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Dvar Torah for the Last Day of Passover

Bob Chodos¹

Texts: Isaiah 2:2–4, 11:1–9; Micah 4:1–5

A Jewish Sabbath morning service typically includes a dvar torah (“word of Torah”), a talk reflecting on that morning’s Torah portion – or, sometimes, the haftarah or prophetic portion.

In 2015, Saturday, April 11, was the last day of Passover, and that morning I led services at Temple Shalom in Waterloo, accompanied by Carol McMullen on guitar. The haftarah for the last day of Passover includes the great vision of peace in chapter 11 of the book of Isaiah, in which the wolf dwells with the lamb and the leopard lies down with the kid. After the haftarah, Carol along with Wendy Weinberg, Ruth Shushan, and Mark Pancer, who frequently sing together at Temple Shalom and other places, sang “Lo Yareiu,” a song that draws from both Isaiah 11 and another soaring vision of peace in chapter 2 of the same book. My dvar torah then picked up the theme:

Isaiah’s beautiful words and the beautiful harmonies that Carol, Wendy, Ruth, and Mark bring to those words – let’s just savour that for a moment.

As I mentioned, the song “Lo Yareiu” is taken from two different visions in the book of Isaiah, one in chapter 11, which is the haftarah that I read, and one in chapter 2. I would like to read in English the whole passage in chapter 2 from which the words of the song are taken:

It will be in the end of days:
Established shall be the mountain of YHVH’s² house
As the head of mountains
And it shall be raised above the hills
And all nations shall stream to it.
And many peoples shall go and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHVH,
To the house of the God of Jacob
And God will teach us of God’s ways
And we will walk in God’s paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth Torah
And the word of YHVH from Jerusalem
And God shall judge between the nations
And shall arbitrate for many peoples
And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares
And their spears into pruning-hooks.

¹ Bob Chodos is a lay leader at Temple Shalom, Waterloo Region’s Reform Jewish congregation, and a member of Interfaith Grand River.

² YHVH is a rendering into the Roman alphabet of the four-letter name of God, יהוה. The exact pronunciation of the name is not known, and Jews never pronounce it. Instead we substitute “Adonai,” often rendered into English as “the Lord,” or “Hashem,” meaning “the Name.” In this dvar torah I used “Hashem.”

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation
And they shall not learn war any more.³

This passage is undoubtedly one of the shining jewels of the Tanach,⁴ but it also has a shadow side that has long niggled at me. The shadow side is the implication that for universal peace to be realized, everyone has to come to our God. Does this not smack of the kind of spiritual imperialism that we deplore in other religions?

One person who struggled with this question was the prophet Micah. Micah was a younger contemporary of Isaiah's, and he learned a lot from Isaiah, but also maybe saw some things that Isaiah didn't see. One curious feature of Micah's book is that it contains, almost word for word, the very same passage that I just read from the book of Isaiah.⁵ Most of the differences between the two passages are trivial; for example, "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation" is in the singular in Isaiah, "*Lo yisa goy el goy cherev*," and in the plural in Micah, "*Lo yis'u goy el goy cherev*."

But there is also a much more significant difference, for at the end of the passage in Micah is a verse that does not appear in Isaiah: "For every people shall walk in the name of its God, and we will walk in the name of YHVH our God for ever and ever." This verse puzzled traditional commentators, for it seemed to contradict what Micah had just said. What does it mean for all nations to stream to the mountain of YHVH if those nations then walk in the name of their own Gods?

I would like to suggest that this final verse does not contradict what comes before but offers a way of interpreting it. Perhaps the nations are streaming to the mountain of YHVH not to worship our God but to learn how better to worship their own Gods. We know that even though only a tiny proportion of the world's population is Jewish, Torah has indeed gone forth from Zion. Jewish teachings and stories are an essential component of Christianity and Islam, our siblings in the family of Abrahamic religions, and through them have indirectly influenced other religions such as the Baha'i and Sikh traditions. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in exile from his birthplace and spiritual home of Tibet, has written that "the image of Judaism as a religion that has helped a people to survive in exile for so long is deeply inspiring. When I first came in contact with Jewish leaders, I used to ask them, 'Tell me your secret!'"⁶ Modern Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Emmanuel Lévinas are read well beyond the Jewish world. I get notices of academic papers of interest through an email service called Academia.edu. Last week there was one called "Jewish thought in Lévinas and Buber." Unfortunately I could only read the English abstract because the paper, by a scholar named Toshihiro Horikawa, was in Japanese.

Of course it works the other way as well. I've known since I was a student at a Hebrew day school that social justice is a central component of the Jewish tradition, but I gained a much fuller appreciation of what it meant when I saw Jesuits I worked with put their lives on the line in places like El Salvador and Jamaica. In our service we treat the Torah like an ancient king, but I've still found I had much to learn about how to revere a sacred text from the attitudes and customs of my Muslim and Sikh friends surrounding the Qur'an and the

³ Isaiah 2:2–4.

⁴ The Hebrew Bible.

⁵ Micah 4:1–5.

⁶ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2010), p. 93.

Guru Granth Sahib. It's no secret that Jewish observances are linked to the rhythms of nature and the cycles of the sun and the moon, but becoming acquainted with Wiccan and Pagan practices has helped me understand just how deep that connection is.

So perhaps the call to the nations to stream to the mountain of YHWH is a call not to conversion but to mutual learning and exchange. It's a call for us to live our tradition in a way that others can learn from us, as well as to be open to learning from others. And perhaps that is what will ultimately lead to nations beating their swords into ploughshares, to people not learning war any more, to the wolf dwelling with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the kid. *Ken yehi ratzon.*⁷

⁷ "May this be God's will."