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BAMIDBAR AND SHAVUOT

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**THE PANDEMIC THEOLOGY DILEMMA:
PRESERVE NORMALCY OR EMBRACE
CRISIS?**

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As we stand now, some 14 months from the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, it is worth reflecting on some of the more salient religious discussions that were taking place in the scary early days of the pandemic. As life was disrupted and people were unsure how to go about their lives, religious and otherwise, many turned to rabbis. Much literature (including several *sefarim*) has been produced on various halakhic issues that emerged at that time. While sophisticated theological discussions have been far less extensive, it is worth reflecting on one discussion, partially exposed and partially beneath the surface, that took place in the months of March and April 2020.

That discussion pertains to the overall religious sensibility with which one is bidden to respond to COVID-19, especially as it was at its height. Aside from taking safety precautions, how should one relate to God in a world of COVID? Should one preserve normalcy to whatever extent possible or should one instead embrace the sense of crisis and channel it in one’s religious devotion?

I believe that different religious leaders, some explicitly and some less so, advised the adoption of one or the other of these approaches. This essay will draw both from a programmatic theological essay and from several other treatments of the issue that are less direct in their theological leanings but reveal a clear sensibility in that direction. It will analyze rabbinic approaches from America and Israel that can be categorized as Modern Orthodox, Dati Leumi, and/or moderate Haredi. Furthermore, the period a

year ago during which these discussions took place – the abrupt shift from Nissan’s celebration to *sefirah*’s mourning will be especially helpful in bringing to light the practical ramifications of these theologies.

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein’s Theological Approach

The most explicit treatment of the question of the appropriate theological response to COVID was presented by Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion, on March 27, 2020, during the early days of the pandemic. It was originally sent to Yeshiva students and alumni, and is published here (in English translation from the original Hebrew) at *The Lehrhaus* for the first time. The essay is worth reading and analyzing in great detail; for the purposes of this essay, however, we will quickly summarize the essay and turn to one of its larger questions.

R. Mosheh presents a dichotomy between two types of prayer – prayer out of a sense of normalcy and prayer out of crisis. Drawing upon his grandfather, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s theology,¹ R. Mosheh notes the difference between appealing to God in nature and appealing to God *against* nature. While the first is channeled in the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei* and Tractate *Berakhot*, the latter appears in the second blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei* (on revivification of the dead) and Tractate *Ta’anit*. Under normal circumstances, (and especially in the modern era,) where nature is our friend, it is appropriate to call out to God as functioning within nature. In a pandemic, however, where nature itself is the source of the greatest danger, one must cry out to God out of a sense of crisis. One beseeches God to override the natural order rather than to serve our needs within it.

This approach, R. Mosheh emphasizes, has major ramifications in terms of the way in which people should pray in a situation of acute crisis, as well as for a variety of other ritual issues. On that point he writes as follows:

In light of this analysis, the ramifications on the policy of *psak* must be determined as well. One of the primary approaches to current halakhic questions attempts to maintain a familiar routine to whatever extent possible, and is willing to be lenient to achieve this end... Familiar routine is a comfort; but when the world order has turned upside down, the objective should not be to seek calm or comfort, but rather to face reality, and understand that our relationship with the world around us has shifted. We must recognize the crisis and make the necessary spiritual adjustments... The aspiration to execute a halakhic policy which strives to maintain routine is not a question relating to a specific halakhic detail, nor is it a general question of leniency or stringency in policy, but rather a fundamental question of whether the crisis should be acknowledged, and the aspiration to return to that which is familiar and routine abandoned. The world is changed, and this must be acknowledged.

Halakhic policy must reflect the crisis of the moment, in order that people can “recognize the crisis and make the necessary spiritual adjustments.” Maintaining a familiar routine (absent cases of particular need) should not be the goal. The facts on the ground dictate that the world has changed; it would be an affront to God to ignore this reality in the interests of greater cohesion.

Halakhic Ramifications

There are several important points in this account of Coronavirus. It insists on a human reaction that takes the crisis seriously, which will have implications below. It focuses both on the fact that humanity is uncommonly fighting against nature and the phenomenon of greater isolation. It draws on theological views of Rabbi Soloveitchik in insisting that this requires a distinct liturgical response. It points to the risk of overlooking the crisis and cautions against it, as well.

This diagnosis of the spiritual significance of the COVID pandemic is valuable in itself, and worth considering both on its own experiential terms, and also as it relates to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s theologies of technology and of prayer. However, it also has more pointed applications in the halakhic realm. Various ritual (and other) matters of Jewish law stand to see a very different application if treated under this theology and its attendant meta-Halakhah rather than

an alternate one. Below, we will consider some of these ramifications, both within R. Mosheh’s approach and within alternate approaches that preserve a different theological understanding.

The Importance of Retaining Normalcy

The position of R. Mosheh, while well-developed, was not the primary position taken in response to the early stages of COVID. The majority practice, at least among American synagogues, was generally to do whatever possible to retain a sense of spiritual normalcy and routine amid the pandemic. This manifested itself in several different ways. To give perhaps the best example, many synagogues held pseudo-*minyanim* over Zoom, even though they generally did not think this actually counts as a *minyan*. One of the main benefits of this practice is the sense of consistent synagogue-like interaction in the lives of the congregants.² While there have been calls for increased *tefillah* in a general sense, and daily Tehillim recitations, there have not generally been calls to qualitatively rethink the nature of prayer or one’s spiritual existence, nor have there been accounts of how this pandemic differs from other crises.

This seems to constitute a position focused on maintaining normalcy in difficult situations. One can note several reasons that underlie or support this position. At one level, there is certainly a value to routine, not only because it provides comfort, but also because it provides structure and aids people’s functioning in difficult times. This is noteworthy in itself, but it is especially important against the backdrop of the mental health crisis precipitated by COVID that has affected so many. Additionally, there is the more specific concern about religious experience. While there may be advantages to embracing the isolation of the pandemic and calling out to God from isolation, there is also a logic to maintaining spiritual practices of normalcy and applying them in this difficult time. Furthermore, looking ahead to a time following the crisis, there is the value of maintaining schedules and commitments going forward, when it comes time to return to the synagogue. We are starting to feel the ramifications of this today, as more and more people are returning to regular prayer. For that reason, there has been a general trend to minimize divergences from standard practice and to make religious life hew to usual structures as much as possible, even as life has become ever so unusual.

To illustrate this point, it is instructive to consider a letter that Rabbi Yaakov Taubes of the Mount Sinai Jewish Center sent to his community on March 27, 2020, less than two weeks before Pesah:

Dear Community,

Over the past few weeks, as the situation in the world has worsened and the extent of our new reality began to set in, many have tried to find meaning in the chaos... For many of us, finding Hashem [in] these extraordinary times has gotten harder not easier. Without our Shul, our friends, indeed without everything that helps [make] a religious life worth pursuing for so many, connecting to Him has [become] more difficult. Davening at home, observing Shabbos without community, not seeing anyone - these can be impediments to achieving and enhancing proper Yiras Shamayim...The lack of stability and the unknown about how long this will all last can be so incredibly stressful and... many of us are not looking upward to Shamayim, but downward at our phones. This past Thursday was Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the beginning of the month of redemption, and often most importantly for many who are used to being in a rush in the morning, the beginning of a month with no recitation of tachanun. When Rav Hershel Schachter, Shlita, was asked about whether we should perhaps say tachanun during Nissan this year in light of the troubling times in which we find ourselves, he replied that the reason tachanun is omitted is that we are commemorating the redemption which our ancestors experienced from Egypt and projecting forward to the future redemption, which Chazal say will also take place in some form at this time. The significance of these ideas remains in place, despite everything going on at present... Our world has been turned upside down, but it nonetheless is time to get ready for Pesach and that is what we are going to do...

The letter notes the challenge of facing a chaotic world lacking structure, which both creates a personal challenge and a difficulty of connecting to God rather than to news and other this-worldly sources. Taubes' solution to this challenge is to focus not on the timely challenge but on the timeless redemption celebrated on Pesach. The ritual marking of Nissan as a time of joyful redemption and thus not a time for the anguish-ridden prayer of *tahanun* should

therefore be applied as normal, reaffirming both God's capacity to redeem and the maintaining of ritual matters as per usual.

There are thus two essentially opposite views on how best to respond to the crisis of the pandemic. Should one emphasize the uniqueness of the current moment and look to shift religious practice and experience where possible – a perspective of Coronavirus Exceptionalism? Or should one rather be a Coronavirus Normalizer, seeking to minimize the divergences and emphasize continuity with spiritual life in general? This important debate will have ramifications on several different planes.

The Debate Over *Tahanun* in Nissan

R. Taubes noted the view of R. Hershel Schachter regarding the skipping of *tahanun* during this year's Nissan, a view that is worth considering more directly. Moreover, the general approach towards Coronavirus Normalization might be seen in a series of halakhic decisions offered by Rabbi Schachter, adopted and applied to the synagogue context by a broad spectrum of American Centrist Orthodox rabbis.

R. Schachter's view not to recite *tahanun* was publicized, along with a directive to cease reciting *Avinu Malkeinu*.³ With the onset of the crisis, many had called for adding *Avinu Malkeinu* to their prayers, either the classical litany of *Avinu Malkeinu* requests beseeching redemption from God following the *Amidah*, or, alternatively, a one-line insertion into the blessing of *Shema Koleinu* requesting an end to the current plague. R. Schachter ruled that these somber additions were all to cease with the onset of the redemptive month of Nissan, as they would in a usual year.

This view was disputed by several others, among them R. Mosheh himself. In a March 29 e-mail, part of a rabbinic discussion as to how to proceed on this issue, he wrote:

I am definitely of the opinion that one should continue to say *Avinu Malkenu* and *Tahanun* in *hodesh* Nissan as well and I personally do so. Although there is a compelling halakhic case for this, that is not the main reason. The real reason is that there is a compelling religious and emotional need to do so. If in times like this we don't cry out to the *KBH*, then when should we do so?

For R. Mosheh, if there is ever a time to call out to God, it is in the midst of a pandemic. Maintaining the usual rules of avoiding mourning during Nissan would be inappropriate in a time of great crisis. He also noted halakhic precedents for

this. Ta'anit chapter 3 discusses scenarios of national crisis (especially drought) where the community would fast and possibly even blow the *shofar* on Shabbat in order to facilitate the prayer of *et tzarah* necessitated by the difficulties of the time. If clear expressions of mourning are allowed on Shabbat in times of crisis, that should certainly be allowed for the lesser celebration of the month of Nissan.

Furthermore, he ties some of his theological reflections on the obligation of prayer to this issue, arguing that in times of crisis there is not only the usual obligation of prayer but a special obligation of prayer based on crisis that actually is a higher grade, biblical requirement. One who prays as if all is normal and does not engage with the pathos and crisis of the moment may have fulfilled the usual, rabbinic obligation of prayer but fails to succeed in the biblical requirement of a prayer out of crisis. This approach likely draws upon the theological and halakhic reading of the Rambam and Ramban offered by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rav Mosheh's grandfather.⁴

R. Mosheh goes a step further, diagnosing and condemning the (unattributed) view of those who believe it is best to not recite *Avinu Malkeinu* during Nissan. He even takes on the suggestion of the Israeli Rabbinate to fast a half-day rather than a whole day, seeing it as an attempt to minimize the significance of the moment⁵:

I believe that there is an emotional and religious unwillingness to admit the true extent of the crisis and to behave accordingly and that this creates a very unhealthy disconnect bet[ween] our medical and practical behaviour and our religious awareness. All the attempts to seek the positive and to emphasize the normal can only be legitimate if they follow a deep and sincere recognition of our situation as a crisis rather than attempting to ward it off or paper it over. In light of this, I am afraid that fasting half a day, not saying *Avinu Malkeinu* in Nissan (if you said it before) etc. may be a form of denial of the extent of the current crisis or may encourage such a denial.

This powerful critique stems directly from R. Mosheh's theological approach to COVID, that the crisis and isolation should be leaned into and taken seriously by offering prayer born of crisis, rather than minimized by maintaining a business-as-usual attitude. Interestingly, it would seem that the ultra-conservative Eidah HaHareidit in Jerusalem agreed with him on this issue, as their guidance, also published

early in Nissan 5780, recommended the recitation of *Avinu Malkeinu* as well.

It is worth noting that R. Mosheh's position here is consistent with his position on the phenomenon of public prayer and fasting for droughts, rituals which have routinely taken place in Israel in past decades. R. Mosheh has publicized his position in opposition to these fasts, on the grounds that there is no true crisis, as there is full and continuous access to water during the so-called crisis. Viewing his treatment of that issue in light of this one, what emerges is neither a pro-fasting or anti-fasting position, but rather a more nuanced stance: whether or not one declares a state of religious emergency, entailing fasts and special prayer, should rely not on formalized categories of crisis ("the *mishnah* says that one should fast following a drought") but rather on the lived experience of crisis, taking a realist perspective as to what qualifies as danger. If people are actually dying, or lack access to basic goods, that is reason to shift one's mode of prayer. This existentialist position on prayer as part of one's relation to God, extending beyond a formalist halakhic approach and considering the experience of the individual praying, has some deep connections to the philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.⁶

Empty Invitations: The Debate Over *Kol Dikhfin*

This debate over how to experience the joy of Nissan relates to another dispute over how to approach the invitation *kol dikhfin yeitei ve-yeikhol*, "all who are hungry may come and eat," (part of *ha lahma anya*) where the host of the *Seder* renders an invitation to all wayfarers at the outset of the *Haggadah's* recitation. In a time of social distancing and even lockdown, is there logic to reciting this empty and even false invitation? Rabbis offered divergent views on this issue in advance of Pesach 5780.

R. Hershel Schachter encouraged the recitation of the prayer as usual, applying the following logic:

At the beginning of the Pesach Seder, we invite all impoverished people to join us for the meal (*ha'lachma anya*). Although one would surely not allow guests into his home during this dangerous time, these words should still be recited at the start of the Seder. The reason we announce this invitation is in remembrance of the practice when the Beis HaMikdash stood. Then, Jews would invite anyone to join them in eating the Korban Pesach. Our recitation of these words today, is not meant as a true invitation, as is clear from

the fact that we don't open the doors and announce it in the streets for guests to hear. After the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, there was an additional prayer added, that we return to the land of Eretz Yisrael. It is recommended to explain this to those at the table before reciting this paragraph.

This position makes two assumptions. First is that the invitation rendered by *ha lahma anya* is never a genuine invitation, as is demonstrated by the fact that it is recited as a formula rather than publicized to the relevant parties. Possibly more relevant is the secondary assumption regarding how that formulaic line should be applied, understood, and publicized this year. R. Schachter suggests explaining to *Seder* attendees that this line is a mere artifact, which is reasonable enough, but essentially does not treat this year as differently from any other. In fact, it emphasizes the fact that this year's *kol dikhfin* is no more an empty invitation than any other year.

However, some have suggested that, this year, even as one recites the full text of *ha lahma* including its invitation, there is reason to introduce additional messaging that speaks to the current crisis. Rabbis [David Block](#) and [Yitzchak Etshalom](#), both educators at Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles, [have written](#) in these virtual pages to suggest additional prayers surrounding *ha lahma anya* that capture the moment and offer a message.

Block, for example, has offered [the following prayer](#), based on the structure of one composed by several rabbis at Bergen-Belsen, in another scenario that deviated (in that case much more exceptionally and poignantly) from the usual Pesah *Seder*. He notes that his text includes both a sense of mourning what is missing and joy at doing what is appropriate in the situation. The suggested prayer reads as follows:

Our Father in Heaven! It is open and known before You that it is our will to do Your will to celebrate the festival of Pesah with our communities, families, and friends, to pray and recite Your praises together with our communities, to have an intergenerational conversation about the story of the Exodus, to take care of the elderly, to sincerely invite those less fortunate to partake of the *Seder* with us, as the *Haggadah* says, "Anyone who is hungry – come eat, anyone who is needy – come and partake of the Pesah

offering." With aching hearts we must realize that the current precautions around the COVID-19 pandemic prevent us from such celebration, since we find ourselves in a situation of *sakkanat nefashot*, of potential danger to our lives. Therefore, we are prepared and ready to fulfill Your commandment, "And you shall live by them (by the commandments of the Torah), but not die by them," and we heed Your warning: "Be very careful and guard your life." Therefore we pray to you that You maintain us in life and hasten to redeem us that we may observe Your statutes and do Your will and serve You with a perfect heart. Amen!

While this approach certainly does not diverge from R. Schachter on the specific halakhic question of whether to recite *ha lahma* and its invitation, it also has a distinct educational message, one that takes seriously the crisis of the moment and applies it to educational effect with this new suggested ritual. What is emphasized is not the similarity to every year's *kol dikhfin*, but how different the overall experience is.

***Sefirah* and COVID**

We have seen that the question of how to celebrate happy religious occasions during Coronavirus is an important barometer of how one relates to this experience theologically. In parallel, issues relating to traditional religious periods of mourning may be instructive as well. By this I refer to *sefirat ha-omer* and the traditional practices of mourning that accompany it, including, most notably, the common custom of refraining from listening to music. (That practice has several forms. Some disallow only live music or singing with musical instruments, but not *a capella* music; the details need not detain us now, as we are speaking about a general attitude.)

Some have raised the question as to whether, given both the difficulty of social distancing and the limited options for entertainment and even engagement in the home, there might be a dispensation for listening to music during *sefirah*. As one rabbi put the question (sent out to RCA members on April 13, 2020): "In order to reduce some of the depressing atmosphere can we allow for the dispensation of the *issur* of music, at least the recorded kind, during *sefirah*." Rav Schachter's [response](#) to this query notes that the practice of not listening to music is only a *minhag*, or custom, patterned after the year of mourning following the death of a relative. It originally applied only to music with dancing and was later extended to recorded music. Given the attenuated level of

the prohibition and the current moment, Rav Schachter ruled as follows:

During this time of global suffering, it would appear that for some individuals, refraining from listening or playing music may leave one in a state of sadness or emotional distress. This would appear to reach beyond the intent of this restriction. If the motivation to listen to music is not to put oneself in a cheerful mood but rather to ease the tension or pressure in one's home, and to help bring oneself back to a normal disposition, that would be permissible. One should still avoid listening to very cheerful music.

The permissive ruling was not limited to cases where there would be a risk to someone's mental health – those cases are clear and allow for much more extensive leniencies. Rather, this was a case where one would be sad or emotionally distressed as a result of lacking access to music as a comforting activity. In such a case, Rabbi Schachter presumed that the original practice was not intended to cause people sadness, only to avoid excessive happiness, and thus one may listen to music, albeit while still trying to avoid more cheerful music. The basis of the argument is fully halakhic, and based around the goal of maintaining one's usual state of mental well-being.

One might have invoked another factor in this context, that the global pandemic and state of crisis might precisely call for a more somber state of affairs than usual. Rather than being a reason to alleviate the sorrow of *sefirah*, it might be a reason to double down on the sense of isolation and lack of calm precipitated by the prohibition on music (assuming it didn't rise to a level of danger to one's mental health).

In fact, Rav Asher Weiss, a leading decisor in Israel, argued in a similar direction in a short Hebrew essay translated here:

In terms of your question, which many are asking – should one be lenient at this time to allow listening to music during *sefirah* given the Coronavirus?

I will express to you my pain. It appears to me to be a tendency in the broader community, and even among many rabbis, to be lenient in a sweeping manner in all areas, given the Coronavirus. Some exempted women

from cleaning for Pesah, others permitted eating *kitniyot*, yet others allowed speaking to their distant and isolated relatives using a computer on *Yom Tov*, some allowed planting flowers on *hol ha-moed*, and many other similar cases. The more lenient, the more praiseworthy!

This tendency has no place and no justification. We are in a time of crisis, and in a time of crisis it is incumbent upon each person to strengthen themselves [religiously] and to practice additional stringencies and to sanctify oneself through [refraining from] what is permitted, not to denigrate what is prohibited.

For this reason it is clear that there is no reason to allow in a sweeping or general fashion playing and listening to music during *sefirah*; rather, each case must be considered on its own. It is clear that if, as a result of social distancing and remaining at home, a man or woman has a psychological difficulty like depression, and listening to music will settle their mind and give a rest to their turbulent soul, there is certainly room to be lenient.

Similarly for parents with large families who have difficulty occupying their children... But there is no room to make a general [lenient] ruling here.

While R. Weiss agreed with R. Schachter about the relatively limited *minhag* of not listening to music (and especially recorded music) during *sefirah*, and he allowed for leniencies in cases of need, he was not willing to offer a sweeping permissive ruling. Instead of formulating this point on purely halakhic grounds, R. Weiss invoked a theological consideration – the fact that our current moment is one of crisis. Rather than the broad tendency to leniency that many have adopted, with the goal of making life easier in these difficult times, R. Weiss insists, it is necessary to seek religious growth, including by pursuing stringency. That is at least part of the reason why R. Weiss was loath to offer a general leniency, and why he only permits music in cases where it is deeply needed.

Conclusion

Pandemic cases make for complicated theology. Proper responses to the impetus of a global crisis, and one that

entails extreme isolation in practice, might pull in two opposite theological attitudes. At once, there is a goal of preserving a sense of normalcy in order to promote psychological and even spiritual well-being. At the same time, one might see the objective of emphasizing the crisis and its limitations, with the goal of having the appropriate relation to God in prayer and ritual. Both Coronavirus Exceptionalism and Coronavirus Normalization are reasonable positions, given the circumstances.

This tension has been demonstrated by analyzing three cases – the nature of prayer and its application during Nissan; new rituals in *ha lahma anya*; and possible attenuation of *sefirah* mourning rituals—where there have been debates over specific questions that tie in to this broader theological issue. It is no coincidence that each relates to an event triggered by the Jewish calendar – generally these responses have been formulated piecemeal, responding to specific events and items on the immediate agenda. While it is possible to notice patterns and uncover the implicit theology behind these rulings, these theologies are generally not explicitly formulated as such, with the notable exception of R. Mosheh Lichtenstein’s explicit treatment.

This analysis revealed some patterns as to who comes down on which side of the divide. R. Hershel Schachter, followed by many community rabbis such as R. Yaakov Taubes, emphasized a focus on retaining normalcy as much as possible. That meant retaining the normal calendar of skipping prayers of mourning, retaining the pseudo-

invitation of *kol dikhfin* as usual, and trying to avoid some of the difficulties of *sefirah*’s mourning period. On the other hand, a group of rabbis from different sectors of Israel’s halakhic community coalesced around the view of emphasizing the crisis of this moment in their messaging – R. Mosheh Lichtenstein of the Dati Leumi community, Hasidic *dayyan* R. Asher Weiss, and the Lithuanian Eidah HaHareidit leadership. Their embrace of a theology of crisis and isolation, of increased prayer even in happy times, and of increased stringency rather than leniency all combine into a coherent theological position.

This pattern reflects a divide between American and Israeli decisors and communities. Part of this may tie in to Israel’s long-standing culture of instituting special days of prayer and fasting in response to current events, which America lacks. Additionally, in Israel the pandemic was seen, on a national level, as a Jewish crisis, while Jews in the United States likely saw it as a more general challenge rather than a particularly Jewish one.

By examining these various theological and meta-halakhic issues, it is possible to attain a view of the theologies in response to this horrific crisis. As the greatest challenges of COVID seem far back in the rear-view mirror, and as things are beginning to return to normal it is worth keeping in mind these divergent theological approaches to crisis taken up by various Jewish communities. And, just as we recently marked the end of the plague in Rabbi Akiva’s time with Lag ba-Omer, may this emergence from COVID portend a happier outlook, as well.

¹ This relates to both the themes of human and divine majesty and humility and the dichotomy between regular prayer and prayer out of crisis that are prevalent within R. Soloveitchik’s works. See *Lonely Man of Faith*, “*Majesty and Humility*,” and *Worship of the Heart* at length.

² Another such benefit is offering regular contact with the synagogue and its rabbi at a time when natural interactions are not taking place. Additionally, some communities have used this as an opportunity for expressing prayers for the deceased that are parallel to *Kaddish*, if not *Kaddish* itself.

³ The following message was publicized in one rabbinic group:

Rav Schachter feels that Avinu Malkeinu should not be recited during Chodesh

Nissan as it has always been considered to be a חודש הגאולה. Tachanun is not recited nor should Avinu Malkeinu.

⁴ See his classical account of this distinction between two levels of prayer in the essay “*Prayer, Petition, and Crisis*,” appearing in R. Soloveitchik’s *Worship of the Heart*.

⁵ It is not clear who in particular, other than the Israeli Rabbinate, this critique is aimed at. That being said, it would apply squarely to the position noted above.

⁶ For an analysis of some of these categories, see several relevant essays by Alex Sztuden, especially “*Grief and Joy in the Writings of Rabbi Soloveitchik, Part I: Psychological Aspects*,” *Tradition* 43:4 (2010), 37–55.

A LETTER ABOUT COVID

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March 27, 2020

To our Dear *Talmidim*,

Our heads are spinning with thoughts in these troubling times. I wanted to share with you, with whom I feel close, some thoughts regarding the present reality, and our response to the situation.

These are disturbing times. Difficult emotions are raging, even threatening; not the usual anxiety that possesses us in a "normal" crisis, like the fear and trepidation of war, security threat, or illness. This distress is different, a vague but consistent unease in the depths of the soul.

Certainly, fear and trepidation from the danger of disease, and the concern about the potential disaster in a pandemic, are very real. Dread of the catastrophe we have seen in other countries is palpable, and enhanced by fear of the unknown. The unknown threatens us with the mystery of what the future holds for us – this is one of the most significant components of the fear of death with which we are all so familiar – and in this case, our inability to predict the magnitude of danger and enormity of threat reinforces our fear. Each of us feels threatened because we do not know what tomorrow will bring, and we are all endangered by the pandemic.

However, there is another element at play in the current situation. Contrary to medieval or ancient society, modern man derives support and comfort from familiar routine in times of crisis. When we feel threatened, we hold on to routine as an emotional respite. Modern society encourages those who are ill to continue their routine even in times of sickness, and understands the importance of routine during wartime or security threats. I am reminded of the cleaning staffs that would arrive at the scene of mass terror attacks immediately after the removal of the wounded, washing the streets with powerful hoses, to enable a return to routine within hours of the event. Routine is not only important, it's also comforting. Modern man views the natural order as a positive and beneficial force, and normative life sponsored by the natural world as safe. He has learned how to use nature to support his needs, and views nature as a source of provision and security. With scientific knowledge, he understands nature to a great extent, and utilizes the

technology he created to recruit nature to serve him best. The powers of nature are accessible and obedient. The laws of nature and course of regular life are not perceived as threatening or dangerous, but rather as a framework for personal and economic security. Deviation from nature, whether through natural disaster, war, or economic crisis, is the primary threat to modern humanity; we are therefore comforted by that which is familiar and routine.

This state of mind, which has become second nature to us, has been undermined in the current crisis. Suddenly, instead of offering comfort, nature is a threat, and routine – the cause of possible disaster. The crutch has become a beating stick, and the source of comfort has become a threat. In this new reality, only dramatic steps involving a complete break with routine and war against nature can save us. Nature and modern lifestyle have turned against us, like a harnessed bull turning on its master. It is a world turned upside down, and this state shakes our equilibrium and undermines our existence. Man has lost his anchor, and knows not how to navigate his own world; his work plan was knocked down, and the manual is no longer relevant.

This change carries significant spiritual ramifications. The panic and loss of control are threatening. Our trusted map or Waze have gone astray, and we feel helpless without them. Like a small child lost in a mall, suddenly, without warning, the fun, familiar, bustling place of entertainment becomes threatening and frightening, inducing hysteria. He searches for a familiar face, store or sign, to return to a familiar framework, but can't find one. He cries out for his father and mother in his fear and distress, begging to be heard and rescued, and turns to an unseen redeemer. Suddenly an adult reaches out and offers him a hand – and he clings to him. If, God forbid, he follows the wrong adult, tragedy might ensue.¹

However, in the best case, the child might look up and see that it is his mother or father who have come for him, reaching out a loving, protective hand. If he had not been lost, he would not cling to them; he would have preferred his freedom. On the familiar road to kindergarten or school he might not even hold their hand at all. However, in this strange and foreign reality, he clings to his parent, his savior.

We are this child. In our present reality, we are threatened by the dangers of the pandemic, and frightened by an unfamiliar world. Fear of danger, dread of an unfamiliar world, and the loss of routine are all reflected in our souls. We cry to our father to reach out and save us from this frightening reality. If normally we would delight in man's independence and God-given autonomy to cultivate and keep the world, today we feel not only our weakened

position, but also nature's hostility. This is not the kind world that is "desirable for gaining wisdom, (cf. Genesis 3:6)" but rather a "vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions... something your ancestors had never known. (cf. Deuteronomy 8:15-16)" The snake and scorpion are one danger; the unfamiliarity is another, "something your ancestors had never known." One of the great challenges of Israel's journey through the wilderness was coping with the unknown and unfamiliar, waking each morning to a foreign world. The difficulty of living in a world "your ancestors have never known" is the key to understanding the nation's strange yearning to return to Egypt. Despite the fact that Egypt is a land of oppression and enslavement, it is a world 'your ancestors have known.'

The idea of coping with an unfamiliar reality resonates in our prayers. Each day we begin *Amidah* with turning to הא-ל הגדול והגבור והנורא – the great, mighty, and awesome God. A special blessing is dedicated to each of these epithets. The first two – הגדול הגבור – are two different attributes of divine providence. גדול is the distribution of divine abundance in the natural world. As Maimonides diligently emphasized, there is great religious value to maintaining natural law and to divine governance within the framework of scientific constancy. This is the normative route of God's governance and providence, and the foundation of natural order. In this context, God "Who bestows good kindness ... and recalls the kindness of the patriarchs, and brings the redeemer to their children's children." These benefits, mentioned in the first *berakhah* of *Amidah*, are provided within the normative and familiar world. God provides for us routinely in a world governed by natural law. This is normative divine providence, under normal circumstances.

The assumption at the foundation of the second *berakhah*, אתה גבור, is reversed – here, God's governance conflicts with nature, and subdues it. The might described here is the might of defeating nature, which commits God to conquer his desire to maintain natural law and defeat the rules of his own design. Therefore, the *berakhah* begins and ends with resurrection – "You are mighty forever, Hashem, You revive the dead, and are greatly capable of liberating... and you are reliable to revive the dead." There is no greater contrast to natural law than resurrection. Here God benefits his creation by acting against natural law. This concept of defeating nature is inherently problematic, since it contrasts God's role as man's benefactor with his role as the creator, who commands the maintenance of the natural laws he designed. Despite this conflict, the rabbis instructed us to turn to this attribute of גבורה. They informed us that it is not impertinent to turn to God's might and ask him to suspend natural law; in fact they positioned it in the introduction to

Amidah. We turn to God as a father and merciful king, and ask him to hear our cry and defeat the laws of his own world for our benefit. The epithet גיבור denotes the ability of God's might to defeat a conflicting divine attribute. In other words, turning to a mighty God is turning to a merciful ruler who has the ability and desire to bend the rules of his own design due to his compassion, and the acknowledgement that he has the ability to do so, when natural law cannot be relied upon.

The dichotomy of greatness and might when standing before God in prayer is expressed halakhically in the division between tractates *Berakhot* and *Ta'anit*; while both relate to prayer, one discusses routine, everyday prayer, while the other delves into prayer practices in a time of crisis. However, the two are differentiated not only in the sense of distress and the presence of danger, but also in the divine attributes that are employed. *Berakhot*, with its normative prayer, turns to God who governs the world with the natural law he created, and benefits us through natural law, while *Ta'anit* pleads with the attribute of might – particularly relating to controlling rain,² which negates the natural order. When facing drought, plague, epidemic, and cessation of rain, man turns to God and asks him to overpower nature. Redemption cannot be found within the framework of nature, since it is nature that poses the threat; instead, in his distress, man asks God to suppress the natural order. He is compelled to go out of his comfort zone, and turn to God while deserting the familiar framework of beneficial nature and comforting routine. He leaves his protective home and prays on the street, as an expression of stepping out of the comfort of his routine – a last resort against the hostility of nature.

This sense of a hostile nature that requires overpowering and might is foreign to modern man. In the consistent tension between fixed natural laws and divine providence, modern man is accustomed to turning to God, who will kindly tend to his needs, livelihood, and health, within the natural framework. The modern God-fearing man prays and pleads to God with passion and intensity, but his prayers emerge from an understanding that out of the natural possibilities pertaining to his personal reality, God will choose a positive outcome. He is reluctant to pray for the submission of nature; he prays for God to guide and hone nature toward the desired outcome.

Over the last few weeks, reality has changed, and this demands a parallel change in our emotional world, in prayer, and in religious experience. Man is no longer Adam I; nor is he Adam II, who trusts nature to provide his needs, even when this security creates the existential loneliness described in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. The state and

perception of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, an essay based on modern philosophies that trust in nature, is a far cry from the current condition of the current isolated man. R. Soloveichik describes man's conquest of nature in a world where technology provides man with control over the universe; but now what we need is prayer that turns to the attribute of גבורה to battle nature. We need to acknowledge the new existential state, and pray to God, who heals the sick, while recognizing the new reality.

Our prayers today need to be founded on the mode of prayer described in *Ta'anit*, which expresses this perception. The primary relevant prayer from *Ta'anit* in this situation, which is embedded in our *siddur*, is אבינו מלכנו.³

In this context we should note that these prayers in *Ta'anit* are based on an acute sense of danger, based on a threat from nature. A threat from nature is usually severe. While the threat is sometimes gradual, and only becomes concrete over time (such as cessation of rain), it is no less severe. In the present reality, in which the threat emerged gradually, not everyone feels there is an individual threat, since the extent of the danger is amorphous. Contrary to an acute sense of trepidation, if it exists, the vague unease makes it difficult to utter these prayers. This requires one to internalize the dangers posed by nature, not to shirk our responsibility to respond with appropriate prayer.

In light of this analysis, the ramifications on the policy of *psak* must be determined as well. One of the primary approaches to current halakhic questions attempts to maintain a familiar routine to whatever extent possible, and is willing to be lenient to achieve this end. Of course, each situation requires individual attention, but the fundamental question of whether it is even correct to maintain routine in these trying times should be addressed. Should the individual and the community not be instructed that these are not usual times, and that we are faced with a new world and existential state; and for now, there is no spiritual or existential logic in maintaining a routine that befitted a different reality? Familiar routine is a comfort; but when the

¹ This was indeed Israel's sin with the Golden Calf – they clung to the first element they believed would protect them from unfamiliar surroundings. In their panic and fear they failed to understand that what they looked to as a solution, was, in fact, the problem.

² The discussion of the rain as a feature of might which overcomes nature, instead of a natural force, is beyond the scope of this letter.

world order has turned upside down, the objective should not be to seek calm or comfort, but rather to face reality, and understand that our relationship with the world around us has shifted. We must recognize the crisis and make the necessary spiritual adjustments. Instead of holding on to the past, we must come to terms with a different present. The aspiration to execute a halakhic policy which strives to maintain routine is not a question relating to a specific halakhic detail, nor is it a general question of leniency or stringency in policy, but rather a fundamental question of whether the crisis should be acknowledged, and the aspiration to return to that which is familiar and routine abandoned. The world is changed, and this must be acknowledged.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that I don't believe fear of epidemic and disease are necessary to enhance the sense of man's dependence on God. Our dependence on the divine is crucial to our religious existence, no less in normal times, in our dealings with comforting routines and friendly nature. However, this dependence is no longer filtered through that which is familiar and routine, but rather through battling routine; we therefore need to turn to God as the only power that can conquer nature on our behalf. This is another form of divine providence; in order to merit this, man must recognize the specific need and pray to God, while shedding the sense of security usually derived from the world that surrounds us.

May the great, mighty, and awesome God hear our prayers, and remove illness from our midst and from the entire world.

With sincere and loving hope for physical and spiritual health,

Mosheh Lichtenstein

** English Translation by Atara Snowbell of original letter in Hebrew

³ Another prayer from *Ta'anit* that is embedded in our *siddur*, to a lesser extent, is מי שענה. To me this seems an appropriate addition alongside עשה למען and עננו ה' עננו. In times that demand crying out to God (for example, in the fast day declared this week on *Erev Rosh Hodesh*), since all these additions have a deep connection with the *Ta'anit* mode of prayer.

GLEANNING THE WISDOM OF RUTH

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The book of Ruth begins with the attempt to overcome loss. After suffering through the death of her husband and her sons, Naomi brushes herself off and attempts to rebuild her life back in her hometown of Bethlehem. Surprised by Ruth, her former and ever-loyal daughter-in-law, Naomi ends up not only restored but also having ensured the continued spiritual flourishing of her people.

Leon Kass, an emeritus professor of social thought at the University of Chicago and the author of *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* and *Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus*, has also found comfort in the story of Ruth after experiencing upheaval in his life. Following the loss of his wife of 54 years, Amy Apfel Kass, Kass learned the book of Ruth with his granddaughter Hannah Mandelbaum, a Jerusalem-based college student. *Reading Ruth*, a result of their *havruta*, documents the wisdom and insights of Ruth's teachings that they learned together.

A brief volume (the book runs 125 pages, including endnotes), the authors present their own commentary largely without the assistance of classical Jewish interpreters and without utilizing recent scholarship on Ruth. (The few secondary sources cited on occasion are a decades-old essay by Maurice Samuel, another by Cynthia Ozick, a *Mosaic* article on Ruth, and Yael Ziegler's *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, which the authors state they came across late in the process of their writing.) As they write in the introduction, when pressed by their publisher to imagine their ideal reader, they picture him or her as "whether young or old a lover of stories with a taste for character and artistry; a serious but open-minded seeker of wisdom regarding enduring human concerns," but not necessarily familiar with prior knowledge of the text, knowledge of biblical scholarship, or religious commitment.

It would not be a surprise then for long-time readers of Ruth and its commentaries throughout the ages—including recent years' close literary readings offered by [Jonathan Grossman](#), [Yair Zakovitch](#), [Tamara Cohn Eskenazi](#) and [Tikva Frymer-Kensky](#), and [Orit Avnery](#)—to already be familiar with much of the content in this new commentary. But Kass and Mandelbaum's passion for the material, often felicitous phrasing, and the accessibility of their work to a wider range of readers than a typical scholarly commentary make the volume a worthwhile read independent of one's previous study of Ruth.

By way of example of the work's style, when Naomi encourages Ruth and Naomi's other daughter-in-law, Orpah, to find *menuhah* following the deaths of their respective husbands (1:9), the word is brilliantly rendered "marital-maternal relief from restlessness." The problematic nature of Elimelekh, Naomi's husband, leading his family out of Israel and into the fields of Moab during a famine—much discussed in classical rabbinic texts (which go unmentioned)—is framed by the authors thusly:

... a certain man - an 'ish, a man of standing - decided to leave the country. Why should we be interested in him, and what, we wonder, are we to make of his singularity? Should we regard him as a maverick and outlier in Israel, or as a paradigm of Israelite initiative and enterprise - or, alternatively, of Israelite waywardness?

Ruth's famous pledge of allegiance to Naomi ("Wherever thou goest, I will go..." (1:16)) is meticulously analyzed for its nuance, with the authors' keen eyes noting that:

...when Ruth solemnly invokes (for the first time) the Lord God of Israel (not the 'elohim of Moab), it is not in expression of reverence or in prayer for a blessing. She invokes Him only to call down His punishment on her - misery like yours, Naomi, and more so - should she allow anything but death to separate them.

In their rendering of the scene in chapter two in which Ruth finds herself in Boaz's field and the latter's employee mentions to him that Ruth is "the Moabite maiden who came back with Naomi from the fields of Moab," (2:6) the authors suggest—contra the usual understanding of this as a snide, racial dismissal of a foreigner by the field overseer—that he is in fact helpfully and sheepishly hinting to his boss that this indigent young woman could sure use some help from, say, a rich relative of Naomi, should he happen to know anyone who fits that description (*cough* *cough*). Following the same thread, the authors—in alignment (intentional or not) with recent revisionist understandings of Boaz as less classic hero and more hesitant, wavering potential-suitors—note that Boaz introduces himself to Ruth without stating his name or identifying himself as Naomi's kinsman, unsure as to the propriety of initiating a courtship.

Besides the often breathtaking prose, one of the great strengths of *Reading Ruth* is the skillfulness with which it

offers its literary analysis. The many guiding words that appear in clusters in the short narrative (eg. *shuv* [return] in chapter one and *shakhav* [lie down] in chapter three) are gleaned for insights into the characters' psychological and spiritual motivations, as are the biblical author's callbacks to unusual words used earlier in the tale. Examples of the latter phenomenon include Ruth being told by Boaz to "cling" to his workers (2:8) (meant to signal a reward for Ruth's having clung to Naomi when prospects for neither seemed high (1:14)) and Ruth reporting to Naomi that Boaz sent her back from the threshing floor with food lest she return "empty" to her mother-in-law (3:17) (meant to convey that fortunes have turned since Naomi first stepped foot back in Bethlehem after God had "emptied" her (1:21)).

The authors adeptly articulate the genealogical and behavioral subtext that constitutes the key to understanding the Book of Ruth's most crucial scene, the one taking place at the threshing floor in chapter three: namely that Ruth, descended from Moab—and Boaz, descended from Judah's son Peretz—are each products of earlier biblical stories of night-time seduction. So too they elaborate on the symbolic nature of the character and place names throughout the book: Bethlehem, Kass and Mandelbaum explain, can mean "House of Bread," while Ploni Almoni, they note, can be rendered as "'Joe Blow,' 'John Doe,' or 'Mac.'"

Unsurprising to readers of Kass's earlier works on the Bible, *Reading Ruth's* greatest asset is its aim to stake moral claims about how to live life well and to convey the wisdom the Hebrew Bible has gifted the world. Noting the aforementioned Ploni's reluctance to marry the foreigner Ruth, the authors note:

...before we rush to convict him [for this poor decision], we should consider whether we - average people ourselves - would have chosen differently: how many of us would gladly marry, only out of putative moral responsibility, the foreign-born widowed wife (from an enemy nation) of a deceased second cousin whom we hadn't seen in ten years, to sire and rear a son that will be his, not ours?

Contrast Ploni's reticence with how the authors address Boaz's eventual decision:

...it is love and loyal devotion, and not merely moral duty, that govern Boaz's final pledge to raise up Mahlon's name upon his inheritance and to make sure

that his name is not cut off from among his people. The deepest love is not a painful lack seeking satisfaction for oneself, but a bountiful overflow seeking the good for one's beloved, in generative acts both large and small.

Reading Ruth makes for perfect Shavuot night reading (and you won't need to stay up all night to finish it). It succinctly but sumptuously conveys the pathos, profundity, and artistry of the pastoral tale that has inspired countless kindnesses for generations. Fitting for a book read on the holiday of the giving of the Torah, a time in which countless intergenerational *havrutot* have studied God's word long into the night, the book of Ruth seeks nothing less ambitious than to capture the essence of our people's national story and the keys to its eventual restoration in its Land. As the authors—one from his residence in the United States, the other, his granddaughter, from hers in Israel—remind us:

...in Israel, begetting and belonging are of the essence. Members of the community should not disappear without a trace and land should not be permanently alienated. The community should avoid an enduring division between the landed and the non-landed. Every family should be rooted in the land, able to sustain its life, generation after generation, in service to the Lord.

ACROSS THE RIVER

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When the sorcerer walked through the town gates, I was standing with my friends Reuven and Yitzchak in the square, which was not where we were supposed to be. Reuven should have been in the study hall, where his wife had directed him to go. Yitzchak should have been at the market, helping his father. And I should have been resting my voice, since that evening, for the first time, I was going to be allowed to lead the prayers in synagogue—an honor I had been hoping for and practicing for, but that I now, somewhat nervously, wished was not coming so soon.

We were all, mind you, on our way to where we were supposed to be. We were obedient young men, with no inner drive for trouble. Reuven loved his studies, and I loved the taste of prayers in my mouth, the feeling that came when I hit the right accents with the right emotions. Yitzchak, while he did not exactly love trade, certainly appreciated the money he would take home. But we were all still young, and it was a warm lush day with the first hint of summer twining through the breeze. It had been a long time since the three of us had sat together under a teacher's stern eye, and though we saw each other in passing almost every day, we always had something to catch each other up on.

"My wife," Reuven said—he was newly married, and always blushed slightly when he said *my wife*—"tells me her sister is ready for marriage, and her parents are talking to the marriage broker. What do you say, Yitzchak? You won't find a better family."

"Eh," Yitzchak said, lifting a shoulder. "I admire her parents well enough, but I'm not sure I like who my brother-in-law would be."

Reuven made a show of punching him, and I gave them both a sharp look. Not too sharp—I didn't want to appear insulted that *I*, apparently, was not a good marriage prospect for Reuven's wife's sister—but really, we were no longer children. If the rabbi's wife was at market, and saw me behaving like a wild animal, she might mention it to the rabbi, and he might decide I wasn't ready to lead prayers after all.

"I have to go," I said. "I need to practice for tonight."

Yitzchak lifted the corner of his mouth—once he was in a jocular mood, it was hard to get him out of it—but Reuven nodded. "Of course. Are you going to sing one of your own poems?"

"No!" I hadn't even considered it. No one but the two of them and my father had heard my compositions. And though they all assured me my prayer-poems were wonderful, I knew they were just shells of what they could have been. They needed an infusion of words and songs I couldn't yet give them. And though I knew where I could go to find that music, I wasn't ready.

I could not possibly explain. So I said, "It's only my first—"

Then a hush fell over the square, and we turned just in time to see the sorcerer walk through the gate.

He was dressed like a monk, but his cassock cast a shadow darker than itself, so we all knew immediately what he was. He walked past the beggars at the well, past the women herding mules along the street, past the children playing near the walls, straight toward us. The only three Jews in the square.

We should have run. We would have, if he hadn't come so fast. Next thing we knew, he was beside us. His sleeve fell back to reveal a gnarled hand with too-long fingers, and with the knuckles of that hand, he brushed Reuven's cheek.

Reuven let out a small, strangled sound. Yitzchak and I stepped back.

The sorcerer smiled at us, then turned and kept walking, farther into the town.

* * *

News of the sorcerer had been passed along by traders and travelers from the other towns along the Rhine. He was from the east, they said, from the land of the Byzantines, and he was headed back there to help the Byzantine emperor fight the Moors. On his way, he was killing as many Jews—only Jews—as he could.

This was no real surprise to us Jews, though it was quite a relief to our Christian neighbors.

He had already killed many of us. He touched people, and they went home, and then they weakened and died. The travelers were unclear on how long it took.

But they were clear that he never stopped with only one. After Reuven died, there would be dozens more... maybe hundreds. First here in Worms, and then in another town, and another. There was nothing we could do to stop it.

I helped Yitzchak walk Reuven home to his wife and waited with them until the sun dipped low. And then I went to the river.

* * *

Years later, when I was much older and living in another land, I discovered that scholars had been searching for centuries for the Sambatyon River. It puzzled me at first, because of course I had always known where it was. It was right behind my house.

It took me longer than it should have to realize that I was the only one who had ever seen it. Not merely in my hometown—that, I had always known—but in the entire world. That was why others searched for it in distant deserts and faraway jungles. They did not know that the Sambatyon came to those it chose.

By then, I was ashamed to tell them it had chosen me.

The river behind my house wasn't usually the Sambatyon. Normally it was the Rhine, flat and gray, with ripples that were slow and languid, as if they didn't quite have the desire to make it all the way to the sea. As if, like the rest of us, they had nowhere to be but here.

It was only when I was alone, but not *always* when I was alone, that I felt the change: a restless surge within me, as if my mind was a maelstrom, full of thoughts and words and images desperate to get out. As if the prayers I practiced so diligently—prayers that I loved, that I longed to share with my community and devote my life to perfecting—were too rehearsed, too calm. Missing something I could not find in my synagogue or my town.

Then I would go to the river and find it wild and turbulent, waves rearing high above my head and crashing down in a fury of white froth. Rocks the size of a man's fist were tossed among the waves like goose feathers at a slaughter, clashing against each other and smashing the waves into glittering bits of spray.

The violent waters were always blue, a brighter, more crystalline blue than the sky above Worms ever was. And on the other side—which I could glimpse in bits and pieces, scattered and distorted through boulders and froth—I saw no houses and gardens, no chickens or pigs. I saw tents, and

long leonine creatures that looked like neither dogs nor cats, and dark-skinned figures in strange white clothes moving among them.

I wanted to see more, but not nearly as much as I wanted to hear their songs—prayers which must be so like, and so unlike, our own. I knew their music would fill the gaps in my own hymns, that if I infused my compositions with their prayers, it would make us whole. Bring us closer to God and to what we should have been. But the river, with its frantic rocks and roars of spray, was unceasingly loud, drowning out any sounds from the other side.

By then, of course, I knew what the river was, though I still didn't know *why* it was what it was. I had learned our history: how a thousand years ago, ten of Israel's twelve tribes were exiled before the rest of us. How they passed through Assyria and found a place, safe and secure, beyond the Sambatyon River: a river that ran wild six days a week, but became calm and smooth between sundown on Friday and nightfall on Saturday.

Living in isolation, the Ten Tribes could atone for the sins that had caused their exile and prepare for their eventual return. They had their own kingdom, their own customs, unchanged over the hundreds of years during which we, descendants of the other two tribes, had mingled with our neighbors and been downtrodden by them. The Ten Tribes had kept their original customs, their unique ways, their native skills.

Which would, I hoped as I watched the waves shoot billows of white spray into the air, include sorcery.

Two boulders crashed against each other, sending shards of wet rock flying. I flinched away, but felt a sharp pain right under my eye. When I touched it, my finger came away with a smudge of blood.

It was the first time anything from the river had touched me. As if it could see the rowboat I had dragged over—borrowed from a sympathetic Christian neighbor—and knew what it meant.

As if the river was warning me.

I did not step back. I was afraid that if I did, the rocks would disappear, and I would be facing only the Rhine: flat and wide and still, with nothing on the opposite bank that couldn't already be found on this side.

The sun touched the horizon, a blaze of orange drawing a host of blue and pink after it.

The rocks fell into the water, a sudden avalanche of deadly splashes. The froth settled into a swirl of bubbles, the ripples going as still as fractured ice.

It was the Sabbath, and on the Sabbath, the Sambatyon River ran smooth and tranquil.

I had thought that in its stillness, it would look ordinary, like any other river. But its sudden serenity looked more unnatural than its usual chaos.

And now, at last, I could hear voices from the other side.

I had dreamed of this moment for so long: my chance to take the music that drifted across the water and weave it into my own prayers. To reunite the Tribes of Israel, in song if not in reality.

Until tonight, I had spent my Friday evenings at synagogue with my father. I went with him even when he said I was too young, in order to pay close attention to the cantor. I had to know the prayers from our side of the river, to know them in my bones, before I could mix them with those from the other side.

They were singing in words I recognized as Hebrew, but so strangely accented that I couldn't make out their meaning. Not that I needed to: I knew what the songs were about. They were singing on their side, as we were on our side—as I should have been, at synagogue—to welcome the Sabbath.

I could have stopped and listened. Could have held those prayers in my mind, to bring back and mingle with my own compositions. Even at that moment, with the palpable terror that was strumming through every Jew in Worms filling my body, I considered it. Just for a few moments. It was what I had been born to do, and surely it wouldn't make a difference....

I thought of Reuven's wan, hopeless face. My shoulder muscles knotted. I drew in a deep breath, closed my eyes, and pushed the boat into the river.

* * *

During the week, it was the rapids and the rocks that kept the Sambatyon impassable. Any attempt to row across it, or even to step into it, would have torn a man's body apart.

On the Sabbath, it was something else that made the river into a barrier: God's law. For a thousand years, no single

person from the Ten Tribes had taken advantage of the river's calm. A boat ride, a transgression of the Sabbath, would tear a Jew's soul apart. To them, and to us, it was just as real a blockade as the deadly waves.

Something inside me shrank as I picked up the oars. And yet it was such a simple thing. The river didn't fight me; it was glassy and smooth, stained pink by the sunset. My body didn't fight me; my hands were sweaty but firm around the oars, my arms pulling rhythmically. I thought of all the Jews in my town, of my father's white-streaked beard and my mother's tired smile, of my little sister who climbed trees like she was half-squirrel. She was small and fast and lithe, and had not yet learned to be afraid.

She would learn it today.

In other towns, the sorcerer had killed children as well as adults. Entire families had vanished. In some cases, he had killed all but one, leaving a lone soul to bear all that grief.

The oars dipped in and out of the water, forming ripples that looked like quenched fire. If my soul fought me, I didn't hear it.

Souls can be very quiet, sometimes. That's why we need to raise our voices in prayer.

* * *

A man was waiting for me on the other side of the river. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, his face set in a forbidding scowl.

I decided not to get out of my boat just yet.

I dug one oar into the bottom of the river and heard a snap—the ground was covered with rocks, not dirt, so there was nothing to dig the oar into. I should have realized.

Since the oar was already broken, I kept pushing until the boat was high enough on the bank that I was pretty sure I wouldn't drift away. Then I pulled the oar—or half of it—into the boat, and laid it carefully next to the few items I had flung in at the last minute: a glass jar, a sack, a woven basket. I was surprised but pleased that my hand did not shake through any of this.

Then I turned to face the man.

He stepped closer, with a little lurch. "You should not be here. You are in violation of the Sabbath."

He spoke in Hebrew. Though his accent was strange, I was able to understand him. His voice was clear and slow and faintly melodic.

My own Hebrew was creaky and limited, used only for prayer and study. But for this, a matter of law, it was not hard to find the words I needed. "It is permitted to violate the Sabbath to save a life."

"Whose life are you saving?"

These words were harder to find. But I managed, in embarrassing fits and starts, to explain. The man listened without changing expression until I reached my point: "We do not know magic anymore, and we do not use weapons. We cannot kill him on our own. We need help. We need someone to cross the river and challenge him."

The man sighed, and I heard his answer in his sigh. "We cannot cross the river."

"To save a life, it is permitted—"

"It's not that. This river is not meant to be crossed." He stepped back, away from the water. Away from me. "Not yet."

I had been thinking this through all day. There were so many arguments, subtle and persuasive, that I could have made. But my limited words would have come out in a tangle, and all I could manage was, "We *need* you."

I put all my despair, all our helplessness, into those three words. The man bowed his head, and I had a moment of hope.

But his eyes remained on mine, and my hope died as I recognized the firmness behind his gaze. It wasn't sadness—or at least, not the type of sadness that would do me any good.

It was regret.

"You need us on this side of the river," he said, "more than you need us on your side."

My hands *were* shaking now, but I managed to pull the glass jar out of the bottom of the boat. I hadn't been certain, when I grabbed all these receptacles, what they might be for. Perhaps some part of me had feared, or known.

"Then give me something," I said, "to take back to my side."

He reached down, pulled a few weeds from the ground, and held them out to me, mud still clinging to their roots.

"Do you have these," he said, "where you come from? They possess healing properties. Perhaps they can help your friend, the one who has already been touched."

I tossed the weeds into the basket, but didn't break his gaze. "What about the rest of us? We will all die, if the sorcerer is not stopped. I need some..." What was the Hebrew for *spell*? "Some *thing*. That I can use to—to fight—"

He was shaking his head even before my words stuttered to a stop.

"You are not a fighter," the man said. "You were not meant to carry *weapons* across this river."

My jaw clenched. "Weapons are what we need."

"We have," he said kindly, "nothing to send with you."

But I didn't need kindness from him. I needed *help*.

"What good are you, then?" I switched to Yiddish; it obviously didn't matter whether he understood me or not. "Why can I see the river, if I was never meant to cross it? Why can I see *you*, if you won't help me? Just to know that you're here? What good does that do for *anyone*?"

From the expression on his face, I thought he might understand me after all. But I didn't wait to hear what he might say, or not say. I turned myself around and used the broken oar to push my boat back into the smooth water.

* * *

It was much harder rowing with only one oar, and with no hope. By the time I reached my side of the river, my shoulders hurt as if the bones inside them had rubbed each other raw.

Which would have been a welcome distraction from the deeper pain in my chest. Except I wasn't distracted at all.

I pulled the boat onto the shore and looked back over the water. I could see the man from the Ten Tribes still standing there, watching me.

I thought of the piece of oar I'd left in the rocks. At nightfall of the next day, when the Sabbath ended and the river started churning, would it be thrown up with the rocks, smashed between them and splintered into shards? Or

would it be left behind, a piece of our land not subject to the river's current, to sink into the mud beneath the water and disappear?

Either way, it would be as if I'd never been there.

I took the useless, broken half of the oar and thrust it, too, into the rocks, so hard the wood splintered my hand. I jabbed it again and again, my tears spilling into the water, where they, too, would leave no trace. Finally, I dropped the oar and watched it bob on the surface, which was so clear that I could see the deadly rocks lying heavy and still beneath the glassy water.

A few more plinks on the gentle current, and then nothing. My tears had stopped falling.

I stood staring into the Sambatyon for several minutes. Then I rolled my throbbing shoulders, reached into the water, and started pulling rocks out onto the shore.

* * *

I applied the weeds to Reuven's forehead, and ground some into his water, but they did nothing. Over the Sabbath, he got weaker and weaker.

The sorcerer had not yet attacked any other Jews, possibly because we spent the day enclosed in our homes or praying in our synagogue. According to the travelers' tales, the sorcerer preferred to touch us one at a time, when we were alone.

So I went out alone, after the late-afternoon prayer, under a sky bruised dark blue and purple. I went to the square where I had stood with my friends, dragging my sack along the street. It was filled to bursting with the stones I'd gathered from the river, and it was heavier than I had anticipated. By the time I let go of it, it felt like my shoulders would never recover.

Not that it would matter if I ended up dead.

I was fairly sure the sorcerer would find me. But the sack had slowed me down more than I had expected, and it was later than I had planned; I didn't feel like taking chances. Also, I had spent much of the day listening to Reuven's bride weep, and I was angry.

"Sorcerer!" I shouted into the twilight, in German, which I spoke better than I did Hebrew. "I challenge you to combat!"

I heard him laughing before I saw him coming. I blinked, and there he was: a tall shadow, like the night come early, that solidified into a cowed, black-clad man.

A *man*. But I could not quite convince myself that was what he was. I had left Reuven curled around his own body, shaking and covered with sweat.

"To *combat*?" he repeated, and laughed again. "Have the Jews of the Rhine learned sorcery, then?"

My hands were shaking, too, as I clenched one fist around a slick river stone. But they had been shaking since the night before. I had grown used to it.

"No," I said, and raised my voice so those watching from their windows could hear. *You need us on this side of the river*, the man had said; and though I didn't agree, I understood what he meant. What it had always meant, to know the Ten Tribes existed somewhere, safe and strong and free. "But the Jews on the other side of the Sambatyon have never forgotten it. They will come when we need them."

I flung the rock, with all my strength, at the sorcerer.

All my strength was not a lot; studying to be a cantor does not do much to build one's arm muscles, and mine still hurt from last night's rowing. But my days of playing children's games were not so far behind me, and I still remembered how to aim. The rock flew straight and true, directly at the face within the black cowl.

The sorcerer flung up one hand, palm out, his too-long fingers stretched wide. The rock stopped in midair and hovered several feet in front of him.

He clenched his gnarled hand into a fist and turned it, slowly. With a grinding sound, the rock shattered into pieces, and then into dust. The dust fell, a swift thick sprinkle, to the ground at the sorcerer's feet.

I had expected as much. Even so, his deliberate ease sent fear shooting in sharp quivers through my feet and up my legs.

"Well?" he said. And when I just stood there, the shaking having taken over my entire body, he threw his cowl back so I could see his smile. "Have you nothing more for me?"

I turned and ran.

I heard him laugh behind me, long and slow. I heard his footsteps hit the cobblestones, unhurried but sure.

I did not turn around until I heard him scream.

Training as a cantor does not build muscles, but it builds a very precise sense of time. I need to know just when the sun appears over the horizon, which is when the recitation of the morning prayer is permitted. I need to know the moment the gates of Heaven close on Yom Kippur, which is when my pleas should reach their greatest intensity. I need to be able to judge precisely when the Sabbath begins.

And when it ends.

At the exact right interval after sunset, when the sky was dark enough to reveal three stars, the Sambatyon burst again into fury. Somewhere, behind my house or in another place, the rapids poured up into the sky and crashed down in violent waves.

And the rocks I had dragged from the Sambatyon whirled into the air in turbulent fury, bursting out of my bag, crashing and tossing and smashing, just as the sorcerer leapt over it. Even the droplets of water clinging to them did their best to form waves, hissing and scattering through the air, around and into the black-clad sorcerer.

He only screamed twice, so I think it was quick—that he was dead before the rocks pounded his body into a pulp.

But to be truthful, I can't say I really care.

* * *

The rocks did not continue whirling in the square for long. Away from the river, I suppose, they lost the source of their movement; or perhaps they knew when they were no longer needed. By the time the moon rose, they were jagged and still, piled on the sorcerer's corpse in a broken heap.

Which was just as well. The fact that Jews are mocked for not fighting does not mean we won't also be punished when we do.

I gathered the rocks and threw them into the Rhine. Whether they made their way back home again, I cannot say. I walked by the river several times a week, for many years, but I never saw the Sambatyon again.

I always went on Friday nights, even though it meant giving up the chance to lead prayers. I stood by the gray sluggish water, and closed my eyes, and listened with all my might.

I never heard anything but the faint echo of our own songs. And when I opened my eyes, the river was always dull and gray.

I did find that broken oar, over a decade later, long after I had paid my neighbor for it. I stumbled across it the day before I left Worms to accept a position as the cantor in a much larger synagogue in a city far away. It was an opportunity I had dreamed of for years, so I didn't understand my sudden reluctance to leave. My parents had both passed away years ago, and I lived in a house on the other side of town with my wife and children. Yitzchak had moved to Speyer. Reuven's widow had remarried, and I rarely saw her. There was nothing to hold me here, to this town on the banks of a river I would never cross again.

I had gained some fame, by then, with my own prayer compositions. Some of my poems had spread up and down the river, been adopted by Jews in towns I'd never stepped foot in. Only I knew that my prayers, much as they were admired, were inadequate; that there was something missing, something I could not get down, no matter how hard I labored with pen and parchment. Something no scribe on this side of the river could force quill and ink to express.

A chance I had lost forever. A song neither I nor my people would ever get back.

When I found the broken oar, I turned it over and over in my hands. It was smooth and slick, whittled down by a steady current. I thought of taking it with me.

I left it there, in the mud.

It has been years since I last saw the Rhine. And as for the Sambatyon...

I keep the jar on my lectern, where I can see it when I lead services. I don't need it; my sense of timing has always been excellent. But every once in a while, before I start the Friday night services, I glance over.

And when the water in the jar stops whirling and frothing, and settles into a smooth, tranquil stillness, that is when I begin to pray.

Author's Afterword

Across the River is a retelling of a medieval story about the author of the *Akdamut*, a *piyyut* recited in most Ashkenazi congregations on the first day of Shavuot. This tale relates how Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak crossed the Sambatyon River to enlist the help of the Ten Lost Tribes so that the Jews of his town could fight off a deadly sorcerer.

Several years ago on Shavuot, I heard Dr. Chaviva Levin of Yeshiva University speak about the *Akdamut piyyut* and its legend. Some time after that, I was invited to write a retelling of a myth for a fantasy anthology. The result was this story, in which I try to remain faithful to the spirit of the original while also adding my own twist.

The original legend of Rabbi Meir (or at least one version of it) can be found in [this article](#) by Jeffrey Hoffman.

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