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שמע בקולה

Hanukkah:
Restoration
with Innovation

By Miriam Udel

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J^oFA

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Liturgically speaking, Hanukkah wears borrowed finery.

On each of the *biblically* mandated festivals, it is only logical that we read aloud in synagogue whichever passage in the Torah enjoins that holiday's particular sacrifices or other ritual observances. For the feasts originating during the rabbinic period, however, Torah readings had to be retroactively matched to the events being commemorated.

Hanukkah — celebrating the rededication of the Temple after the Maccabee military triumph over the Greco-Syrians — is different. Although the holiday is invoked in the first two Books of Maccabees, neither these two nor the two subsequent Books were ever accepted into the Jewish canon. References to Hanukkah are sprinkled sparsely throughout the Mishna,³ and there is a brief talmudic discussion⁴ of the miracle of the oil, as well as the proper technique for kindling the required lights. But there is no obvious biblical text corresponding to the festival. This vacuum creates an interpretive opportunity for the Sages: the eight-day Festival of Lights is inflected and deepened by its pairing with the dedication of the original Tabernacle during the Israelites' desert sojourn.

The Torah portion that we read on Hanukkah begins with an account of Moshe's completion of the משכן:

ויהי ביום כלות משה להקים את המשכן וימשח
אתו ויקדש אתו ואת כל כליו... (במדבר ז,א)

1 The author wishes to express deeply held appreciation for AZN, who was placed in her life as an agent of both תיקון and חידוש.

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3 See *Bikkurim* 1:6, *Rosh HaShanah* 1:3, *Megilah* 3:6, *Bava Kama* 6:6.

4 See *BT Shabbat* 21.

And it came to pass on the day that Moses had made an end of setting up the Tabernacle, and had anointed it and sanctified it, and all the furniture thereof... (Numbers 7,1)

The chapter goes on to detail an inaugural process for the Tabernacle lasting nearly a fortnight, during which princes representing each of the 12 tribes bring contributions of silver, gold, incense, and fine flour, along with animal sacrifices. The rabbis who limned the connection between this passage and the late festival of Hanukkah saw consummate importance in God's in-dwelling in the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple) in order to accept these sacrifices. The very first *piska* (literary unit) in the midrashic collection *Pesikta deRab Kahana*, dating to fifth-century Palestine, opens with an intricate homily intended to instruct and delight the congregation on the first day of Hanukkah. A careful reading of this complex midrash offers a study in how the binding together of a biblical text with a post-Biblical event invests both with greater resonance.

The text is written as a *petihah* (Aramaic: *petihtah*), a homiletic form in which the *darshan* (exegete) begins by citing a verse from the נביאים and כתובים, at a far textual remove from the day's designated Torah portion. The *darshan* will weave and wend his way to the opening verse of the day's assigned reading, so as to build suspense. In this case, the midrash opens with a verse from the Song of Songs:

באתי לגני אחותי כלה (שה"ש=שיר השירים=ה,א).
ר' עזריה בשם ר' סימון אמר למלך שכעס על
מטרונא וטרדה והוציאה מתוך פלטין שלו,
לאחר זמן ביקש להחזירה, אמרה יחדש לי דבר
ואחר כך הוא מחזירני...

*I have come [back] into My garden, My sister, My
bride (Song of Songs 5:1). R. Azariah, citing R.
Judah bar R. Simon, told the parable of a king
who became so angry at his wife that he deposed
her and cast her out of his palace. After a time
when he was willing to bring her back and restore
her to her place, she said: Let him innovate*

in some way;⁵ then let him bring me back and restore me to my palace...⁶

The parabolic association of God with a king and of Israel with His queen is a common enough trope in midrashic literature. On the interpretive level of the parable (גמסל), the people Israel have angered their divine husband, possibly through the consummate sin of the golden calf, or perhaps through some other transgression. When the Godly king seeks to rekindle the relationship, the now-alienated people demand some innovation as a token of His affection. God indeed offers something new. The midrash goes on to explain that whereas sacrifices used to be accepted from a lofty position in the heavens (God must be “up there,” the rabbis reason, based on the verse in Genesis (8:21) that describes the way the sweet savor of Noah’s sacrifices would waft up from below), now God will make a home “down here” among the people. That home is the new Tabernacle, and later, the Temple. The garden is verbally linked to a bridal canopy or chamber,⁷ so that this divine homecoming is likened to newlyweds beginning to share a habitation.

Next, the midrash takes pains to demonstrate that the *Shekhinah*, or Divine Presence, originally resided on Earth, in the Garden of Eden. How else could God be said to be מתהלך בגן (“walking in the Garden”) when it came time to confront Adam and Eve with their sin? The midrash goes on to note the oddity of the *hitpa’el* (reflexive) form מתהלך, and to see in that peculiar verb an intimation of God’s withdrawal of the *Shekhinah* from earthly precincts. The withdrawal, says the midrash, was a gradual process that unfolded over generations, in response to human sinfulness.

With cool precision, the midrash details the incremental departure of the *Shekhinah* from the earth all the way to the farthest, or seventh, heavenly remove. The calm exposition of this process belies

5 This formulation represents a significant departure from Braude’s more tendentious translation, “Let him first renew for my sake his former practice.”

6 All translations from *Pesikta deRab Kahana* are a very lightly modified version of William G. Braude’s JPS translation.

7 The word גני in the Song of Songs carries a *dagesh* in the *nun*, and is therefore taken to suggest גינוני, “my bridal bower.”

the wrenching heartache that it implies: God resides very far away indeed. Yet upon sinking to this nadir of sorrow, the midrash changes course and continues, “Over against these wicked men, seven righteous men arose and brought it about that the Presence came back to the earth...” Just as the *Shekhinah*’s reluctant withdrawal happened over time, her restoration to Earth occurred slowly. Each generation heralded the rise of a צדיק who brought God one level closer to Earth — and so, closer to the people again. In the version of this midrash found in *Pesikta deRab Kahana*, the seven righteous figures who gradually restore the *Shekhinah* to her primordial earthly home are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, Amram, and finally, Moses, chief among prophets.

The midrash illustrates a consummate act of תיקון, or repair. Things took a long time to break — and they took an equally long time to be fixed again. It is notable that the rupture, the alienation of God from the world, was effected anonymously, through the neglect and transgression of nameless “generations.” Yet the process of restoration, just as incremental, proceeded through the agency of influential and dedicated named individuals. Hanukkah is a time to celebrate the power of steady, incremental change over time, undertaken through a partnership among generations.

The conclusion of the text weaves together the first and second strands of the midrash, the nuptial theme with the divine restoration. The *derasha* ends simply:

עמד משה וזכה והורידה לארץ, לכך נאמר ויהי
ביום כלת משה וגו’

“Moses arose, and the merit he earned brought the [Divine Presence] back to the earth. Hence, *And it came to pass on the day that Moses had made an end of setting up the Tabernacle...*”⁸

Thus the *darshan* has brought us back around to א, במדבר ז, and the verse with which the Torah reading for Hanukkah begins and with which we began our

8 This is the literal and customary translation of the verse. Professor Braude’s translation reinforces the midrashic pun to be explicated below.

analysis. The construct form in the verse ביום כלת משה cries out for exegetical attention. After all, the Book of Numbers is describing the erection of a tent, all of the components of which had already been prepared. Anyone who has ever put up a pre-fabricated *sukkah* knows that such a process is a relatively quick and smooth one. So why use the elaborate phrase “on the day when Moses *made an end* of setting up?” If it took half an hour to do, why would there be a *day* when he finished? Surely, the *darshan* avers, it is because the biblical text refers not just to a simple act of construction,⁹ but to the culmination of a process of cosmically significant restoration that has been seven generations in the making!¹⁰

Yet there is one more curiosity the rabbinic exegetes require us to unpack. The Masoretic tradition does not actually write out the word כלות in the “full” form with the letter *vav*, but rather in the “partial” form as ביום כלת משה. Thus, it is possible to discern in the first phrase of the Torah portion for Hanukkah a nuptial image, as כלה means “bride.” Not only, then, does the verse describe the culmination of a long process of repair, but it also refers to the wedding between God and the Jewish people. In fidelity to this midrashic message, Professor William Braude translates the culminating verse as, “*It was on Israel’s bridal (כלת) day that Moses brought to a conclusion (כלות)...*” This circuitous yet rich midrash begins with an instance of marital rupture, details a process of restoration and repair, and ends on a delightful note of hopeful union. The queen may be reunited with her king; God’s presence may rest once again amidst the people — but only if there is robust חידוש. Enacting a process of restoration does not mean attempting the slavish re-creation of what once was, but rather enlisting a storied and glorious past in the service of an equally glorious future of righteousness and attentiveness. True restoration requires innovation.

9 Indeed Rashi interprets the phrase to mean that on each day prior, Moses had erected and then disassembled the Mishkan. The day referred to in the verse was the day on which he finally allowed it to remain standing.

10 For this insight, I am indebted to Dr. Bernard Septimus, Jacob E. Safra Professor of Jewish History and Sephardic Civilization at Harvard University, and the teacher with whom I first studied this source.

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