

This is the first in a series of articles, which TRADITION hopes to present to its readers, treating of individual *mitzvot*. From time to time different authors will choose one or another of the commandments and attempt to digest its basic *halakhot*, relevant historical material, and, above all, the conceptual implications of the *mitzvah*. Rabbi Hayim Donin, spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai David in Detroit, Mich., is an alumnus of Yeshiva University and member of the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America.

H A V D A L A H

The Ritual and the Concept

Havdalah is a ritual performed in the synagogue and at home upon the conclusion of the Sabbath. Like the *kiddush* which ushers in the Sabbath, the *havdalah* is usually recited over a cup of wine. The latter however, also includes blessings over the light of a candle and over fragrant spices (*besamim*). The prayer itself blesses God, taking cognizance of the division which He made between the seventh and the other days of the week and of other separations He brought into being. It is a beautiful ceremony, particularly impressive for children to whom the light of the beautifully twisted multi-colored candle somehow imparts a mood of mystery. Unfortunately it has been neglected, even more than the *kiddush*, by all but the most conscientious Sabbath-observing families in the American Jewish community.

But the act of *havdalah*, which seems to consist only of a verbal declaration recognizing a specific division (between the Sabbath and the weekdays), actually extends to areas far beyond that of the *havdalah* ritual. *Havdalah* is also a concept which runs through the religious philosophy of Judaism.

Havdalah — The Ritual and the Concept

Though the term *havdalah* generally connotes the Sabbath night ritual, its implications are far greater.

According to a *Baraita*¹, there are seven different *havdotot* (divisions or separations) specified in Scripture:

- a) between the holy and the profane (Lev. 10:10)
- b) between Israel and the nations (Lev. 20:26)
- c) between the clean and the unclean (Lev. 10:10; 11:47)
- d) between light and darkness (Gen. 1:4)
- e) between the heavenly waters and those below (Gen. 1:7)
- f) between the Levites and the Israelites (Num. 8:14)
- g) between the *Kohen* and the Levite (Chron. 1 23:13)

The phrase used in the *havdalah* service referring to the division between the "seventh day and the six working days" is not itself of biblical origin. This reference is part of the biblical distinction "between the holy and the profane."

There are other verses in Scripture, other than those mentioned above, where some variation of the word *havdalah* occurs. But they either fall into the above-mentioned categories or refer to a purely physical division. The separations recorded in the *Baraita* imply not just a physical separation, but a spiritual one.

Since our understanding of the term *havdalah* or *le'havdil* must be extended to spiritual and moral separations or divisions, it would be more meaningful if we translated the terms as "set apart" or "distinguished." That such setting apart does not necessarily refer to a physical separation but to a religious-moral one, and requires discernment rather than an act in order to fulfill it, may be derived from the statement of our Sages who insist that *havdalah* is dependent upon wisdom.² Surely only one possessed of a high degree of knowledge, understanding, and discernment is able to make the necessary moral-ethical-religious discriminations.

With this as an introduction, let us first consider *havdalah* as a specific ritual before turning to a fuller treatment of *havdalah* as an important spiritual concept in the Jewish religious tradition.

THE RITUAL

There are conflicting opinions as to whether the recitation of havdalah at the conclusion of the Sabbath is a biblical requirement or only a rabbinic one. Maimonides rules³ in favor of the former. He maintains that the requirement of formally reciting some words which take cognizance of the division of the Sabbath from the other days is derived from the same commandment which declares the kiddush (sanctification) to be a religious imperative. The havdalah constitutes a further awareness of the sanctity of the Sabbath at the moment of its departure.

The actual form of the havdalah, however, was not fixed until the time of Ezra, when the Men of the Great Assembly instituted the prayer. It did not at first consist of a separate ceremony, but was recited as part of the evening *Amidah*. It was some time after the return of the Israelites from their Babylonian exile when they had begun to prosper and could afford the luxury of wine, that the Sages required the havdalah to be recited over a cup of wine. When Israel became poor again, it was re-inserted into the *Amidah*. The recitation of the havdalah in both instances soon became firmly established in Jewish law.⁴

The text of the havdalah in the *Amidah* is as follows: "Thou hast favored us with a knowledge of Thy Torah and taught us to perform the laws of Thy will. *Thou hast made a distinction, Lord our God, between the holy and the profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of work.* Our Father, our King, grant that the approaching days begin for us in peace; may we be withheld from all sin, cleansed of all iniquity, and devoted to the veneration of Thee."

When the Talmud inquires as to the reason for its inclusion in the fourth benediction, that of *chonen ha-daat*, two answers are offered. Rabbi Joseph said: Since havdalah is a form of wisdom (i.e. the ability to distinguish, to make discriminating judgments) it was inserted into the blessing which asks God for "knowledge, understanding, and discernment."⁵ This opinion is reinforced by the Jerusalem Talmud which says: *im ein de'ah*

Havdalah — The Ritual and the Concept

havdalah minayin? “If there is no knowledge, how can one achieve *havdalah*, the ability to make the necessary distinction?”⁶ The Rabbis, however, offered an alternate explanation and simply said that since the *havdalah* is a recitation for the weekday, it was inserted into the first benediction that is said at a weekday *Amidah*.⁵

Although the recitation of *havdalah* in the *Amidah* formally removes the sanctity of the Sabbath so that work now becomes permissible,⁷ the recitation of the *havdalah* over the proper kind of beverage remains a rabbinic requirement.

The established order of the *havdalah* service is as follows: a) the blessing over the wine, b) the blessing over the spices, c) the blessing over the light, and d) the *havdalah* paragraph, which is, of course, the essential declaration of the ceremony.

There is an introductory paragraph which precedes the above order, and consists of a series of verses from Isaiah, Psalms, and the Book of Esther. The quotation from Esther that “the Jews had light and joy and gladness and honor” incidentally marks the *havdalah* service as the only place in the entire *Siddur* where the term *Yehudim* for Jews appears. All these verses express our faith and trust in the Lord, the need to serve Him with cheerfulness, these being requisite in the weekday struggle with reality. The use of these introductory Scriptural verses is not recorded in early sources, is not to be found in early Sephardic prayerbooks, but constitutes a custom developed sometime during the Middle Ages, as a *siman tov*, a good sign. Even as late as the sixteenth century, we find that R. Moses Isserles in his glosses on the *Shulchan Arukh* only lists three out of the five verses which we recite. Other sources list other variations.⁸

Though the use of a cup of wine in conjunction with the *havdalah* goes back to pre-talmudic times, as indicated previously, the light and the fragrant spices apparently did not come into vogue until much later, about the 2nd century B.C.E. While a number of meaningful symbolic reasons are given for the use of the light and the spices, its origin seems to be based upon the more prosaic circumstance that it was the common practice for the Sages to dine elaborately for the third Sabbath

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

meal which extended well after nightfall. The light and the fragrant spices, as we shall see, were the very first things brought to the table at the conclusion of the Sabbath even prior to the havdalah over wine. In time, these became part of the formal havdalah service.

That the light and the fragrant spices were initially part of the Sabbath meal itself rather than the havdalah ceremony can be derived from the argument between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel on the order to be followed in the use of the *besamim* (fragrant spices) and the *or* (light), a difference of opinion listed under the general heading of "these are the differences of opinion between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel in matters governing the meal."⁹ It is evident from the Mishnah itself that it was common practice to use incense or fragrant spices at the conclusion of every major meal.¹⁰ To recite a blessing over this fragrance, as over the food, was an extension of the religious spirit. This could not be done on the Sabbath, however, since it was necessary to pass the incense (*mugmar*) over hot coals immediately prior to use. It was customary for them, therefore, to have it prepared as soon as possible after the Sabbath in order to refresh themselves.¹¹

The practice, however, soon took on broader and more symbolic significance. Resh Lakish gives the following explanation for the use of the *besamim*: "Since on the Sabbath every Jew is possessed of an additional soul which takes leave at the end of the Sabbath, his soul is grieved at the departure of the Sabbath with its loss of spiritual strength. He therefore requires some satisfaction which he receives through the good smell of the incense."¹² A pleasant smell is considered in rabbinic sources as the delight of the soul, rather than of the body.¹³ In Hebrew the word for "soul," *neshamah*, derives from the same root as the word "breathing," *nashom*.

As for the light, since it too was not permitted to be kindled on the Sabbath, it was considered proper that its first use after the Sabbath should be for a religious purpose, i.e. the havdalah ceremony, accompanied by the recitation of a special blessing.¹⁴ Another reason offered is that the kindling of the light as the first act of the week symbolizes the very first act

Havdalah — The Ritual and the Concept

of creation which took place on the first day of the week when God said "Let there be light." From talmudic sources, we get this midrashic rationale for the blessing over the light: "After Adam was created on the sixth day, the sun continued to shine right through the Sabbath. When it began to set for the first time at the end of the Sabbath and darkness came, Adam was frightened. What did God do? He gave Adam the knowledge to take two stones and strike them together, thus bringing forth from it fire (light). Upon seeing it, he blessed the 'Creator of the lights of fire.'"¹⁵ We therefore do likewise.

An alternative explanation, quite popular with preachers, is that the use of the light and the fragrant spices completes the participation of *all* the five senses in the havdalah ceremony, implying the consecration of all our senses to God and His will at the very start of the week.

Other details of the havdalah service include the custom of glancing at the palms and nails of one's hand during the recitation of the blessing over the light. This is done so as to derive some use from the light, lest it be considered a *berakhah le'vatalah*, a blessing recited in vain. Other mystical explanations are to be found which see meaning in every nuance of the delicate gestures.

Though wine is the preferred liquid for the "cup of benediction," the law allows the use of some other beverages as well.¹⁶ There is a difference of opinion as to whether women are obligated to recite the havdalah. Some of those who maintain that the *mitzvah* of havdalah is only a rabbinic requirement, separate from and not dependent upon the Sabbath laws, excuse the woman from its observance on the principal that it is a "positive commandment dependent upon time." The majority opinion is that women are under obligation either to recite or hear the recitation of the havdalah.¹⁷

The practice of reciting the havdalah at the conclusion of the third meal in the early days of the Mishnah was probably responsible for establishing havdalah as a home service. Even where it was heard at the synagogue, it became customary to repeat it at home, particularly for the sake of the children.¹⁸

The debate amongst the Sages on how to conclude the hav-

dalah lends strength to the contention that the ability to distinguish between the holy and the profane, the Sabbath and the weekday, was deemed to be an integral part of the sanctification of Israel. Rav proposed the words, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, Who sanctifies Israel." Samuel preferred the words, "Who separates the holy from the profane."¹⁹ The latter version is the one now used, but the implications of the former opinion ought not be lost to us.

THE CONCEPT

The afore-mentioned difference between Rav and Samuel whether to say "sanctifies Israel" or "separates the holy from the profane" is important to us not as an exercise in semantics, but because it emphasizes their basic conceptual agreement. They are united in the thought that there exists an organic union between sancitification and separation. Their disagreement on which words to use in the framework of an havdalah ritual means only that they are trying to say the same thing in the best way. The decision of the Halakhah in favor of Samuel indicates where the emphasis ought to be put in order to make sanctification a reality.

Indeed, whenever we find the element of sanctification, there we shall also find the element of havdalah or separation. When the Torah says *kedoshim tihyu*, "Ye shall be holy" (Lev. 19:2), Rashi interprets it to mean *heyu perushim*, "separate yourselves [from immoralities and transgressions] . . ." The second half of the sentence in which God tells Israel "Thou shalt be holy unto Me, for I am holy" are the words, "and I will separate you from among the nations to be mine" (Lev. 20:26).

We are led to the conclusion that if there is no havdalah, no separation, there can be no true *kiddush* or sanctification either. The extent to which the Sabbath is properly observed in our day, for instance, may be more accurately gauged by a census of those who observe this ritual, and who thus possess a sense of the separation of the Sabbath from the other days, than by a census of those who observe only the kiddush.

Havdalah — The Ritual and the Concept

Just as the *mitzvah* of kiddush and havdalah are both derived from the same commandment, the latter serving as the proper culmination of the former,²⁰ so does the *concept* of havdalah serve as a necessary and integral part of the holiness motif which runs through the fabric of our faith.

It is a common mistaken notion that the distinctions that our religion teaches us to recognize are those which are only concerned with good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, holy vs. profane as the Torah sees it. What is not generally realized is that the Torah also teaches us to recognize distinctions within the areas of the Good, the Right, and the Holy themselves. Not everything that we are instructed to discern and separate is necessarily between opposites. The Torah teaches a sliding scale of ascending holiness and descending defilement.

Our Law clearly distinguishes between levels of defilement.²¹ Similarly does it recognize a hierarchy in holiness, and incorporate it into the structure of its laws. We express this recognition even in the havdalah service when the Sabbath overlaps a festival and we conclude the havdalah which separates the Sabbath from the festival with the benediction "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, Who separates the holy from the holy."

Life consists of a spiritual ladder with many rungs, leading upwards to God, the All-perfect and All-holy, or downward into the depths of moral and spiritual chaos. The ability to go up the ladder is dependent upon our wisdom in being able to distinguish between the rungs.

Although in general our tradition teaches us the importance of striving to rise in holiness, there are instances where such ascendance is neither demanded nor desirable. Such distinctions in holiness are clearly based upon a difference in assigned function, rather than upon the thought that one is better than the other and should be discarded in its favor.

In this category, we should place such distinctions as those between the *Kohen* and the rest of Israel, between Israel and the rest of the nations, between the Sabbath and the weekday. Each of the former were assigned a special role in relation to their counterparts. Though one is placed higher than the other on the scale of holiness, both sides have their place

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

in the divine scheme. If there is distinctiveness, it is a result of their particular functions. Yet all are necessary. Because the Torah ordains the establishment of a spiritual division between these categories, who will say that they are not all necessary and have not their own duties to fulfill in accordance with the Divine Will?

In the consciousness of the Jew, to work during the six days is a necessary corollary to resting on the seventh. We can, in fact, only talk in terms of a day of rest when we also have days of work.²² For the Israelite to perform his assigned duties is as much a *mitzvah* as for a *Kohen* to perform his tasks in greater sanctity. For the Gentile to abide by the commandments of the sons of Noah is as much the fulfillment of the Divine Law as the observance of all Torah by the Jew. Holiness, in these instances, is achieved by reaching the highest rungs within each category, and recognizing the functional distinctions between them as taught by the Torah.

Let us now examine some of the areas where we find the goals of sanctification characterized by a spiritual type *havdalah* or separation.

The Torah commands that the Sabbath be sanctified. "Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8). But sanctification clearly calls for distinguishing between this "seventh day and the six days of work." This distinction is embodied in many of the Sabbath laws which strive to make of the Sabbath not merely a day for work stoppage, but a day which is "different" and set apart. By way of example, everything used on the Sabbath must have been prepared before the Sabbath or be in a state of constant preparedness. Most physically creative acts are forbidden, and are placed in the category of "work," though they require but the barest minimum of energy to perform them. Secular reading and secular thinking is frowned upon. The distinctiveness of the Sabbath is emphasized by the ceremony of *havdalah*, which sets it apart from the other days of the week.

Only a lack of understanding of the very nature of the Sabbath is responsible for the modernist's questioning the traditionalist's insistence upon observing it strictly in accordance

Havdalah — The Ritual and the Concept

with Jewish law by completely withdrawing from the hustle and bustle of modern life and all its mechanical devices. Many see in the Sabbath nothing more than a day of leisure, or a day away from earning their livelihood. Many feel that as long as they occupy themselves with “enjoyable” activities, the Sabbath is properly observed. On this basis, of course, any convenient day of the week may and does serve the purpose. Unfortunately, they miss the whole point of the Sabbath.

There are basic distinctions between “work” as we popularly understand it and the way our Halakhah understands it; between “leisure” and “Sabbath rest”; between “enjoyment” of activities and “enjoyment” of the Sabbath. To capture the spirit of the Sabbath and to sanctify it accordingly requires us to distinguish clearly between these terms, to become aware of these *havdolot* in theory and practice. Without such divisions, the full *kedushah*, sanctification of the Sabbath, will be far from complete.

The Torah also commands that Israel be sanctified. “Thou shalt be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation unto Me” (Ex. 19:6) and “thou shalt be holy unto Me, for I am holy” (Lev. 20:26). As indicated earlier, this election of Israel to play the priestly role among the nations of the world required its separation from among the nations. History is witness to the fulfillment of the Divine Will. Wherever Jews have lived, though they may not have differed physically from others, they were yet distinctive and set apart. The basic unassimilability of the Jewish people as a whole has been a source of wonderment to historians and sociologists alike, especially in view of the adverse conditions which prevailed and which discouraged national and religious perpetuation. Explanations have been offered and theories have been suggested. Yet to the faithful, whatever the validity of each theory, they are but the reflections of the Divine Will. Just as God created divisions in the world of nature, so did he create divisions in the spiritual sphere.

It is tragic that in our modern age there are still attempts, both from within Israel and from without, to alter the divine scheme. From without, there are those who have not yet given up hope of prevailing upon our people to resign from its elected role

and give up its assigned tasks in order to fit the spiritual categories of the "other nations." From within, there are those who feel that unburdening ourselves from the special priestly disciplines assigned to our people and minimizing the separateness of Israel and the distinctiveness of Judaism is in line with God's wishes and in the best interest of our faith and of mankind.

It must be clearly emphasized that the goal of sanctification cannot be realized without the principle of *havdalah*. To give greater force to this principle, Israel and Israel alone was directed to become aware of still other spiritual divisions and distinctions, i.e. the laws of *Kashruth* and all others involving the concept of *tahor* and *tamei* (the clean and the unclean).

The purpose of the commandment "to distinguish between the clean and the unclean" is given in the very next sentence (Lev. 20:26) which calls for the sanctification of Israel and its separation from among the nations. This point is clearly developed in Dr. Samuel Belkin's essay, "The Philosophy of Purpose" (p. 14). He contends that "the religious philosophy of purpose, which Maimonides never questioned, teaches that certain foods are forbidden not primarily for reasons of health or hygiene, but for a higher moral reason." To distinguish between "the beast which is to be eaten and the beast which is not to be eaten" (Lev. 11:47) is an aspect of the broader requirement that Israel learn to "distinguish between the unclean and the clean." *Tahor* and *tamei*, though translated as "clean" and "unclean," are primarily descriptive of a spiritual or moral state of being rather a physical one, even in the areas of levitical purity and defilement (Dr. Belkin, in the aforementioned essay, pp. 21-22).

As Israel was separated from among the nations, so did God separate the tribe of Levi from among the rest of the tribes of Israel (Num. 8:14) for further specialization in His service. And from among the tribe of Levi, it was Aaron and his descendants who were selected for still higher sanctification. As we go up this ladder of spiritual selection, each group fulfilling its own assigned roles, there are more separations, distinctions, and disciplines with which each must be concerned.

Havdalah — The Ritual and the Concept

Aside from those additional disciplines affecting his personal life in matters of marriage, death, etc. the *Kohen* was charged with the responsibility for separating the holy from the profane and the clean from the unclean as it applied to the sacred worship in the Temple (Lev. 10:1).

We turn now to that all-encompassing havdalah in the Torah, the implications of which are perhaps intended for all mankind. Long before Israel came into being, at the beginning of creation, God caused a division between the light and the darkness. Light and darkness are frequently used as symbolic descriptions of truth and falsehood, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance. God created only the light, and saw that it was good. We take cognizance of this first creative act of the week when we include, in the havdalah, reference to the division between the light and the darkness. Yet Genesis is not the story of Israel alone. It is the story of the world. Awareness of this havdalah and those which stem from its divisions which extend to the moral and ethical spheres as well, need not be limited to Israel alone nor to the *Kohen* within Israel. It must be the heritage of all mankind.

These are difficult discernments. Though light and darkness are mutually exclusive, so that they are easily distinguished, it must not be forgotten that there are overlapping areas when one blends into the other as does the day into the night and the night into the day. So it is sometimes in the areas of truth, knowledge, and good, when a sharp sense of discernment is necessary to make the subtle distinctions. Such acuity is vital in order gradually to raise our society to the level of true holiness.

What does such holiness consist of, according to Judaism? Not in the ascetic, saintly withdrawal from life. Not in the excessive denial to oneself of all human pleasures and the repression of all human drives. It consists, rather, of full participation in the stream of human and community life, sharing the joyous as well as the sorrowful experiences which life has to offer, denying to oneself no legitimate pleasures; but at the same time so developing one's sense of discernment as to be able to distinguish the right from the wrong, the true from the false, the good from the bad, the sacred from the profane, the

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

pure from the impure, and the clean from the unclean. The greater the sense of havdalah, of ethical-moral-religious discrimination, the greater the holiness of the individual. Holiness is the fully developed sense of havdalah in life.

The higher moral and spiritual purposes of our faith can be achieved through the techniques of these havdolot. To successfully implement these requires "knowledge, understanding, and discernment." It requires a "philosophy of purpose" among our people as among all men. It requires a sense of destiny and a feeling of eternity.

NOTES

1. *Pesachim*, 104a.
2. *Yerushalmi Berakhot*, V:2.
3. Maimonides, *Hil. Shabbat* 29:1.
4. *Berakhot*, 33a; also Rashi *Pesachim*, 105b.
5. *Berakhot*, 33a.
6. *Berakhot*, V:2.
7. *Shabbat*, 150b; *Orach Chayyim*, 299:10; *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shabbat* 29:3.
8. Seligman, *Baer Siddur* p. 311.
9. *Berakhot* VIII.
10. *Berakhot* VI:6 & Bartenura *ad loc.*
11. *Berakhot*, 43b, 53a.
12. *Taanit*, 27b; Maimonides, *Hil. Shabbat* 29:29.
13. *Berakhot*, 43b.
14. *Pesachim*, 53b.
15. *Ibid.*, 54a.
16. *Arukh ha-Shulchan Hil. Shabbat* 272:14, 296:13.
17. *Ibid.*, 296:1-5.
18. *Yerushalmi Berakhot*, V:2.
19. *Pesachim*, 104a.
20. Maimonides, *Hil. Shabbat* 29:1.
21. Cf. Maimonides, *Hil. She'ar Avot ha-Tumot*.
22. Cf. *Shabbat*, 88b.