


Shabbat Shalom!

We have all heard many a D'var Torah based on the weekly Torah reading, and quite a few that speak about the week's Haftarah. But what about a D'var Torah based on a B'rachah? Is that even allowed? Well, here goes.

Just a few minutes ago Lynne Birnholz beautifully chanting today's special Haftarah for Shabbat Ha-Gadol and concluded with a familiar series of B'rachot. Among them was the B'rachah that mentions Elijah Ha-Navi — Elijah the Prophet. It seems to me that this particular B'rachah connects in many interesting ways with this morning's texts and with the themes of this important week in the Jewish calendar — the week leading up to the Seder and the eight days of Pesach. Those connections are a little surprising, a little ambiguous, and ultimately inspiring.

Now let's suppose you're young enough that your Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah is still fresh in your mind; or let's say that your mind is sharp enough that you can still remember back that far; or let's say you had a special occasion not long ago, or maybe just because it was about time. If you have ever chanted a Haftarah (here, not in a Reform Temple), you know this B'rachah. Even if you never recited it, you have heard it many times. “ Sam'chenu Adonai Eloheinu b'Eliyah Ha-Navi avdecha, uv'malchut Beit David M'shichecha ...” OK, we know the Hebrew, but how often do we look across the page at the English?

Let's take a look in Siddur Sim Shalom, on page 147, the third paragraph down:

Bring us joy, Adonai our God, through Your prophet Elijah and the kingdom of the House of David Your anointed. May Elijah come soon, to gladden our hearts. May no outsider usurp David's throne, and may no other inherit his glory. For by Your holy name have You promised that his light shall never be extinguished. Praised are You Adonai, Shield of David.

The central theme here is one of the central themes of Judaism: Redemption. “Malchut beit David”: “The kingdom of the House of David”

has been our dream for three thousand years. Maybe we're not literally expecting a kingdom, but at least symbolically, we remember David's reign as our days of glory. The theme of Redemption resonates with the most crucial events of our history: the redemption from slavery in Egypt; the redemption from exile in Babylonia; the rise of modern Israel from the ashes of the Holocaust.

And you notice it doesn't say King David, but "*David M'shichecha*": "David, Your Moshiach," the Messiah, the Anointed leader of the Jewish people. When the prophet Samuel anoints David, that is the sign that David is the one chosen by God to be the eventual king of Israel, and it is the anointment that fills David with "Ruach Adonai": the Spirit of God.

Before our B'rachah comes to David, it speaks of Elijah, the messenger of Redemption. Every week at Havdalah we sing "Eliyahu Ha-Navi," and at the Seder we sing "Eliyahu Ha-Navi": "בִּמְהֵרָה וְיָמֵינוּ יָבוֹ אֵילֵינוּ": "May he come soon, in our lifetime." "Im Mashiach ben David": with a Moshiach, a chosen leader descended from David.

Why does Elijah get this special role? It is Elijah who defeats the prophets of Baal when God sends down a blaze of lightning to accept Elijah's offering. That dramatic event convinces the people of Israel to turn back to the God of Israel.

But it is also Elijah who finds that God is not in the wind, and not in the earthquake, and not in the fire, but in a soft, murmuring sound: the voice of conscience, perhaps. The fact that Elijah is the one to bring the news of Redemption suggests that we may need to look inward, and not to dramatic events for Redemption.

And our B'rachah speaks of rejoicing: "Sam'cheinu Adonai Eloyeinu," "Bring us joy": joy in the arrival of Redemption, and joy in the anticipation of Redemption. And how well we know that it was the anticipation, and not the reality of Redemption, that sustained the Jewish people throughout the centuries.

But there is a dark note here too — the cloud of false hope, of a false Messiah, of The Other capturing the glory of David. "Al kis' o lo yeshev zar":

“May no outsider sit on his throne, and may Others no longer inherit his glory.” Honestly, I used to think these words were a relic from the Dark Ages when our Christian neighbors tried to force us to accept Jesus as the Messiah. But there were always plenty of imposters and pretenders to the throne of David. The Hasmonean kings and King Herod claimed the throne of David but were not descendants of David, and they turned out to be corrupt oppressors. Bar Kochba was widely regarded as the Moshiach but brought utter disaster on Jerusalem and on the Jews. Shabtai Zvi claimed to be the Messiah but left a generation of Jews in deep disappointment.

More broadly, the idea of the Other warns us not to seek Redemption from the wrong quarters, and not to seek the wrong goals in our daily lives and in our activities as a community.

Against the idea of a false hope, our B’rachah emphasizes the certainty of God’s enduring promise: “Ki v’sheim kodsh’cha nishba’ta lo”: “For You have sworn to him by Your Holy Name.” And what was the promise that God made to David? Not only that God would establish a “House” for David; not only that “Your house and your kingship shall be secure forever”; but also that “I will establish a home for My people Israel and will plant them firm, so that they shall dwell secure and shall tremble no more.” The promise of a coming Moshiach is not just about leadership, not just about a kingdom, but about the Redemption of the whole Jewish people.

Not just the promise, but our awareness of that promise, is crucial to our B’rachah, and to Passover, and to Judaism: “Shello yichbeh neuro l’olam vaed”: “That his lamp shall never go out.” Like the Ner Tamid, the eternal lamp over the Aron Kodesh, we must be continually aware of the promise of Redemption, of the hope for a better world.

Now I said there were some interesting connections between the B’rachah and our texts, so let’s see if we can tie this all together.

Our Haftarah from Malachi, the last of the prophets, ends with the repeated phrase, “I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the great and awesome day of Adonai”. Or maybe, “the day of the great and awesome Adonai.” This phrase is echoed in our prayers, “Ha-El hagadol hagibbor v’hanorah”: “the great, mighty and awesome God.” And that word

“hagadol” is why we refer to this Shabbat as Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat.

Malachi doesn't say anything about Moshiach or about the House of David. He says, “Turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you — says Adonai Tzvaot.” Like Elijah, Malachi looks to the soft murmuring sound within us. He says that Elijah will “reconcile parents with children and children with their parents”; and what better time than when we gather at the Seder table.

Our Torah portion, Tzav, continues the list of sacrifices that began in last week's portion. The list culminates with the special sacrifices for the ordination of Aaron and his sons, and here again we have the theme of Moshiach: Moses takes the “Shemen mishcha,” the anointing oil, and pours some of it over Aaron's head. The anointment makes Aaron holy: the religious leader of the people, chosen by God.

Like the promise of Redemption in our B'rachah, this Torah reading is an idealized vision: every sacrifice must be carried out just so. At the end of our reading it says that “Aaron and his sons did all the things that Adonai had commanded through Moses”; that's the ideal. Just wait until after Pesach, then we read of the dark cloud, the danger of the Other. Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu bring “alien fire,” “Eish zar” into the Tabernacle. Just as our B'rachah says “Al kis' o lo yeshev zar,” “may no alien sit on his throne,” so the Torah says that “Eish zar,” alien fire, brings disaster on Nadav and Avihu and on the community.

But the enduring lesson is the one we read in the first Aliyah: “Eish tamid tukad al hamizbeiach, lo tichbeh”: “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar; it may not go out.” Just as our B'rachah promises “Lo yichbeh nero,” “his lamp will never go out,” so our Torah commands, “Eish .. Lo tichbeh”: may the fire never go out.

That fire, I think, is not the actual fire on a sacrificial altar, any more than the Moshiach is an actual king. The fire is the eternal fire in our hearts, the yearning for Redemption, the hope for a world perfected. As parents turn to the children and children turn to their parents around the Seder table, as we speak of the great Redemption from the oppression of Egypt, may we

carry on that hope for a better world.

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