

God's Gift, Our Responsibility

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AS I APPROACH THE HIGH HOLY DAYS AND ENGAGE in the work of *heshbon nefesh*, the examination of my soul, I am drawn to two particular texts that remind me what it is that God asks of me as I reflect upon the past and prepare for the forthcoming year.

The first text is Responsum 26 in “Mayim Hayyim,” by Rabbi Haim David Halevi (1924-1998), the former Chief Sephardi Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Halevi addresses the meaning of the High Holy Days by contrasting the notion of redemption informing them against the character of redemption associated with Passover. He frames his argument by taking note of Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a, where it states, “Rabbi Eliezer says, ‘In Nisan [when Passover falls] Israel was redeemed. However, in the future, Israel will be redeemed in Tishrei [when the Days of Awe occur].’ Rabbi Joshua states, ‘In Nisan Israel was redeemed, and Israel will in the future also be redeemed in Nisan.’”

Halevi observes that the dispute is not one of date. The precise time of “the future redemption” was not of great consequence to either rabbi. Rather, the issue was an ideological one regarding the nature of redemption itself.

Halevi contends that the central ritual of Passover was the eating of the “matza of obligation – *matzat hova*” on Passover Eve, in commemoration of the matza our ancestors ate as they escaped from Egypt. As stated in Exodus 12, “And you ate [the matza] in haste (*bahipazon*).” Focusing on the word, “hipazon,” and citing the Mekhilta (midrashic commentary on Exodus), Halevi states that it referred not to the haste of Israel alone, but “to the haste of the Shekhina (the Indwelling Presence of God).” According to this midrash, Israel was mired “in forty-nine gates of impurity” during their enslavement, “and if the Children of Israel had been delayed even one more second, they would have entered the fiftieth gate and it would not have been possible for them to leave Egypt.” At that moment, the Shekhina appeared and redeemed Israel from slavery.

The redemption from Egypt is one where Israel was totally lacking in merit. Redemption “was sealed by the will of God alone.” The redemption of Nisan is “*geulat hesed*,” a redemption of divine grace that God bestows upon an unworthy Israel. In the opinion of Rabbi Joshua, the ultimate redemption will be a “redemption of *hesed*” as well. Redemption is contingent upon the kindness of God. It cannot be attained through deeds that Israel might perform.

However, Rabbi Eliezer disagrees and Halevi approvingly cites his assertion that Tishrei – the time of the Days of Awe – must complement Nisan for “*geulat he’atid* – future redemption” to occur. On the High Holy Days, God acts in accord with *middat ha-din*, the attribute of justice. It is a time when the actions of human beings “can avert the stern decree.” As a result of human conduct, Israel can be judged worthy of redemption. This is the message of the High Holy Days – that redemption is not exclusively the result of Divine grace, but can be achieved through human actions that God demands of us. It is this message that Rabbi Eliezer emphasizes.

As I read this responsum, I am drawn immediately to the deservedly celebrated essay “The Lonely Man of Faith,” by Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik (1903-1993). The insight that “The Rav,” as this seminal Modern Orthodox figure was known, offers there on the nature of what it means to be human based on the two stories of creation found in Genesis 1 and 2 are particularly instructive for elucidating the writing of Rabbi Halevi, as well as the philosophical position R. Eliezer puts forth in the Talmud. In Genesis 1:28, Rabbi Soloveichik observes, God says to primeval man and woman,



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“Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and *subdue* it.” The primeval being, whom Soloveichik labels Adam I, achieves dignity through self-effort and through active mastery of the world. In contrast, the “man” created in Genesis 2, whom the “Lord God formed from the dust of the earth,” and who Soloveichik identifies as Adam II, is placed in the Garden of Eden and accepts in gratitude the world that God has created. In the exegesis Soloveichik offers of Adam I and Adam II, he is not speaking of two distinct types of human beings. Rather, he is offering an archetypal description of what it means for us to be human beings. He is describing the two sides of what we are as men and women. Adam I and Adam II together are “Everyman.”

Rabbi Soloveichik thus highlights the message of Rabbi Halevi. We need to acknowledge our human dependency on the Divine. Hence, we need Passover. At the same time, there is the equally crucial need to recognize that God demands we assume responsibility. Hence, we must appreciate the challenge of the Days of Awe. Both poles are required for us to realize our destiny as human beings. ● Rabbi David Ellenson is president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.