

Torah Table Talk

Passover as a Paradigm for the Future Redemption

Haftorah for Eighth Day of Passover
Deuteronomy 15:19-16:17/ Isaiah 10:32- 12:6



According to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Judaism is an “Exodus religion.” The story of Israel’s redemption from slavery is a paradigm for the nature of the world and the course of history. Commenting on the Haftorah for the final day of Passover, he writes, “To close the circle of interpretation, on the last day of the holiday the prophetic portion, taken from Isaiah (Chapter 11), articulates the futurist dimension of the Exodus. In that final fulfillment, the Lord will “recover the remnant of God’s people and gather the dispersed of Israel...from the four corners of the earth.” The ingathering will be the new Exodus....The restoration will be messianic: “A Shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse.” It will be associated with universal justice (“He shall judge the poor with righteousness and decide with justice for the lowly.”) and universal peace- no more “nature red in tooth and claw.” ...Thus will come the Exodus for all people, the future universal Exodus whose source and guarantor is the original Exodus celebrated on Passover.”

Today’s Haftorah contains one of the best known Messianic images in the Bible. But we are left to wonder what it really means. Are we meant to read it literally or is it an allegorical statement? And if so what does it mean?

Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, the fatling together; with a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. A babe shall play over a viper’s hole and an infant pass his hand over an adders den. In all My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done; For the land shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord as the water covers the sea.

Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:11

The great evils that come about between human beings, who inflict them upon one another because of purposes, desires, opinions, and beliefs, are all of them likewise consequent upon privation. For all of them derive from ignorance, I mean from a privation of knowledge...for through recognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished. It holds out this promise, saying: “And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb....” Then it gives the reason for this, saying that the abolition of these enmities, these discords and these tyrannies will be the knowledge that people will then have concerning the true reality of the deity. For it says: “They shall not hurt nor destroy in my holy mountain; for the earthy shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord...”

David Hartman, A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism

If violence is seen as stemming from a privation of knowledge, then the movement in history from a world dominated by violence, war and exploitation to one in which mutual understanding, the pursuit of justice, and the love of God prevail need not be based on a theology whereby God breaks into history and brings about the messianic reality. Reason, the image of God in every human being and the ground for the individual’s love of God, can also serve as the ground of the hope of establishing a community whose central political focus will be the growth of the knowledge of God.

Samuel Dresner, Keeping Kosher: A Diet for the Soul

We see that the diet of Adam, the first man, who dwelt in the ideal society of the Garden of Eden is limited to fruits and vegetables. He is meant to be a vegetarian. No mention is made of animal food, only “every herb yielding seed” and “every tree in which the fruit of a tree is yielding seed.” Not until we come to the story of Noah is meat permitted.... Just as at the beginning of time there was no eating of meat in the ideal society of the Garden of Eden, so at the end of time there will be a return to the original state of in the world in the perfect society described by the prophet Isaiah: “The Wolf shall dwell with the lamb... the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”....It seems quite evident that the prophet believed that, in the future time, human beings too would no longer eat meat.

Birkat HaMazon

May the All-Merciful bless the State of Israel, the beginning of the blossoming of our redemption.

Questions for Discussion

1. If Isaiah’s vision of the future is metaphorical, what do you think he had in mind? What do the wolf and the lamb dwelling together represent? What would it take to accomplish this? Do you think this is an attainable vision or a naive vision of the future?
2. Based on the teachings of Moses Maimonides. Rabbi David Hartman concludes that Isaiah’s vision is not some type of miraculous occurrence but a product of knowledge of the Lord? What do you think of his conclusion?
3. How could knowledge help to avert some of the evils that we face in the world today? What type of knowledge do you think we would need and what type of knowledge is Maimonides talking about? Read chapter 11 in the Book of Isaiah. What other references are there to knowledge in this chapter?
4. Do you think God has a role to play in bringing about utopian world? Why or why not? Is religion a source of good and hope or a source of violence and unrest?
5. Rabbi Samuel Dresner offers a very different understanding of the vision of Isaiah. What role does Kashrut play between the ideal origins and the ideal end of time described in the Bible? If we were meant to be vegetarians why don’t we simply stop eating meat?
6. Why do you think we read this chapter containing a messianic vision from the book of Isaiah on the last day of Passover? Note that the last verses of the Haftarah are also part of the Havdalah service with which we conclude the Sabbath. “Behold the God of my salvation; I am confident, unafraid. For the Lord is my strength and might and he is my deliverance.” What is the connection between this chapter and the Sabbath?
7. We also read these chapters from the book of Isaiah on the morning of Israel Independence day in synagogue. Why do you think contemporary Rabbis in the state of Israel chose this prophetic portion as the Haftarah for this day? Besides the obvious connection in which Isaiah speaks of the return of the remnant of Israel to their land, in what other ways is Israel meant to be the fulfillment of a messianic vision for secular and religious Jews alike?
8. What does it mean when we say that Israel is the beginning of the blossoming of our redemption in the *Birkat HaMazon*?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*