

*Torah Table Talk*  
**Satan: God's Prosecuting**  
**Attorney**

Parshat Beha'alotecha  
 Numbers 8:1 – 12:16/ 2:14 – 4:7



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt  
 in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf  
 "He was the perfect child."*

In the year 538 BCE Cyrus, the benevolent emperor of Persia, allowed the exiled Jewish community of Babylonia to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Still, many Jews chose to remain behind in Babylonia, attached to the good life they had made for themselves there. Several years later, now under the emperorship of Darius, Haggai and Zechariah led a second group of exiles back to the land of Judah to complete the rebuilding of the Temple. Under their inspired leadership the Temple was completed.

A deeply spiritual man, Zechariah prophesied through visions and dreams. He spoke to the people of angels, visions and with mysterious expressions. This chapter was chosen for Parshat Beha'alotecha because it contains a vision in which the prophet sees a Menorah. Today's Torah reading begins with the commandment to kindle the Menorah, the seven branch candelabra. In the book of Zechariah the Menorah is a symbol of the spiritual enlightenment which the new Temple will bring to the nation. With words of encouragement, the prophet tells the people that they will succeed "not by might nor by power but by my spirit."

One of the most interesting references in this Haftorah is to an angel called "Satan." Most Jews are not aware that "Satan" even appears in Jewish literature. There are only two places in the Bible in which we find references to this name, but there are many such references in Post Biblical literature. The character named Satan we find in such literature, however, is very different from the one we have come to know in Western thought. Still, it is hard not to be troubled by such references.

**Zechariah 3:1 – 2**

God showed me Joshua the High Priest standing in front of the angel of the Eternal. The Satan was standing on the right side, to accuse him. The Eternal said to the accuser: The eternal rebukes you, Satan! The eternal who chooses Jerusalem rebukes you! Is not Joshua a brand plucked out of fire?

**Job 1:6 - 12**

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Satan came also among them. And the Lord said to the Satan, "From where do you come?" And the Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down in it." And the Lord said to the adversary, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is no person like him, a perfect and upright man... The adversary answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear the lord for nothing? Have you not made a hedge about him and about his house and about all that he has on every side... And the Lord said, "Behold all that he has is in your power; only upon him do not extend your hand

**Gunther W. Plaut The Haftorah Commentary**

The Accuser (ha-satan\*) Sometimes rendered "Satan" as if it were a proper name, he is one of God's servants; he plays the role of prosecuting attorney but acts only with the permission of God. We are not told what the accuser says; most likely he represents those who oppose temple building and Joshua's elevation to the high priesthood.

\* *The Hebrew usually says ha-satan that is "the Satan," indicating that Satan is a noun and not a proper name. Except for the opening two chapters in the book of Job, he does not play an important role in biblical and post biblical theology.*

## **Midrash Tanhuma, Va-yera, 22-23**

*(This Midrash is meant to explain the background to the binding of Isaac)*

And it came to pass after these things that God tried Abraham" (Gen. 22:1). After what things (did God try Abraham)? According to R. Yohanan, citing R. Yose ben Zimra, after the things Satan had to say. [Following the feast given] upon the "child's having grown and being weaned" (Gen. 21:8), Satan spoke up to the Holy One, "Master of the universe, out of the entire feast that this old man, upon whom You bestowed fruit of the womb at the age of one hundred--out of the entire feast he prepared, could he not have spared, say, one turtledove, one fledgling, as an offering to You?" The Holy One replied, "Is it not true that Abraham prepared the feast in honor of his son? Still, if I say to him, 'Sacrifice your son to Me,' he will sacrifice him at once." Satan said, "Try him." At once "God tried Abraham."

## **Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 81a –b**

Pelimo used to say every day, "An arrow in your eyes, Satan!" One day - it was the eve of the Day of Atonement - Satan disguised himself as a poor man, went to Pelimo's door, and begged for alms. Bread was taken out to him. "On such a day," pleaded Satan, "when everyone is inside, shall I be outside?" At that, he was taken in, and bread was served to him. "On a day like this," he again pleaded, "when everyone eats at the table, am I to eat alone?" So he was taken over and seated at the table. As he sat down, he caused his body to be covered with suppurating sores and proceeded to act in a revolting manner. "Sit properly," he was told. He said, "Give me a cup," and one was given him. Then he became overheated and began spitting his mucus and phlegm into it. Even as they were scolding him, he passed out and died. The rumor went forth: "Pelimo killed a man, Pelimo killed a man!" So Pelimo fled from the city and hid himself. But Satan followed him, and [at the sight of Satan] Pelimo [frightened of being discovered] fell down before him. Seeing how Pelimo was suffering, Satan disclosed his identity, then asked Pelimo, "Why are you in the habit of saying, 'An arrow in your eyes, Satan!'" Pelimo: "What else am I to say?" "Say: 'May the Lord rebuke you, Satan!' "

## **The Zohar Volume 2 Parshat Terumah**

Everything that the Holy One, blessed be He, made above and below is all only to show His honor, and everything is for His service. ....Since this is the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, how could an evil servant come and incite against the will of his Master? And he turns people to the evil path and thrusts them from the good path and causes them not to do the will of their Master, and turns people to the evil path? He answers: Certainly he is doing the will of his master. It is like a king who had an only son, and he loved him exceedingly. And he commanded him with love not to come close to an evil woman, because anyone who approaches her is not worthy to enter the king's palace. That son promised that he would lovingly do the will of his father. Outside of the king's palace was a harlot who was very beautiful to behold. After a few days, the king said: I want to see the wishes of my son toward me. He called that harlot and told her: Go and entice my son, in order to test the wishes of my son toward me. What did that harlot do? She went after the king's son and started to embrace him and kiss him and entice him with all kinds of enticements. If that son is proper and observes the commands of his father, he scolds her and does not listen to her and thrusts her away from him. Then the father rejoices with his son, brings him into the inner sanctum of his palace, and gives him presents and gifts and great honor. Who caused all this honor for that son? We must say that it was the harlot. Does that harlot deserve praise for this or not? Certainly she deserves praise from all aspects, for she did the king's command and she brought that son all the good, all this love of the king toward him. ...Come and see: if there would not be this enticer, then the righteous would not inherit those supernal treasures that are their share in the World to Come.

## **The Siddur: The Evening Service**

Help us our father to lie down in peace and awaken us to life again our King.....Shield us from enemies and pestilence, from starvation sword and sorrow, and remove Satan from before us and behind us...

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Are you surprised to find so many references to Satan in Jewish literature? Why are Jews generally reluctant to acknowledge this aspect of the Jewish tradition?
  2. How does the verse in Zechariah suggest that this conversation is taking place in a court of law? What role does God play in this court? Do you think he is impartial in his judgment – why or why not?
  3. Compare the Midrash about the Akedah, the binding of Isaac with passages from Zechariah and Job. How are they similar to and different from one another? What is the relationship between Satan and God in these passages? Note that the word Stan is often written with a definite article. How does this change the meaning of this word? How did Satan become a proper name?
  4. Why does Pelimo find himself the subject of Satan's actions? How is this passage different from the classic image of Satan in Western Christian thought? Is it different from the other passages in the Bible or similar to them? What does Pelimo learn from Satan?
  5. The Zohar does not mention Satan by name but it appears to be discussing some type of demonic character. How does this character faithfully serve God? How does the Zohar understand the presence of evil in the world? What would a world without evil be like?
  6. There are actually references to Satan in the prayer book. What do you think the Siddur means when we ask God to remove "Satan" from before us and from behind us? Do you think this prayer was meant to be taken literally or is meant to be a symbolic statement?
- 

**Torah Table Talk** is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to [Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org](mailto:Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org).

To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to [tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org](mailto:tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org).

To see an archive of sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***