
Searching for Meaning or, The Meaning of the Search

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PESACH IS THE DEFINING MOMENT OF JEWISH EXISTENCE, OF JEWISH IDENTITY—NATIONAL AND PERSONAL. BOTH THE JEWISH COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL JEWS TURN TOWARD THE PASSOVER CELEBRATION weeks before its arrival in a series of preparatory activities. The most tangible activity is ridding oneself and one's household of *hametz*, leavened products. And the occasion through which the activity becomes ritual is *bedikat hametz*, the search for *hametz* on the night before Pesach. In the Talmud's discussion of the regulations of this ritual we encounter our Sages' understanding of the meaning of this preparation.

In order to appreciate the spiritual significance of this ritual, we must unpack the strange form in which the discussion is recorded in the Talmud. For the large majority of contemporary Jews, talmudic discussions have little significance because they do not seem to be about anything meaningful.

Addressing the issue of finding meaning in traditional sources, Emmanuel Levinas, a French Jewish philosopher with significant impact on the development of contemporary philosophy, has recently directed serious attention to the Talmud. The 1990 publication of an English translation of Levinas' *Nine Talmudic Readings* provides a sample of the application of his hermeneutic to Talmud and his fresh insights into the meaning of the text.

Levinas' work and themes have provided a valuable model for

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my own approach to talmudic texts. In examining the talmudic discussion on searching for *hametz*, I hope to show both the spiritual meaning of the ritual for our Sages and the ways in which the Talmud encodes such meaning.

The Text: Pesachim 7b-8a

(translation from the Soncino Edition of the Talmud)

Our Rabbis taught: One may not search either by the light of the sun or by the light of the moon, or by the light of a torch, save by the light of a lamp, because the light of a lamp is suitable for searching. And though there is no proof of the matter yet there is a hint [memory] of it, for it is said, *seven days shall there be no leaven found (in your houses)* [EXODUS 12:19]; and it is said, *and he searched, and began at the eldest, (etc.)* [GENESIS 44:12]; and it is said, *and it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with lamps* [ZEPHANIAH 1:12]; and it is said, *The soul of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the innermost parts of the belly* [PROVERBS 20:27].

This light of the sun, where is it meant? Shall we say, in a courtyard—but Raba said: “A courtyard does not require searching, because birds frequent it.” While if in a hall, —but Raba said: “A hall is searched by its own light?” This is meant only in respect of a skylight in a room. But (then) what part of it? If (that which is) opposite the skylight, then it is the same as a hall?—Rather, it means (the part of the room) at the sides.

And not (by the light of) a torch? Surely Raba said, “What is the meaning of the verse, *And his brightness was as the light; he had rays coming forth from his hand, and there was the hiding of power* [HABBAKUK 3:4]? To what are the righteous comparable in the presence of the Shechinah? To a lamp in the presence of a torch.” And Raba also said: “(To use) a torch for *hav-dalah* is the most preferable (way of performing this) duty?” Said R. Nahman b. Isaac: “The one can be brought into holes and chinks (in the wall), whereas the other cannot be brought into holes and chinks.” R. Zebid said: “The one (throws) its light forward whereas the other (throws) its light behind.” R. Papa said: “Here (with a torch) one is afraid, whereas there (with a lamp) one is not afraid.” Rabina said: “The light of the one is steady, whereas that of the other is fitful.”

The Interpretation

I

The practice of *bedikat hametz*, the search for leaven, is, and always was, largely symbolic. One certainly cannot wait until the night before Pesach to begin looking for *hametz*. The search is the conclusion of our efforts to eliminate *hametz*, a statement of our preparedness for Pesach. However, on a deeper level, *bedikat hametz* suggests itself as a symbol for a spiritual process, an elaborate ritual which dramatizes the necessary inner preparations which Pesach requires. It is, I am convinced, in this spirit that the talmudic passage should be understood.

The Talmud's opening passage (termed a *baraita*, an early, non-Mishnaic rabbinic statement) is interested in two broad questions: What is *hametz*—that is, what does the symbol of leaven stand for? And, how is leaven exposed and extirpated? The attempt to answer the first question begins by working through an answer to the second.

Leaven, the kind of spiritual leaven we are interested in, is that which is hidden. It cannot be seen in the light of day or night; it cannot be seen even in the bright light of a torch. It is hidden in such a way as to preclude discovery in the noise and distraction of everyday affairs. Instead, it requires the quiet, fragile and private light symbolized by the small lamp or candle (*ner*) used in talmudic times. The meaning and nature of this light will occupy us later in the discussion. First, we need to investigate more closely the nature of that which is hidden and our search for it.

The Talmud tells us that our understanding of this hiddenness cannot be ascertained by logical proof. Rather, it emerges through a historical memory (“There is no proof...but a memory of it.”) The text immediately plunges into the source for all Jewish memory, the Torah, in order to discover something about our search. The searches recounted in the Torah teach us important lessons regarding the environment in which the search for *hametz* ought to take place.

The requirement to search comes from Exodus: *seven days shall there be no leaven found (in your houses)*; this is actually a requirement not to search but to find. We know from analogy with another historic memory that finding implies searching. A verse in Genesis uses the same word—“found”—in narrating the search by Joseph's servants of his brothers'

belongings. In the course of this “search,” they “found” the money and silver goblet that Joseph had had planted in Benjamin’s sack.

What an unusual historic memory to bestir before Pesach! The terrible conflict between Joseph and his brothers...the near murder of Joseph at his brothers’ hands on account of his pride and arrogance and their jealousy...Joseph’s enslavement and subsequent rise to power over them...his punishment of his brothers and their reversal of character...the ultimate reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers.

What does this story have to do with leaven? Everything, perhaps. Clearly the rabbis read the story of Joseph and his brothers as a prefigurement of the story of Israel in Egypt. A double prefigurement that provides a “memory” of what we are looking for when we search for *hametz*: the envy and anger between brothers leading to slavery; the pain and punishment of the perpetrators leading to revelation and reconciliation. When we search for *hametz*, we are looking for just that pride, envy, and unconcern for one’s sibling (Joseph) and one’s parent (Jacob) in our own lives which inevitably leads to slavery and death. All people are, in some sense, our siblings and all traditional wisdom, our parents.

When we find leaven, we connect with Joseph’s finding the goblet in Benjamin’s sack and the brothers finding one another. Ironically, it was through Joseph that the Jewish people came to be in Egypt. Joseph’s sojourn in Egypt ultimately saved the Jewish people physically from famine. But this physical salvation devoid of a spiritual component only resulted in slavery. All of this is a *zekher*—a memory—which we bring to the search for leaven.

After establishing this memory of the search, the Talmud moves to the next level of quotations in order to answer its question: By what light do we search? The relevant memory comes from the prophet Zephaniah. We should pay attention to the context of the biblical verses quoted by the Sages. The rabbis were intimately familiar with Scripture and expected their readers to be also.

The search, which our first biblical quote connected with pride, envy and unconcern, is now more directly identified. The candle/lamp is seen as the instrument of a divine search; one searches for the kind of evil for which, the prophet warns, God is prepared to destroy the world. A time of judgment is at hand, and God, the prophet informs us, is preparing a

“sacrificial feast” (perhaps the paschal offering). He bids the guests purify themselves and announces that before the feast He will search Jerusalem with a lamp/candle. *And I will punish the men who rest on their lees untroubled, who say to themselves, “the Lord will do nothing, good or bad”* (ZEPH. 1:12).

The historic memory which we are trying to recover in order to understand the symbol of *bedikat hametz* becomes clearer. We are searching for pride, envy, unconcern for others, coupled with an arrogant dismissal of God’s justice. And we are searching with a lamp/candle similar to the one used by God. To investigate the nature of this light a little more, the Sages direct our historical memory to yet another source, this one from Proverbs. As in Zephaniah, the context of the verse comes immediately after a litany of offenses by Israel, a list of moral failures to which we are prone. *Bread gained by fraud may be tasty to a man, but later his mouth will be filled with gravel...One who reviles his father or mother, light will fail him when darkness comes...* (PROV. 20:17,20). The text sees moral decision-making as the central source of human meaning and enjoins: *A wise king winnows out the wicked, and turns the wheel upon them. The soul of man is the lamp of the Lord revealing all his innermost parts* (PROV. 20:26-27).

The light we must use to find and extirpate our moral failures — the light that has been used historically to search out the soul of Israel, find her inevitable failures and guide her from slavery to redemption by way of reconciliation—has been the light of God within us. *Bedikat hametz* is intended to force us, through the power of ritual, to discover the light of God within us and to shine it on those character traits which inevitably lead to slavery, in order to purify ourselves and find redemption.

II

A relatively short discussion by later sages (the *Amoraim*) follows the *baraita* with which the passage opened. Although couched in the legal language of halakhah, the law itself is not seriously in question. The discussion takes the law for granted while seeming to plumb its reasoning. Philosophical or theological principles emerge tangentially, in an unfocused manner. Nevertheless, it is the philosophical or theological issue masked by a formal discussion of legal minutiae that constitutes the unstated but unmistakable purpose of the text.

The Gemara (talmudic commentary) asks: Why does the *baraita*

exclude searching by the light of the sun? It answers: The sun would be good for searching only an outdoor courtyard, and Raba has already taught: "A courtyard does not require searching because birds frequent it." We may deduce from this that the part of our lives exposed to broad daylight is not the part we have to search, because exposure to public criticism will likely "keep us clean."

The Gemara then asks: What about searching in a hall, that is, in a kind of porch or piazza, open on top but formed by pillars? But we learn that Raba said: "A hall is searched by its own light." The Rabbis recognize a problem here. If the hall that is searched by its own light is open on top, then why isn't it the same as a courtyard, to which the previous ruling would apply? And if Raba was not referring to such an open courtyard, then what is this "hall" and why is it searched by its own light? The Rabbis agree that Raba could not have thought that the hall was a courtyard; but rather, an indoor, covered hallway with its own skylight. For our purposes we can deduce that natural light may indeed be sufficient to search the public space, but for Raba the candle/lamp is still necessary for "the sides." These are the places not exposed to public scrutiny, the private places, the innards, the heart. Raba's explanation of our *baraita*, his defense of it against superficial criticism, only supports our previous understanding of it.

III

This brings us to the final parry and the final Torah verse, the final sacred memory of our passage. The Gemara asks: "And not by the light of a torch?" In other words, what is wrong with the light of a torch? After all, the Gemara can cite a teaching by Raba himself which would seem to indicate that a torch is preferable to a candle/lamp, thus undoing our understanding of the verses previously cited by the *baraita*, as well as threatening the law itself. For Raba said: "(What is the meaning of the verse) *And his brightness was as the light; he had rays coming forth from his hand and there was a hiding of his power?* To what are the righteous comparable in the presence of the Shekhinah? To a lamp in the presence of a torch."

Thus even Raba must agree that a torch, comparable to the light of God, is more powerful than a lamp/candle, comparable to humans in the presence of God. Further, said Raba, "It is preferable to use a torch for havdalah" implying that a torch is preferable for the performance of other

mitzvot as well since it is already known to be used to fulfill a religious obligation during the havdalah ceremony that ends the Sabbath.

Before we encounter the way in which the Gemara responds to this serious thrust, we must allow the pathways of the argument to be fully trod. For what may appear to us as an argumentative statement may well mask a new level of theological speculation. The Gemara introduces here a new biblical text and a fascinating interpretation of that text concerning the subject of light, one of our two original subjects. It also introduces another occasion on which light is used—the end of Shabbat. Looking more closely at both references, we ask: what is light? Light is the extension of God into the world. A larger quotation from the prophet Habakkuk (3:3-5), the source quoted by Raba, makes this clear:

God is coming from Teman,
The Holy One from Mount Paran.
His majesty covers the skies,
His splendor fills the earth:
And His brightness was as the light;
He had rays coming forth from His hand:
And there was a hiding of His power.
Pestilence marches before Him,
And plague comes forth at His heels.

These remarkable verses contain all of our themes! God is light. The righteous, according to Raba, are the rays which come forth from His hand. God's power is hidden (and must be found!?) and before it can be found, pestilence and plague must be endured—justice must be served. Though seemingly used by the Gemara to oppose our interpretation of the *baraita*, the quotation is in fact the most striking example yet of the themes we have tried to explicate: God as the source of light, and something less than God's light existing within us, a candle or lamp—the spark of our righteousness.

Finally, the Gemara draws a reference to havdalah. At havdalah we separate ourselves from redemption, sadly recognizing that it has not actually occurred. The light of the havdalah torch is the light of God—the God of redemption. Once again, the torch represents God's presence in a redeemed world. In a world characterized by pride, envy and a lack of compassion, however, God's presence has been reduced to a candle/lamp—a spark of righteousness. By that more meager light we must search our

inner life to rid it of the *hametz* which stands between us and redemption.

Far more cryptically, the Gemara says the same thing. Beginning with Rav Nachman, the text offers four straightforward rationalizations for the need to use a candle/lamp rather than a torch when searching for *hametz*, each relevant to the symbolic-philosophic themes developed here. First, Rav Nachman b. Isaac explained: "The one (a candle/lamp) can be brought into holes and cracks whereas the other cannot be brought into holes and cracks." Nothing could be clearer or more practical. Where we are searching, literally and figuratively, only a light small enough to fit into the most hidden recesses will be effective.

Rav Zebid said: "The one (candle/lamp) (throws) its light forward whereas the other (throws) its light behind." The sparks of divinity within us reach forward to reunite with the great light of the divine; the great light of the divine is always reaching backward to us.

Rav Papa adds: "Here (with the torch) one is afraid, whereas there (with the candle/lamp) one is not afraid." With a torch we might hesitate to look closely for fear of setting the house on fire, but not so with a candle/lamp. Metaphorically, the light of the divine is terrifying while the spark of the divine emboldens us sufficiently to begin to search our ways.

Ravina concludes the discussion, saying: "The light of one (candle/lamp) is steady, whereas the other is fitful." The larger torch shakes in our hand and its larger flame throws an unsteady light. And perhaps, while the spark of the divine within us is manageable, the full power of the flame of God is beyond our ability to control.

Thus, the Talmud affirms the law that a candle/lamp must be used to search for *hametz*. But along the way it has engaged us in a far-reaching discussion of the theology of the symbolic search. We have learned that leaven is a symbol of the proclivity of humans to act against their own sibilities. It is a symbol of the evil which the prophet Zephaniah warned us will lead to our destruction. And we have learned much about the nature of the light that counters evil. The light within us is the source of our ability to act righteously and is a spark of God, the source of all light. But the light within us is not the fullness of God's light, something beyond our ability to contain. That light awaits us in a redeemed world that some day Pesach will usher in—when we have searched for and found and destroyed all of the *hametz*—when we will all be guests at the "sacrificial feast" of God.