

READING שפור חמתך TODAY

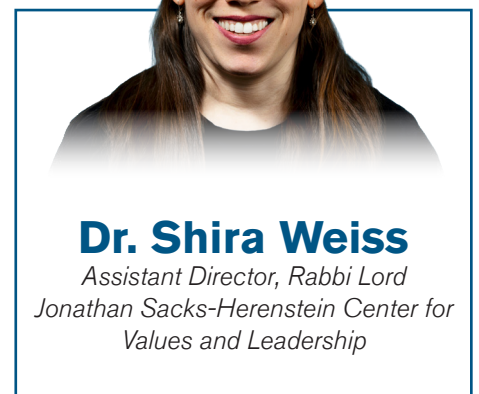
RABBI SACKS ON THE PERSISTENCE OF EVIL

The joy that we so often associate with Passover—the celebration of ancient freedom, the beautiful rituals, and the gathering of family – is clipped at the end of the Seder by the reality check of שְׂפֹרַח הַחֲמָתָה, the request that God pour out wrath upon our oppressors. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in so many of his books, especially *Future Tense*, noted the progression of hatred for Jews throughout history-- in the Middle Ages when Jews were hated for religion, in the 19th – 20th centuries when Jews were hated for their race, and today for our nation-state, Israel, as antisemitism is commonly disguised as anti-Zionism. “No soul was ever saved by hate,” he wrote in *Not in God’s Name*, “No truth was ever proved by violence. No redemption was ever brought by holy war. No religion won the



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admiration of the world by its capacity to inflict suffering on its enemies” (p. 265).
Rabbi Sacks adjured us to fight against hate, especially any forces of enmity fueled by religion. In *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Sacks writes, “He [God] does not want the people of the covenant to be one that accepts the evils and injustices of the world



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as the will of God ... In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be” (p. 25-27). Rabbi Sacks contrasts passive optimism to active hope and emphasizes the value of human protest against immorality.

Throughout his works, Rabbi Sacks describes Judaism as God’s call to

human responsibility to both the Jewish and the human story; he asks us to heal the wounds of an injured world with justice, compassion, and dignity. Not only do we need to protest and fight against the evil and immorality of our enemies, but we also ask God to subject them to the forces of justice.

And yet, when we recite the paragraph of שְׁפֹךְ חַמַּתְךָ as we open the door for Elijah at the end of the Seder, we string together three different verses joined by their passionate, even violent call, language that would seem to undermine Rabbi Sacks' premise about hate:

שְׁפֹךְ חַמַּתְךָ אֶל-הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּךָ וְעַל-
מַמְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁמְךָ לֹא קָרְאוּ. כִּי אֵבֶל
אֶת-יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת-נְהוֹי הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁפֹךְ-עֲלֵיהֶם וְעַמְּךָ
וְחֵרוֹן אַפְּךָ יִשְׁיֵגֵם. תִּדְרֹךְ בָּאֶרֶץ וְתִשְׁמִידֵם
מִתַּחַת שָׁמַי ה'.

"Pour your wrath upon the nations that did not know You and upon the kingdoms that did not call upon Your Name! Since they have consumed Jacob and laid waste his habitation (Ps. 79:6-7). Pour out Your fury upon them and the fierceness of Your anger shall reach them (Ps. 69:25)! You shall pursue them with anger and eradicate them from under the skies of the Lord (Lam. 3:66)."

With the fierceness and brevity of only 32 Hebrew words, we come to the end of the Seder with little room for ambiguity, compassion, or hesitation.

Rabbi Sacks explains that these three biblical verses were added to the Haggadah during the Middle Ages, at one of the darkest periods of anti-Jewish persecution in the Diaspora. It began with the First Crusade in 1096 and the massacre of Jewish communities in Worms, Speyer, and Mainz, which led to centuries of persecution, culminating, in the Holocaust.

In the *Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Haggadah* on this section of the Seder, he writes,

"For centuries, Jews suffered a series of devastating blows - massacres, pogroms, forced conversions, inquisitions, confinement to ghettos, punitive taxation and expulsions, culminating, in the very heart of 'enlightened' Europe in the Holocaust. Yet these verses, two from Psalms, one from the Book of Lamentations, are almost the only trace left by this experience on the Haggadah, the night when we recall our past..."

Rabbi Sacks writes unambiguously that vengeance is antithetical to Jewish tradition: "Judaism is a religion of justice. It is also a religion of love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity and peace. But from the beginning it has wrestled with the question of how to bring the Divine presence down to earth, in the structures and institutions of society. The necessary precondition is justice. Once that exists, there is room for the many other virtues that humanise our world. But without justice, something fundamental is missing. 'Pour out Your wrath' is not a call for vengeance. It is not a call to human action at all. It is, rather, a prayer for Divine justice" (p. 68).

Rabbi Sacks suggests that we read these verses from a place of emotion rather than cognition. They emerge as a cry of pain coming to us from one of the darkest nights of the Jewish soul, as if to say: "Let us understand, one day if not now, the justice of Your world, Judge of all the earth."

We are still trying to understand the justice of God's world, especially in the shadow of Oct. 7 and the intense scourge of antisemitism worldwide. Where some modern, creative Haggadot have changed the language from "Pour out Your hate" to "Pour out Your love," the traditional Haggadah makes space for some of the most difficult, even contradictory feelings

that surface when we think back on that night and its miracles. We remember – indeed are commanded to remember and relive – all the pain that necessitated those miracles.

We do not read שְׁפֹךְ חַמַּתְךָ at the beginning of the Seder; its sharpness should not cloud our entire holiday experience. We make room for the joy, the celebration, and the meal. Only then do we ready ourselves for some of the night's more complex feelings. We invite Elijah, a complicated, zealous, and towering prophet, into our homes to usher in the work we must do when the Seder is finished. The work of redemption that began that night continues.

"Memories of Elijah and the seder can be bittersweet, recalling the annual disappointment of not finding him at the door," writes Sacks Book Prize winner Daniel Matt in *Becoming Elijah*. Matt shares a Hasidic tale that the disciples of the Kotzker Rebbe complained year after year that Elijah never shows up. He promised them that Elijah would come. Expectantly they waited. They opened the door. "Crushed, they turned to their Rebbe, whose face was beaming. Seeing their distress, he asked, 'What's troubling you?' They told him. 'Fools!' he thundered. 'Do you think Elijah the prophet enters through the door? He enters through the heart'" (p. 133-4).

We make a small space for anger at the end of the Seder so that we can name it for what it is and beseech God to bring divine justice with an outstretched arm, the kind that is out of human bounds. And then, as we finish the Seder, we are poised and ready to continue the work of redemption that God lovingly puts in our hands.