



“Night of Watching”: Security, Hope, and the Expectation of Redemption

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Growing up in New Jersey, our front door was always locked. I don't know if it was because of the fear of thieves roaming the suburbs or the fear that members of my father's synagogue would show up without notice. But when I made *aliyah*, I quickly adapted to the local culture, and we would leave our front door open. I must admit, I took pleasure in cheerfully announcing, “It's open!” whenever there was a knock.

Since Simhat Torah, however, we've been diligent about locking the front door. It's during Pesah specifically that I find myself thinking about the significance of this change.

Medieval rabbis explore the tradition of keeping the door open on the Seder night, inspired by the Torah portraying the night of the Exodus as a “Night of Watching” (Exodus 12:42), wherein God particularly safeguards God's people. Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy among our medieval Rabbis concerning the precise rationale behind this tradition.

R. Jacob ben Moses Moellin (known as the Maharil) writes:



ספר מהרי"ל, סדר ליל שני של פסח, ב

בליל פסח יקרא אדם בפני מטתו ברכת המפיל חבלי שינה וקריאת שמע. אך שאר פסוקים שאומרים להצלה מהמזיקין לא צריך כי ליל שימורים הוא משומר ובא מן המזיקין. ומטעם זה אין נועלים דלתות בתים בבריוח חזק כמו שעושין בשאר הלילות דעיקר האמנה לבטוח בשמירת הקדוש ברוך הוא.

Sefer Maharil, Order of the Second Night of Passover, Section B (Ashkenaz, 14th c.)

On the night of Pesah, a person recites the bedtime Shema and the blessing for lying down to sleep. However, the other verses for protection from harm¹ are unnecessary because "it is a night of watching," protected from harmful entities.² For this reason, we do not lock the doors of houses with a strong bolt as we do on other nights because the primary belief is to trust in the protection of the Holy Blessed One.

In contrast, R. Abraham ben Nathan ha-Yarhi (known as the Ra'avan) explains in his book, Sefer Ha-Manhig:

ספר המנהיג, הלכות פסח, עמ' תכג-תכד

ומנהג בכמה מקומות שאין נועלין החדרים שישנים בהן בלילי הפסח, בניסן נגאלו ובניסן אנו עתידין ליגאל, דכתיב ליל שמורים הוא לה', לילה המשומר ובא מששת ימי בראשית ואם יבוא אליהו ימצא הבית פתוח ויצא לקראתו מהרה ואנו מאמינים בזה ובשכר זאת האמנה ניגאל בעזרת השם וישועתו ובמהרה בימינו אמן.

Sefer Ha-Manhig, Laws of Passover, pp. 195–196 (Provence, 12th c.)

And it is the custom in many places not to lock the rooms where people sleep on the nights of Pesah, for in Nisan they were redeemed, and in Nisan we are destined to be redeemed, as it is written, "It is a night of watching," a night that was set aside from the six days of creation. And if Elijah were to come, he would find the house open, and we would quickly

¹ Such as Psalms 3 and 91. See Talmud Bavli Shevuot 15b.

² Literally, *mazikin* are demons, but because there are also interpretations that the "night of watching" protects us from more physical threats like robbers, I left the translation vague.



go out to meet him. And we believe in this. And in the reward of this belief, we will be redeemed with God's help and salvation, and soon in our days, *amen*.

According to the Maharil's opinion, the door is left open as evidence of our trust in God. The night of the Seder is a night when we are all secure under God's watchful eye, alleviating concerns about potential threats, such as burglars attempting to enter from outside. The Ra'avan explains that the door remains open so that we can go out to meet Elijah, the harbinger of redemption, without delay. For him, it is a sign of our faith in being redeemed once more.

The foundation of this dispute is rooted in the development of a *midrash* on the phrase, "night of watching." The phrase appears in Exodus 12:42, which describes the night of the Exodus:

שמות יב:מב

ליל שמרים הוא לה' להוציאם מארץ מצרים הוא הלילה הזה לה' שמרים לכל בני ישראל לדרתם.

Exodus 12:42

That was for God a night of watching to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is God's, one of watching for all the children of Israel throughout the ages.

In the Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael, two opinions are divided on the significance of the term "watching" being repeated in the verse.

מכילתא מסכתא דפסחא יד

ליל שמרים הוא לה'. בו נגאלו ובו עתידין להגאל. דברי רבי יהושע שנאמר 'הוא הלילה הזה לה' רבי אליעזר אומר בו נגאלו. לעתיד לבא אין נגאלים אלא בתשרי שנאמר 'תקעו בחודש שופר' וגומר (תהלים פא:ד) מפני מה 'כי חק לישראל הוא' וגו' ומה תלמוד לומר הוא 'הלילה הזה לה'?' אלא הוא הלילה



שומר הב"ה לאברהם אבינו אברהם בלילה הזה אני גואל את בניך וכשהגיע הקץ לא עכבן הב"ה כהרף עין.

Mekhilta Massekhta de-Pisha 14

"That was for God a night of watching." On it they were redeemed, and on it they are destined to be redeemed—the words of R. Yehoshua, as it is said, "This night is for God." R. Eliezer says: On it they were redeemed. In the future, they will be redeemed only in Tishrei, as it is said, "Blow the shofar in the month"—and why? "Because it is a decree for Israel" (Psalm 81:5). What is the meaning of "this night is for God"? Rather, it is this night that the Holy Blessed One, said to our father Abraham, "Abraham, on this night I will redeem your children." And when the appointed time arrived, the Holy Blessed One did not delay even for the blink of an eye.

Both Tannaim interpret the double occurrence of the word "watching" in the verse as something that is preserved over time. R. Yehoshua believes that the repetition indicates that, just as the Israelites were redeemed on 14th Nisan, so too will they be redeemed in the future on that same date, which is reserved for the complete redemption. R. Eliezer disagrees and believes that the future redemption will occur in Tishrei. According to his opinion, the doubling is explained through retrospective: the date was designated and preserved for redemption since the promise of God to Abraham in the Covenant Between the Pieces (Genesis 15), and this redemption was realized in the Exodus from Egypt. In other words, the question is whether that night is preserved from the past to the present of the Exodus from Egypt (according to R. Eliezer's opinion) or from the present of the Exodus from Egypt to the future redemption (according to R. Yehoshua's opinion).

The statement that the night of the Exodus from Egypt protects against harmful spirits first appears in the Babylonian Talmud. In a discussion in the last chapter of the tractate Pesahim regarding the four cups of the Seder night, our Sages ask: how can we be obligated to drink four cups specifically when, according to the belief of the Babylonian Sages there is a danger



associated with drinking an even number of cups? This would risk exposure to harmful spirits.³

Rav Nahman, a Babylonian Amora, interprets the verse as a response to this concern:

תלמוד בבלי פסחים קט:

ולא יפחתו לו מארבעה. היכי מתקני רבנן מידי דאתי בה לידי סכנה? והתניא: לא יאכל אדם תרי, ולא ישתה תרי, ולא יקנח תרי, ולא יעשה צרכיו תרי. אמר רב נחמן: אמר קרא "ליל שמרים" (שמות יב:מב) – ליל המשומר ובא מן המזיקין.

Talmud Bavli Pesahim 109b

How can our Rabbis establish anything that may lead to danger? Was it not taught: "A person should not eat pairs; and they should not drink pairs; and they should not wipe themselves with pairs; and they should not have sex in pairs"? Rav Nahman said: The verse states, "It is a night of watching"—a night that is protected from harmful entities.

Rav Nahman explains that on Seder night there is no need to be concerned about drinking an even number of cups because on that night we are protected from harm. Note that the meaning of the word "watching" has changed since the tannaitic sources from, "preserved (for future use)," to, "protects (from harmful things)." Drinking in pairs on a regular day is an unnecessary risk, but there is no need to consider it on the night of the Exodus from Egypt, the night on which we are protected from all evil, the "night of watching."

The editors of the Babylonian Talmud incorporate Rav Nahman's innovative interpretation with the original tannaitic dispute in a *sugya* in tractate Rosh Hashanah. This section explores

³ See Isaiah Gafni, *Yehudei Bavel Bitkufat Hatalmud* (1990), pp. 167-172, and Sara Ronis, *Demons in the Details: Demonic Discourse and Rabbinic Culture in Late Antique Babylonia* (2022), pp. 92-127.



the disagreement between R. Yehoshua and R. Eliezer regarding the month of the world's creation, coinciding with the month of Israel's future redemption:

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה יא:

רבי יהושע אומר: בניסן נגאלו, בניסן עתידין ליגאל. מנלן? אמר קרא 'ליל שמרים' (שמות יב:מב) – ליל המשומר ובא מששת ימי בראשית. ואידך: לילה המשומר ובא מן המזיקין.

Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 11b

R. Yehoshua says: In Nisan they were redeemed, and in Nisan they will be redeemed in the future. How do we know? The verse says, “a night of watching”—a night that is set aside from the six days of creation. And the other one [R. Eliezer]: a night that is protected from harmful entities.

The Gemara presents R. Yehoshua's view and attributes to him a *midrash* similar to the one that appears in the Mekhilta. It immediately asks how R. Eliezer, who sees the month of Tishrei as the month of creation and redemption, interprets the verse. Instead of presenting his view from the Mekhilta, the editors attribute to Rabbi Eliezer the interpretation of Rav Nahman, the Babylonian Amora. The Babylonian Talmud uses the same word, “משומר,” in its two different meanings. R. Yehoshua argues that the date is reserved for redemption, and the Babylonian Talmud attributes to R. Eliezer the view that the night is protected from harmful spirits. This is the root of the disagreement between the Maharil and the Ra'avan. The Maharil adopts the approach of Rav Nahman (and attributed to R. Eliezer), and according to his view, leaving the doors open is an expression of the belief that on Seder night the Holy Blessed One, protects us more than any other night and does not allow various harmful entities to enter our house. In contrast, the Ra'avan follows the view of R. Yehoshua—the doors are open to show that we are ready for the redemption that could come immediately.



The custom undergoes a transformation in the words of R. Moshe Isserles (the Rema) in the *Darkhei Moshe*, who connects the two reasons:

דרכי משה, אורח חיים תפ"א

נוהגים לפתוח הדלת כשאומרים שפוך משום דאיתא באור זרוע שלא לנעול דלתות הבתים בליל פסח
דליל שמורים וזהו אמונה בהקב"ה ובהבטחתו ובזכות הבטחה זו אנו נגאלים ולזה פותחים בשפוך
הדלת כלומר ע"י זה ראוי לבא משיח.

Darkhei Moshe, *Orah Hayyim* 480:1 (Poland, 16th c.)

It is customary to open the door when reciting "Pour out Your wrath" because it is mentioned in the *Or Zaru'a*⁴ not to lock the doors of houses on the night of *Pesah*, which is the Night of Watching. This is faith in the Holy Blessed One and in God's promise, and by the merit of this promise, we will be redeemed. Therefore, we open the door when saying "Pour out Your wrath," meaning, through this action it is fitting for the messiah to come.

Here, in addition to not locking the door, it is actually opened during the recitation of "Pour out Your wrath on the nations." The Rema's custom is to open the door wide and proclaim a call for revenge precisely in the space where many Jews keenly felt the threat from outside. This behavior, which would have been considered strange at best on a regular night—and, at worst, even very dangerous—is possible only on a night when there is an explicit promise from God to protect us. Through this action, which demonstrates confidence in God's promise of protection, we are redeemed.

In the current climate, many of us find ourselves grappling with a heightened sense of insecurity and fear. There is an overarching experience of looming threat. Faced with such circumstances, it is instinctive for many of us to retreat indoors and secure ourselves by locking the doors.

⁴ R. Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, 13th century.



In response to this, the custom of opening the door on Seder night can be a helpful experience for us in two distinct ways. From one perspective, we can experience opening the door as stemming from fear. We cautiously open the door, forcing ourselves to rely on the belief that, only on Seder night (the Night of Watching) are we under God's protection. However, as soon as the Seder concludes, we might revert to the routine of locking doors and isolating ourselves within our homes.

Alternatively, we might experience this custom as a symbolic gesture toward a brighter future. By leaving the door ajar, we signify our readiness to step outside, even amidst adversity and uncertainty. Opening the door this year can become a metaphorical gateway to the potential for a different, more promising tomorrow.

My hope is that we can embrace this symbolism with a sense of assurance, poised to venture forth and actively bring about the changes that will ultimately lead to our complete redemption.

