

The singing of angels: A d'var torah for the seventh day of Pesach
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The Torah reading for the seventh day of Pesach is the section of the book of Exodus in which the Jewish people cross the Red Sea on their way out of slavery in Egypt. This section concludes with *shirat hayam*, the song with which the people praise God for liberating them and for drowning the Egyptian army that pursues them.

According to everyone's favorite progressive midrash (rabbinic expansion) on the subject, as the Jews are singing praises to God, the angels wish to sing as well. God quiets the angels, saying, "The works of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you wish to sing praises?!?" (Talmud Tractate Megillah 10b) The acknowledgement of the Egyptian suffering that made our liberation possible has given rise, in part, to the development of two Passover traditions: spilling wine from our cups as we recite the ten plagues during the Passover seder; and abbreviating the recitation of Hallel—or psalms of praise—during morning services on the last six days of Pesach. (Both of these traditions have other origins and explanations as well.)

This midrash about God's refusal to allow the angels to sing has stuck with us, largely because it responds to the discomfort that many of us feel around the Jewish tradition's sometime lack of sensitivity to the suffering—or even to the human-ness—of non-Jews. This midrash helps us to define our worldview as universalist—that is, to define Jews as inherently concerned with the well-being of all of humanity, and not only that of our own community.

All of this is well and good. But the midrash grows more interesting within the context of another midrash, this one included in *Eicha Rabbah*, the major compilation of Midrashim on the book of Lamentations. According to this second midrash:

On three occasions, the angels wanted to sing praises before God, and God would not permit them. What are these? The generation of the flood [in which only Noah and his family were saved]; the crossing of the Red Sea; and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. . . . God said, "These comforting words that you say to me are insults to me." (Petichta 24 in Vilna edition)

I should note that this rejoicing in human failure fits with the character of the angels who, in rabbinic literature, play the part of the jealous siblings who will defend human beings against God's wrath, but who also are eager to remind God of human faults and missteps. Like jealous siblings, the angels often seem to be competing with humans in general, and Jews in particular, for God's love and attention.

Given this angelic stance toward humanity, it is not shocking that the angels would rejoice in the destruction of especially-evil individuals or groups. But what makes the author of the midrash identify these three events as times when the angels might want to sing? And, in particular, why would this rabbinic author imagine the angels rejoicing at the destruction

of the Temple, which in its time was the primary symbol of God's presence, as well as the primary means for Jews to worship God?

Paradoxically, I would suggest that the angelic rejoicing emerges precisely out of the angels' simultaneous care for human beings and anger toward humanity.

All three of the events mentioned by the midrash—the near destruction of the world in the flood, the drowning of the Egyptians, and the destruction of the Temple—are instances in which human beings are punished, at least according to rabbinic tradition, for prioritizing structures and systems over human beings. To wit:

- According to rabbinic tradition, the generation of the flood sinned by stealing from one another quantities so small so as not to be covered by the laws of theft. That is—the people of this generation used their knowledge of the letter of the law in order to subvert the spirit of the law. (B'reishit Rabbah 31:5)
- The biblical story of the Exodus begins with the statement that the new Pharaoh did not “know Joseph.” As most commentators point out, it seems impossible that this Pharaoh would not have heard of the person who once served as second in command in Egypt, and who once saved Egypt from a famine. Rather, in pretending not to “know” the Jewish people, the Pharaoh indicates his refusal to encounter the humanity of the people. For him, the construction of the pyramids takes precedence over the well-being of his subjects.
- Rabbinic tradition identifies *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred) as precipitating the destruction of the Second Temple. One mishnah (first layer of the oral law) tells a story in which a young boy is killed in the heat of a competition about who will sweep the altar of the Temple. Here, eagerness to perform a ritual function overrides concern about the safety of others.

In these three stories of destruction, God punishes those who would prioritize structures—either physical or legal—over human concern. But with the body of the midrash itself, God appears to feel conflicted about these decisions and mourns the consequences of the destructive actions. The angels, on the other hand, have no such qualms. For them, the world seems more black and white: one who sins should be punished, and God should be praised for enacting justice in this way.

In their concern with the letter of the law, the angels indict themselves on the same charges with which they have condemned humanity. Rather than balance anger with compassion, as God does, the angels find no room to have compassion for humanity. For this reason, the angels express unadulterated joy at the destruction of sinners.

Pesach is considered to be the holiday that celebrates the love between God and the Jewish people. For this reason, it is customary to read *Shir haShirim* (the Song of Songs) on the Shabbat of Pesach, as this book has traditionally been understood as a metaphor for the love of God and the Jewish people. By extension, and through reference to the two Midrashim about the angels' aborted songs, we might say that this holiday also celebrates

God's compassion toward humanity and establishes compassion as a religious principle that, in many cases, may trump strict interpretation of the law.

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