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THE FIRST BLESSING OF THE DAY

The first of the *Birkot haShahar* (the morning blessings which are the prologue to the daily prayers)—and, according to Rambam and others, theoretically the first blessing of the day—is a praise of God. “Who gives the rooster (*sekhvi*) the understanding to distinguish between day and night.” The word *sekhvi* in this blessing has a dual meaning, denoting both the rooster and the human heart. In either case, why should the crowing of the rooster or the human response to the rooster (in terms of the heart’s capacity to understand the distinction between day and night) be of such importance that it should become the initial blessing of the day?

The crowing of the rooster has halakhic significance in another area, and this sheds light on the significance of this first blessing. The Mishnah in Yoma tells us that the *terumat hadeshen*, the removal of the ash from the altar by the priest, was done at the time the rooster crowed. This represented the beginning of the daily service in the Temple (cf. Zevahim 20a). Our daily prayers correspond to the Temple service, not simply in terms of the timing of our prayers, but in that *tefilah*, the service of the heart, is a fulfillment of the sacrificial service in the Temple through the uttering of words. (See *Avot deRabbi Natan*, 4:4, where the verse “*le-ovdo bekhool levavkhem*, to serve Him with all your heart,” which Maimonides uses as the biblical source for prayer, is related to the sacrificial service in the Temple. Apparently they are equivalent.) We therefore introduce the prayer service with the blessing relating to the prescience of the rooster, for the crowing rooster in the time of the Temple trumpeted the beginning of the Temple service.

In his shiurim, the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchick, noted that the blessing recognizing the ability to distinguish between day and night parallels the theme of the *Havdala* service after the close of the Sabbath, in which we praise God “Who separates between the holy and secular, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations.”

These blessings, he said, reflected the view that the essence of the Jewish religious experience is the obligation to distinguish between the holy and the profane. [This is by no means a trivial gesture. We live in a world of much obfuscation, where there is often confusion between victim and oppressor, between those who pursue peace and those who pursue war, between truth and prevarication, between genuine speech and mere rhetoric. This sense of confusion and willingness to wink at evil is an ever-present aspect of history, and it appears today in the “even-handed” policy of nations of the world *vis-a-vis* Israel and its enemies.] We have a moral obligation to keep distinctions before us.

Following up on this, I would submit that *kedusha* (sanctity) emerges only through the act of *havdala* (separation). The word *kedusha* contains etymological roots in the idea of separation. The sanctity of the Temple is that of *mehitza*: walls which separate the various orders of holiness within the hierarchy of the ascending sanctity of the Temple. That which is more holy is more cloistered and secluded. *Kedusha* is not omnipresent; rather, it is present within a defined perimeter, which must be ever guarded. “On thy walls, Jerusalem, have I established guardians all the day and all the night.”

Therefore, when we define the religious perspective with which we endow our daily endeavors, by means of the *birkhot hashahar*, it is appropriate that we begin by affirming the principle of *havdala*. Thus, we first acknowledge the separation of light and darkness—*bein or lehoshekh*—paralleling the blessing of the *Havdala* service.*

It seems to me that there is yet an additional dimension to this blessing. The text of our blessings and prayers were formulated by the members of the Great Assembly, led by Ezra, in the period between the destruction of the First Temple and the rebuilding of the Second Temple. This period was one of despair and disorientation in the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Israel’s sovereignty. So bleak was the situation that the Talmud (Yoma 69b) tells us that the prophet Jeremiah was unable to declare God to be *gibbor* (mighty). “Where,” he challenged, “is His might to be seen when gentiles raucously and

*In *minhag Ashkenaz*, the next three blessings are “Blessed art Thou . . . Who did not make me a gentile . . . ; Who did not make me a slave . . . ; Who did not make me a woman.” This, noted the Rav, continues the theme of *havdala*. These three blessings are formulated in the negative rather than in the positive, for, as relates to *havdala*, the negative is far more important than the positive. We make separations by stating not merely who we are, but, more significantly, who we are not. The first two note the distinction between the *kedusha* of a Jew and that of a gentile or a Canaanite slave. The third relates to inherent distinctions in the existential make-up of men and women, not their respective *kedusha*. A woman is endowed with complete *kedushat Yisrael* (sanctity of Israel). As relates to the intensity of that spiritual endowment, there is no distinction between man and woman. When God spoke to the Jewish people at Sinai, His words were directed at women and men alike.

blasphemously dance in His Temple?” Yet when the members of the Great Assembly later formulated the text of the *Amida*, they were able to see God manifested as *gibbor* even in that dark time. God’s might is expressed in His divine discipline, they explained, in His toleration of even those who blaspheme against Him. The omnipotent God does not vent His power and anger at man’s inequity and even permits the gentile, in the playing out of free will, to desecrate the Temple. This is an expression of God’s forbearance and might.

Rav Soleveitchik has pointed out that *gibbor* in this context means an expression not of power but heroism (“Catharsis,” *Tradition*, Spring 1978 pp. 38–41). Thus, the blessing “*ozar Yisrael bigvura*, Who girds Israel with might,” means not that Israel was crowned with power—Israel was never a powerful nation—but rather that Israel was afforded an heroic existence. Heroism is inversely proportional to brute strength and power. The more one is powerful, the less is he required to exhibit heroism. In that historical period, the Jew was required to maintain faith in Jewish destiny and to persevere against all odds; that is, he was required to live heroically.

Ezra was the prophet of faith. It was that faith which enabled him to return from exile with only a small portion of the Jewish population and to rebuild the Temple and reconsecrate the land. Though the sanctity of the land had been canceled by the Babylonian conquest, Ezra’s courageous resettlement sanctified the land for all time. The root of that eternal *kedusha* was Ezra’s heroism: his undiminished vision of the future. Without this heroic posture—exemplified later by Rabbi Akiva’s ability to perceive the ultimate redemption even within the ashes of the destruction of the Holy of Holies—Jewish existence would have been impossible in an environment of unlimited hostility.

Thus, the Rav elucidated the enigmatic verse “the Watchman said, morning has come, and also night, *im tivayun b’a-yu*, if you will desire . . .” (Isaiah 21:12). The text apparently refers to the Divine Watchman who constantly guards Israel and proclaims: “*asa boker*, the bright morning of salvation will come, *v’gam lai-la*, and night”—even though we are presently in the midst of the night of exile and persecution. But the language “*tivayun b’ayu*” is very strange.

Rav Soleveitchik pointed to the Kaddish in which we pray that God accept the petitions of Israel: “*titkabel tzelot’hon uva’uthon*.” What is the difference between the two synonyms for prayer, *tzelot’hon* and *bahut’hon*? The story of Jacob’s blessing of Joseph in Genesis 48:22 is instructive in this regard: “Moreover I have given you a portion above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite, with my sword and bow.”

Targum interprets “my sword and my bow” as “*tzelot’hon uva-ut’hon*.” Undoubtedly, Targum interpreted “the sword and bow” in the

verse metaphorically, relating it to prayer, because there is no record of Jacob's having done battle with the Amorites. What is the correspondence between *tzelot'hon uva-ut'hon*, and the sword and bow?

The Rav explained that the distinction between the sword and the bow is that the sword is used for close combat, while the bow and arrow is used by the archer from a distance. Correspondingly, *tzelut'hon* are prayers for our immediate personal needs: wisdom, health and sustenance. *Bahut'hon* are prayers that relate not to one's immediate needs but to the historical needs of the people. *Bahut'hon* relates to Jewish destiny and ultimate redemption.

The meaning of the phrase in Isaiah, "*im tiva-yun b'ayu*," is that the dawn of our salvation will break—even though we are in the midst of dark, bitter night of exile—if our vision is not limited to the present and immediate circumstances, but rather encompasses the boundless opportunities of redemption in the future. If our view is not riveted in current historical circumstances, but rather glimpses our future destiny, salvation is at hand.

Maimonides's cardinal principle of faith—belief in the coming of the Messiah—is not merely a belief that the Messiah will appear, but that he could come at any moment. This belief in the potential immediacy of the coming of the Messiah is an essential element of our historical perspective. From it flows religious fortitude in the face of all obstacles, and serenity even when confronted with chaotic, difficult times.

It was this essential world-view, I believe, that the rabbis perceived in the crowing of the rooster. In utter darkness, the rooster is able to sense the dim, indiscernible streak of light on the horizon. To the members of the Great Assembly, who saw Jewish history entering an epoch of instability and darkness, the rooster heralded the streak of light in the distant historical firmament. It is thus appropriate that the members of the Great Assembly required each Jew to articulate this quintessential message of faith as the first blessing of the morning service.