

Eliyahu Ha Navi

I

A few weeks ago I began a talk by referring to the TV series, “John Adams.” Today I begin with reference to another well known figure, Eliyahu Ha Navi, Elijah the Prophet. Elijah looms over the Rabbinic understanding of the Pesach Seder. The complexity surrounding his place in the ritual is multi-dimensional and it begins to unfold today on Shabbat Hagadol, embraces our final preparations for the Seder, embraces the Seder itself and is implicit within the culmination of the Seder which in turn reaches beyond the Seder to embrace the period of parallel importance to Pesach - the Yomin Ha Noraim - the High Holy Days and their culmination on Neilah on Yom Kippur. It is through the figure of Eliyahu that rabbinic tradition embodied the theology that they believed was implicit in the Biblical Pesach and informed the entire structure of biblical thought and practice. That is, as the quest for redemption. Whether their theological reading of the Torah was “correct” in some objective sense is a topic we can let scholars debate. What is not debatable is the fact that they understood the biblical Pesach not merely as a memorial to a past redemption, but as a vehicle full of potential for a present redemption and simultaneously an expression of the inevitable failure of that potential and its re-assignment to a hope for future redemption.

The elements of Eliyahu’s path through the ritual are straightforward. He is, first of all, assigned in the haftarah that we read today and which gives Shabbat Hagadol its name, the role of harbinger of redemption. He will appear before the great and terrible day of the Lord in order to turn the hearts of parents to children and children to parents. This is what redemption requires: the harmony between generations. He appears next at

the Seder when we open the door to implore God to bring the nations of the world to justice: we might say, to turn the hearts of nations to each other. He dwells at the Seder in the enigma of the fifth cup, that is, as a symbol of all the unanswered questions we bring to the ritual, even questions as seemingly straight forward as “How many divine articulations of liberation are there in the biblical Exodus story and, therefore, how many cups of wine are we required to drink at the Seder? Before redemption, Elijah will answer this and all our other questions regarding the perfect service of God.

Despite the Rabbi’s assertion that the perfectly performed Seder might actually precipitate redemption, the need for Elijah to explain the details of the ritual, turn the hearts of children and parents to one another and to insure justice among nations make it all but certain that this year will not be the year of redemption, rather that must be postponed at least until next year.

Similarly, our attempt to affect perfect repentance and receive perfect atonement through the High Holy Days will partake equally of disappointment and hope. Try as we might we will not achieve it this year but must postpone it with undiminished hope until next year. Thus at the end of Neilah and the Seder we sing with a unique combination of disappointment and hope – taken together as the profound theological stance of what it means to be a Jew – L’shana Haba b’Yirushaliym, Next year in Jerusalem. Disappointment and hope are embodied as exile. Redemption is embodied as Yirushaliym – the land of Israel.

Judaism developed as a religion of Exile. The entirety of the Five Books of Moses unfolds in the wilderness – looking toward but not in the land. Rabbinic literature is a literature of Exile as are the institutions it created. And for the most part the

literature of the writings and prophets that follow the Humash describe continuing cycles of corruption and rebuke.

Thus we arrive at the central theological problem of contemporary Jews: What is the relationship between redemption and Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. This question has been an issue from the beginning of the Zionist project. Keeping in mind that the founding fathers of Zionism were secular Jews, the Jewish state constituted a rejection of the traditional tension between disappointments and hope that redemption embodied. It represented the belief that what we might call the inevitable disappointment of everyday life is precisely all that we as human beings have to work with. Rather than living for an always receding hope for a perfect future, Zionists believed that Jews ought to accept the vicissitudes of the National State with all its imperfections in order to afford them the same imperfect protection from real world persecution and as a venue for legitimate cultural self-expression that every other people either had or desired in the period of the growth of nationalism that began in the late 19th century. I am not intending to be critical in urging that we articulate and understand that this represented a break with traditional Judaism – a rejection of religious Jewish identity in favor of what was then relatively new but has become almost the norm – Jewish ethnic or national identity. Along with the rejection of the disappointment and hope theology of traditional Judaism came the rejection of all of the institutions and sancta of that theology. The proof of this distinction is still found in the radical secularity of Israeli life [bracketing religious Jews in Israel with whom we will deal momentarily] as well as in the violent anti-Zionism of the vast majority of the religious community, Reform and Orthodox alike, before at least 1948 or even 1967. The development of a secular Jewish identity is a product of the

enlightenment. It may well be a positive development, but it is profoundly different from religious Judaism

In its break with the traditional language of disappointment and hope for redemption, I believe early Zionists felt free to adopt that language for their own purpose – and this is important – without fear that in doing so they would be misunderstood as in any way reclaiming it. In other words, secular ideologies, primarily socialism, served to make immanent (that is, bring the future goal into the present) religious ideology. The redemptive world, envisioned but always receding in religious thought, could be approximated by the idea of human beings embarking on a path of progressive redemption, also understood as receding but not impossibly so. The world of justice and equity that religious Jews understood as the pre-requisite for redemption became the content of redemption.

II

History and theology make strange but inevitable bedfellows. The theology of disappointment and hope did not survive the Holocaust. Waiting to embrace the survivors and refugees who emerged from its ashes was the State of Israel. The historical claims of the Jewish people to the land were and are incontrovertible. The need for a national state to afford some modicum of protection was self-evident. The blood guilt of the European powers equally so. Whatever they could do to insure the establishment of the State of Israel they were morally bound to do whether they did so sufficiently or not. What this all might mean for the other people historically connected to the land is not our present subject, but whatever it might mean could not then or now deny the right of the Jewish people to its national homeland. It became clear that if the theology of

disappointment and hope precluded the survival of the Jewish people, then its rejection was necessary and warranted. However, this did not solve, in fact it profoundly raised, the question: What are the implications of this necessity for the religion of the Jewish people? In Israel and America both, the expectation was that the outmoded theology of disappointment and hope would disappear and with it the traditional trappings of religious life. The failure to take the question of religious meaning seriously, especially in Israel, but among American Jews also, the failure to provide a theology to replace the theology of disappointment and hope and with it a new lens for reading traditional Jewish texts and interpreting Jewish law is a failure we continue to live with but is not my subject this morning. I will address it at another time. (And, I might add, I addressed in great detail some years ago over the High Holidays with a series of sermons suggesting replacing the theology of Exile with a theology of Homecoming.) However, conscious of this continuing theological void, we must return to history, to the events of the past sixty years, to examine the unintended consequences of the unfolding of these events in this theological void.

Beginning in 1948, religious Jews from Reform to Orthodox began to accept the reality of the State of Israel and support it without doing the necessary work of confronting the theological challenges it represented. Instead, already at the early phase, the Zionist appropriation of Messianic language to describe the events of 1948 began to be adopted uncritically by segments of the religious community despite the fact that the use of that language as Zionist rhetoric was, in fact, a rejection of its true theological meaning. A kind of marriage of convenience ensued between the two groups around a shared but ambiguous language. This situation changed radically in 1967. The stunning

victory of Israel against the arrayed might and numerical superiority of the Arab world filled the Messianic language with a new and convincing content. For secular Israeli culture the nationalist impulse to control and contain the larger vision of the ancient Israelite homeland rather than accept whatever piece of that homeland that might afford Jews sanctuary became possible. It had always been a dream of a segment of Zionists and later Israeli political ideology but had never been real enough to displace the more modest goal of achieving something rather than nothing. In 1967 the dream became possible. At the same time, the “miraculous” nature of Israel’s victory, combined with the rhetoric of Messianic fulfillment that the religious community had begun to adopt rather unconsciously in 1948, was transformed into a full fledged experience of Messianic fulfillment. The theology of disappointment and hope was replaced with a theology of salvation achieved.

The history of false messiahs is not a happy one. From the time Rabbinic Jews separated from early Christians, through the Sabbatean debacle, to the heresies of some among contemporary Chabad Hasidim, some Jews have tired of waiting. But whenever the end of history is proclaimed it is inevitable that the normal rules of life are suspended. Messianic time has its own logic, its own law and everything is justified in the name of the new dispensation. So Paul abrogated halacha for Christians, Shabbatai Tzvi proclaimed he had come to make the forbidden permitted and demonstrated his belief by converting to Islam while Chabad – well it is too early to know what form of heresy will be central to the new Chabad, though the merger of Chabad messianisim with the Messianic embrace of Israel by large segments of the Haredi community as well as by a large segment of the ideological nationalists, does not bode well.

Messianic nationalism is problematic on numerous counts. It proclaims that the wait is over and therefore that the work is finished. It proclaims that all the questions have been answered absent Eliyahu Ha Navi. And since the questions have been answered, we are in possession of unarguable truth and empowered to insist on this truth in the face of any opponent – by force if necessary. When this combination of Messianic delusion is coupled with Nationalism it can become toxic. When logic and law are suspended by the Messianic aspect of this cocktail, then any constraints on the worst potential implicit in nationalism is nullified.

When the enemy, real as that enemy may be, is not only an enemy but an enemy of God, anything is justified. When the land itself assumes its place in a sacred geography – a geography that transcends mere mundane political geography, then land is valued over human beings. And when land assumes a transcendent value over human beings then negotiation regarding that land or those people is prohibited.

This is the situation we find ourselves in among some Jews today. For reasons that I tried to explain, among these Jews are some of the most religiously observant despite the fact that in embracing this messianic theology they reject the core of their traditional theology – and also some of the least religiously observant Jews who have adopted a language of messianism absent any belief or commitment to theology as a serious concern. Both groups share a deep anger and rebel at the thought that Jewish theology requires that even now, even after the disasters of the 19th and 20th century, we keep in mind that we are not finished waiting and that there still is hope in that waiting. Messianic Nationalism substitutes the present for the hope for the future. To be chained to the present is to be chained to the self and self-interest. To maintain hope in the future

is to remain open to the possibility of surprise. And surprise is precisely the defining characteristic of a relationship with another human being. We never know exactly what they will do and our openness to whatever the future will bring is precisely the content of being human, living in the shadow of disappointment and glow of hope.

I mentioned in my first talk that I experience a slight shudder when I recite “reisheet tzimihat galuatanu”, the beginning of our redemption. But I continue and will continue to say the words. I treasure the shudder – it reminds me to put the emphasis on the word “reisheet,” beginning, and to recognize that the completion is a long way off and that between the beginning and the ever receding end, there are yet many surprises to hope for – and surprise is just another word for miracle.