

A THIRD HAGGADAH MYSTERY AND ITS HISTORY

D'var Torah by Dr Tahan Menashe

On Seder Night, in the very midst of the joyous celebration, after the banquet, and following the filling of the 4th cup and the cup of Elijah, and just before the jubilation of the Hallel and singing of the hymns, we do something out of the ordinary: In a somewhat mysterious manner, *we open the door and recite a passage which seems to contradict the very happy nature of the Seder; It seems to contradict its universal message of love and freedom, and sounds like a thunderous burst of anger.* We recite three verses:

Verse 1. *Pour Your wrath upon the nations that have never known you, and upon the Kingdoms that have not called upon Your name: for they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his Oasis.*

Verse 2. *Pour out Your indignation upon them and let Your fierce anger overtake them.*

Verse 3. *Pursue them in wrath and destroy them under the heavens of the Lord.*

It is no wonder that the recitation of these verses at the Seder table has aroused much criticism and fury amongst our people, with the passage branded “vengeful” and “vindictive, unworthy of a people that call itself civilised”. Others are calling for the verses to be removed, all together, from the Haggadah.

The question is whether these claims are justified? Is the passage truly intended to incite revenge? If not, then why it was introduced into the Haggadah? What are its sources? Who included it? When? And why?

I would like to take this opportunity to shed some light on this mystery through a number of interesting and pertinent points:

First of all the verses do not constitute a prayer, because they are just quotations taken from the Bible. The first verse was extracted from Psalm 79 (verses 6-7), the second from Psalm 69 (verse 25), while the third is from Lamentations no 3 (verse 66). To evaluate their significance we ought to consider the three texts in their entirety. And indeed, careful examination of their thematic and linguistic characteristics indicates that they are in fact national supplications and lamentations in which our people mourn terrible atrocities that had befallen them and call for salvation.

The fact that we recite Psalm (79) on the 9th of Av, together with the Lamentations, confirms that “pour Your wrath” was *meant to bemoan recent acts of barbarism committed against the nation of Israel.*

The second point is that this paragraph was not and could not be intended, God forbid, against our neighbours, as it is read precisely when the door is opened. On the contrary, the paragraph *specifically singles out pagans “who have never known”*

God and “who have never called upon” His name, meaning: those who never believed in God, never worshipped Him and never accepted His supreme authority. Such people were targeted for specific reasons: first and foremost for offending God; secondly for “devouring” Jacob, that’s to say: **consuming him or destroying him**: and also for ruining his “Oasis”, meaning: **his Temple**.

The groups of pagans fall into this category are two: The Babylonians who destroyed the 1st Temple in the year 586 BC, and the Romans who eradicated the 2nd Temple 656 years later. Yet since the Psalms and Lamentations were composed much before the Roman era, the heathens referred to in “pour Your wrath” must be **the Babylonians** and the Babylonian alone. Nobody else.

The third point is that the “pour Your wrath” passage was not part of the original Haggadah compiled by Rabbi Amram Ben Sheshna, the Gaon of Sura, in the 9th century. This section was inserted at a later date, during the Middle Ages. The question is: why did we need lamentations and supplications during this particular period of history? The answer being: because of the many **devastating atrocities** that were inflicted on our people at that time.

They began with the first crusade in 1096, during which, on their way to the Holy Land, the Crusaders massacred the Jewish communities of Europe. They left a trail of blood and destruction along their path. Thousands of Jews were slaughtered along the Rhine district, especially in Worms, Speyer and Mainz, and also in the flourishing communities of Regensburg and Prague. The butchery continued unabated all the way to Jerusalem, whose Jewish congregation was gathered and burnt alive in a synagogue.

Similar acts of savagery were perpetrated against our people, in main land Europe, during the second Crusade (1144) as well. Yet they did not stop there and expanded to England slightly later.

The atrocious events commenced in England in the year 1189, just before the start of the 3rd Crusade, when King Richard the Lionhearted came to London for his coronation at Westminster Abbey. During the ceremony when the King was so busy, the crusaders outside attacked, and literally annihilated the Jewish community of the Capital. The atrocities spread later on viciously, against the strict orders of the King, and engulfed the whole country. The communities of Norwich, Lyn, Dunstable, Stanford, Northampton and York suffered most.

In York, the prosperous Jewish community endured most horrific martyrdom. The Jews there took refuge in the royal tower, but were besieged by the murderous mob. They managed to hold against the siege for six days, but seeing no possibility of deliverance, their Rabbi, Rabbi Yom-Tov of Joigny, advised them to take their own lives rather than betray their faith. They obeyed him, and like in Masada, 1120 years earlier, they slaughtered each other, sanctifying the name of God. This happened on the eve of ‘Hashabat Hagadol’, the 17th of March 1190.

Significantly, when King Richard later heard about the extent of the atrocities he coined a horrible new term, unique of its kind in history. He named them: a **‘holocaust’**. They indeed constituted a holocaust, one which continued in Europe for

200 years, yielding many lamentations and supplications that we read to date on Tishah Be-Av.

On account of what had happened in England and particularly in York, some scholars suggest that “pour Your wrath” may have been assembled and recited by Rabbi Yom-Tov of Joigny during the 6 day siege of York Tower, just before his tragic martyrdom. It could, therefore, be a sombre English contribution to the Haggadah.

Moreover, another terrible record was sadly set in England at this time – that was the dreadful **Blood Libel**. The first expression of this lie occurred in Norwich in the year 1144, after the death of a boy called William, probably at the hands of paedophiles. Soon the Jewish community was accused of killing the boy and using his blood for the baking of Matza. **Preposterous allegations of ritual murder at Passover** were to appear with desperate consequences in many parts of Europe throughout the centuries. There have been 200 documented cases of Blood Libels in Europe and beyond, accompanied by pogroms and massacres against the Jewish people during the Passover festivities. Just imagine two hundred massacres at the feast of Passover.

No wonder, therefore, that a call for salvation was brought in at the very heart of the Seder ceremony, at the point of opening the door for Elijah who heralds the coming of the Messiah. Only the Messiah could have saved them.

The fourth point is that our sages deliberately chose the ‘pour Your wrath’ passage to suit the occasion of pouring the 4th cup and that of Elijah, and also to commemorate the pouring of the blood of victims massacred during endless pogroms. Psalm 79, from which the controversial first verse was taken, begins, in fact, with a description of atrocities, twice mentioning the shedding of the blood of our people, while the Hebrew language uses the same word: “shefoch” for shedding the blood as for pouring the wine and for pouring the wrath.

I have always been amazed by the resourcefulness of our sages, but their extraction from the vast ocean of the Bible just three drops, three verses that mean so much, commemorate so much, lament so much and hope so intensely, is absolutely remarkable. And within these verses, to hit upon a single word: ‘shefoch’, which cements history and misery with ceremony, jubilation and anticipation, is utterly startling.

The fifth point is that this controversial passage is in fact mild in tone given the horrors that the Jewish people were subjected to in that era. I completely agree with Chief Rabbi Sacks who considers it a prayer, a restrained prayer for Justice. Rabbi Sacks explains his opinion as follows:

“What is notable about this addition to the Haggadah is its restraint. “ “Pour Your wrath” is not a call for vengeance; it is not a call for human action at all. It is rather a prayer for Divine justice. These verses are a cry of pain coming to us from one of the dark nights of the Jewish soul”.

The 6th point, the last but not least, is that **not all Israel opposes “pour Your wrath” and wishes it be removed from the Haggadah text**. There are those who admire it and consider it an expression of Jewish bravery, whereby Jews under grave danger have dared to point an accusing finger at their detractors and ask for divine justice. One of those people is a distinguished lady named Deborah Lipstadt. Deborah is a true fighter for justice. She is a Holocaust historian who successfully defended herself in a British court, here in London, against the Holocaust denier David Irving who’d sued her for libel. Deborah makes no apology for “pour Your wrath” and writes about it with great appreciation as follows:

“Many Seder participants are decidedly uncomfortable with the short paragraph which asks for God’s wrath to be poured out on the nations that do not “call out in God’s name”. “I, on the other hand, love it. Why my infatuation with this hard-hitting paragraph?”

“I picture the many beleaguered Jews, particularly in Europe, for whom Passover, with its proximity to Easter, was a dangerous time. I imagine Jews who spend much of the year fearful that the non-Jewish world might violently turn on them. They knew they would have little recourse to protect themselves.

“Suddenly, for one short paragraph, they open the door of their homes and publicly told the world what they wished for those who had done them evil. For one brief moment they could let their desire for justice be heard publicly. They did not have to cower in fear”.

In conclusion, “Pour Your wrath” is neither vengeful, nor vindictive. It is a supplication or lamentation in which the tortured soul of Israel calls for divine justice. Under no circumstance should it be excluded from the Haggadah, being the only reminder, the only trace, the only response left in our prayers to that horrific era of our history. King Richard the 1st was right to call it a Holocaust. It was indeed a slow and lengthy Holocaust, lasting over two centuries. It should never be forgotten.

On the other hand the passage is so genial that it is not easily understood – not by our own people and especially not by others. It has been and could readily be used against our communities. For this reason, the verses’ true intentions should be made clearer by the **addition alongside them of a prayer of love and gratitude** for those among the nations who aided, protected and saved Jews through the ages. Fortunately, there is in fact in existence a prayer that suitably expresses such affection and appreciation. It was found written beside “pour Your wrath” in an old manuscript from Worms dated 1521. Many scholars doubt the authenticity of this manuscript, but descendants of Holocaust survivors, saved by righteous gentiles, agree with its sentiments. It could certainly be introduced into our Haggadah as well. The prayer reads:

**“Pour Your love on the nations who have known you,
And on the kingdoms who call upon your name.
For they show kindness to the seeds of Jacob, and they defend your people Israel,
from those who would devour them alive.
May they live to see the Sukkah of peace spread over your chosen ones,
and participate in the joy of all your nations. And let us say: Amen!**