

Shabbat Ha-Chodesh  
March 20, 2009  
Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois

Laurence Edwards

### **Bound Up, but not Tied Down**

Do you remember that Seinfeld episode when George was convinced that he could see better by squinting, and was spotting dimes at 20 yards? Sometimes I feel that way when I am thinking about history, about where we come from and how we got to where we are. If I could narrow my focus enough, squint back in time, I could somehow see how things were and discover the connections between then and now.

This special Sabbath, Shabbat Ha-Chodesh, is the last Shabbat in Adar. It is halfway between Purim and Pesach. We will announce the coming new moon of Nisan tonight. The extra reading assigned from Exodus 12 sets out the original instructions for the first Passover.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household. ... You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. ...

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a Passover offering to the Lord. For that night I will go through the land of Egypt, and strike down every first-born ...when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread...  
(Ex. 12:1-20)

This is a commandment that pre-dates Sinai – the instruction is given already while still in Egypt, and the first Pesach is to be celebrated there. We recognize the symbols of Pesach, Matzah, and Maror – the lamb, the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs. But we know from our own celebrations of Pesach that reclining on pillows has replaced the staff and the girded loins. We drink four cups of wine – not mentioned here at all – but put no blood on our doorposts. It is the same observance, but also quite definitely not the same.

The special haftarah, from the prophet Ezekiel, gives the sense that there are indeed connections between the readings, from very different times in our history. Ezekiel spoke to the exiles in Babylon. His vision of a rebuilt Temple and its reinstated rites is so strange, so different from the many details given in the Torah, that Ezekiel almost did not make it into the Bible. According to Michael Fishbane's magisterial volume on the haftarot, Ezekiel's many departures from the priestly laws stated in the Torah

contributed to an ancient rabbinic decision to withdraw the Book of Ezekiel from public use, but this act was cancelled after the heroic exegetical effort of Hananiah ben Hilkiah. ... His interpretations are "no longer found among us" (said Kimhi), but the effort saved the day...<sup>1</sup>

Ezekiel imagines a future with a rebuilt Temple, with rituals rather different from what had been before. For example, "On the first day of the first month, you shall take a bull of the herd without blemish, and you shall cleanse the Sanctuary. The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering and apply it to the doorposts of the Temple... (Ez. 45:18-19). A similar instruction is given for the seventh month as well. Nothing like this is mentioned in the Torah. Set side by side, the Torah and Haftarah readings make it very clear that some of our most important celebrations have changed dramatically over time.

Reading through the Ezekiel passage, one wonders why this is assigned two weeks before Passover – it can only lead to confusion! But it does at least let us know that Ezekiel, a priest *and* prophet, can re-imagine tradition. He knows that it does not stand still, does not remain forever frozen. We are not paleontologists dealing with the calcified remains of dinosaurs. We are living, breathing human beings, and our traditions also live and breathe.

In that connection, Howie Aronson sent me this week a very interesting study of a simple word from the Mishnah on Passover.<sup>2</sup> It is only when we get to the Mishnah, around the year 200, that we have a description of a Passover seder similar in many details (though not all!) to what we are used to. When the Mishnah speaks of serving the first cup of wine, it uses the verb *mozeg*, "to mix." I was taught that the wine in those days was very thick and needed to be watered down, and thus the verb "to mix" came to mean "to pour" wine. But Howie's source (a website called "Balashon") demonstrates that it was much more complicated. It did have to do with keeping things under control – which can be a concern after four cups of wine. But the problem was not alcohol, or syrupy consistency. After comparing many sources, including Greek and Roman, Balashon comes to the conclusion that

... it wasn't the alcohol that made the wine strong - it was ... spices! And in fact, we see that "spices" were added to wine in a number of Hebrew

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarah* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 356.

<sup>2</sup> Balashon: <http://www.balashon.com/>

sources. We see that almost all the mentions of *meseq* can be explained to be adding spices or other drugs to the wine ... In Maccabees III 5:45 it says that the elephants were driven to madness before battle by giving them "wine mixed with frankincense". ... Note that the Aramaic word for intoxication was *besumei* בסומי - from *besamim* בשמים, "spices"!

... [T]he seder was modeled on the Greek symposium. However, the rabbis made sure that this special occasion did not denigrate into simple revelry or worse. So of course it was very important to mix the wine with water. In fact, there was an opinion in the Mishna that if one did not dilute the wine the blessing "*borei pri hagafen*" could not be made (Berachot 50b). And one of the descriptions of the "rebellious son" was that he drank neat wine - without dilution (Sanhedrin 70a). ...

Of course as time went on, as Rashi and the Tosafot mention (on Pesachim 108b), there was no longer a need or a practice to dilute the wine. However, I do find it strange that nothing is done at the Seder to recall this once common custom. We saw that with *mesubin* and *afikoman* that the meaning and practice of the words have changed significantly over the generations. But we still do eat the *afikoman* and lean on our side - even if that wasn't the original intent. [We'll discuss this some other time.] What is left of the mixing of wine? Maybe, if only to get the children to ask questions - we should be inspired by Shir HaShirim, and not leave out the "*mezeg*" אל-יְהַסֵּר הַמֵּזֶג - *al yechsar hamazeg*!

The passage in Song of Songs to which he refers, by the way, is this:

How lovely are your feet in sandals,  
O daughter of nobles!  
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,  
The work of a master's hand.  
Your navel is like a round goblet—  
Let mixed wine not be lacking!—  
Your belly like a heap of wheat  
Hedged about with lilies. (Song 7:2-3)

What a lovely image for the beginning of spring! The "mixed wine" which is not to be lacking is *ha-mezeg*: *al yechsar hamazeg* – do not leave out the mixed wine! And do not forget that Song of Songs is also part of our Pesach celebration – of all the biblical books, Song of Songs is the mixed wine, the book that spices up Scripture. Thus the suggestion made here by this learned contemporary commentator is not only to move ahead, leaving the old behind. We also look back and recover, remember, refashion the old in ways that speak to us now.

If we focus our vision on the various multi-colored bits that make up the mosaic of Judaism, spot those glittering dimes from 20 centuries away, we see that being faithful to tradition does not mean keeping things forever the same. It does mean consciously appreciating the many lines of connection that tie us to the past – without tying us down. We are indeed bound, obligated by our rich historical inheritance; but we are not prisoners of that past. The English word “bound” has an interesting double meaning: one can be “bound” by ropes or chains, unable to move; and one can also be “bound” for a destination, traveling, on the road. Our ancestors had been “bound” as slaves in Egypt; and then they were on their way, “bound” for the Promised Land. We carry the past with us, to be sure, but we are bound for a future always being imagined. How will you “mix it up” this year?