

The Cup of Sorrow, the Seat of Honor, and the Wanderings of Elijah

By Haviva Pedaya

Translated from Hebrew by: Ethan Pack, Ph.D., U.C.L.A.

Introduction and editing: Stav Ofer & Avi Ofer

Introduction

As part of the struggle for democracy and freedom in Israel, the Israeli Civil Democracy Movement has published this year (2024) its version of the Passover Haggadah: a democratic, civil, humanistic and secular Haggadah, edited by Dr. Avi Ofer. It is based on the "Ofer Haggadah" (Created by Dr. Ofer for use in his family) which in turn is inspired by the Kibbutzim Haggadah as well as the traditional Haggadah, the Tanach and Biblical criticism.

In addition to the Haggadah itself, this publication contains original and reprinted texts, poems and artwork by notable Israeli thinkers and artists, among them: Haviva Pedaya, David Grossman, Shva Salhoov, Amos Oz, Shimon Adaf, David Harel (President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities), Sami Shalom Chetrit, Sigalit Landau, Zvi Lachman and Zoya Cherkassky. It also includes writings and works of art by members of the families of those murdered, abducted and displaced in the October 7 massacre.

The Haggadah is available online in Hebrew, with a partial translation to English, here:

<https://www.civildemocracy.org.il/en/hagada-2024-online>

The following essay was written for the 2024 Democratic Haggadah by Haviva Pedaya, a professor of Kabbala and a poet, who comes from a family of renowned Iraqi kabbalists.

Psalm 107 [in Greek and Latin bible: 106] is a psalm out of which the rabbis delineated a structure of four things for which we are obliged to give thanks, four kinds of suffering, as well as deliverance and salvation from this suffering. "Some lost their way in the wilderness, in the wasteland... Some lived in the deepest darkness, bound in cruel irons... they reached the gates of death... Others go down to the sea in ships, ply their trade in the mighty waters... Mounting up to the heaven, plunging down to the depths..." Four kinds of suffering: wandering in the mazes of the desert, captivity in a prison, the sickness of hunger, and being trapped in the heart of a storming sea. When one emerges from the straits of these four things, one is obligated to give thanks. And when we offer praise for this kindness, the verse repeats in a fixed rhythm: "Give thanks to God for He is good, His kindness endures forever".

The Sephardic liturgy connects this psalm to the Passover holiday, and links it with the entire quartet structure that characterizes the Haggadah: 4 cups, 4 sons, 4 questions. The Ashkenazi liturgy, and in particular the Hasidic that follows the customs of the Ha'ari [Rabbi Isaac Luria], connects this psalm with every Sabbath eve. Encoded within this song is a powerful cosmic myth of descent into She'ol, "the pit," [the Jewish iteration of hell]. According to the mythic narrative that the Ha'ari puts forth, the real captivity of those "bound in cruel irons" is the captivity of the sparks of the soul that descended at the time of the shattering of the vessels, and continue to descend throughout history, into the pit. The days of the week and Shabbat, and likewise the entire year and Passover, constitute a ritual rhythm of exile and redemption. These are therefore the designated times to offer praise for the salvation and redemption that comes with deliverance from the pit.

<https://www.civildemocracy.org.il/en/hagada-2024-online>

The mystic narrative goes on to relate that the spiritual leader, the healing teacher is prepared to conduct a kind of ritual descent into the pit, in order to redeem the sparks that are trapped there.

On October 7, parts of the people were plundered; its body was cut off, and the fragments of its soul were shattered. The captives are akin to the 288 sparks (the code number that the Ha'Ari enumerates for the sparks that were captured in the bottomless deep during the shattering of the vessels). They are akin to the black flower [FLOWER in Gematria = 288] now waiting under the surface of the earth for its release and redemption. Those bound in cruel irons, and in the gloom of the tunnels, dwellers of darkness and the shadow of death. It is not a metaphor, it is not an image, it is not a cosmic narrative, it is a simple clear and concrete reality: 134 captives as of today, and no one knows how many of them are dead, and how many of them are alive. We go about under the sun with our hunger sated and our thirst quenched by clean water, while our brothers and sisters, bound in cruel irons, are subjected to the sickness of hunger and deprivation in a bombed out city, whose inhabitants, both the guilty and the innocent, are also subjected to starvation. Perhaps some of the kidnapped are buried under the rubble; perhaps some were killed or their souls departed from hunger or lack of clean air or medicine; some men and women have been tortured by a brutal hand. Four cups: a cup of sorrow, a cup of poison, a cup of death, and a cup of tribulation. In the midst of the night, a desert bird looks out upon all this destruction, a Little Owl [called in Hebrew: Ruins Owl, sounds like "cup of ruins"]. Its large eyes are like two cups expanding and opening in wonder as the sparks of humankind continue to descend into the pit. "For I have eaten ashes like bread and mixed my drink with tears" (Psalms 102:10). I am reminded of a prayer my great-grandfather wrote, "The Prisoners of Hope", which he composed in 1942 and in which he begged for the liberation of the souls that had been swallowed up. The prayer was said by him falling into the dust after his tears have streamed out of his eyes and into a cup, and he has drank them in order to identify with the prisoners of captivity, those sick with hunger, trapped in the depths.



Barn Owl, 2022, by Sofie Berzon MacKie. The artist is the manager and curator of Kibbutz Be'eri Gallery of Art, which was totally destroyed by Hamas terrorists on October 7, 2023.

Elijah's most elevated ability was the ability to affect return. In a community that maintains its strength and coherence, a covenant, destiny, and mission obligate it to bring back to itself the parts of it that have been lost. These are also the obligations to redeem captives. A captive [heb. *shavuy*] is a person who seeks to be returned [*mushav*]. Brought back. It's not only the voice of the captive that demands this, but also the voice of God that categorically commands the mitzvah of redemption of captives. Thirst and hunger, lack and longing must be part of our day-to-day portion, a poisoned fixture, until we pave and reach a path out of the pit, toward homecoming.

Beside the families of the kidnapped and their supporters who carry the burden of their missing relatives and take up their cry to those like them, there is no leader around who takes upon himself the role of returning, the difficult burden of descending into the pit and the duty to speak with enemies and murderers in order to return home our sparks and the fragments of the light of our collective body. We have no real teacher like Elijah who returns sons to their fathers and fathers to their sons, mothers to their children and children with their mothers. Elijah, who, in some of the myths and narratives, turns into a wandering Jew, no less than the Messiah. He also lives for the duration of history as a kind of eternal image of wandering on the margins of the roads, one who is revealed in legendary form in order to return the lost parts of one to another: a bickering husband and wife; a Jew without flour for Matza; he embodies the simple life that cannot exist at all without faith and return, each and every moment.

One of the Jewish myths tells of the seat of honor that is like a case of souls, a treasure-chest from which souls bloom. The posters and placards with pictures of the missing, dominating the public areas in Israel and even abroad, have already turned into a fabric of woe into which God gazes as He sheds two tears into the great sea of His weeping over the destruction of His home [the Temple]. Not only the destruction of an actual Temple, but also the destruction of values. We yearn to see the living people redeemed from their captivity and returned to their seats. The empty chair that waits for them. A moment of deliverance and raising the cup of salvation. A moment that will always already be mixed with the taste of poison and the pain of all those who lost, and those who we lost on the way to the hoped-for homecoming.

What will happen? How many of our captives are still alive? How are they, bound in cruel irons, prisoners of hope, us and them? How many have been buried and how many will be fixed in the collective memory as permanently missing because they will not come back? Upon how many of them will legends sprout and Haggadot of pain be narrated to the one child that remains from the slaughter? To the witnesses? To the remnant who found refuge? Behold, they are bereft of a bright and clear end, they are drifting in the endless expanses personified by Elijah, who became the wandering Jew and wept in his misery.

Elijah, who is not afraid and who also roams about the Gaza Strip, trying to speak and update us about the processes in which lies the possibility of freedom and deliverance for both peoples.

The message of Elijah – who wanders and becomes more and more horrified and yet still believes and wishes to return what is lost and missing – it that at any moment it is possible to place soft messianism against the messianism of political zealotry that could turn the whole world into the pit. Elijah tells us that the real martyrs are simple people who wished to live their lives in the fields and houses in the Kibbutzim and villages on both sides of the border. Every one of the captives is now in a sense a prisoner of hope, in a sense the absent one, and in a sense Elijah, who is none other than the wandering Jew. Every one of them is our Messiah, drifting on the side of the roads, whose dream is reconciliation and his cry is return and homecoming. “Return to the fortress you prisoners of hope” (Zechariah 9:12).



Red Fox, 2022, by Sofie Berzon MacKie, Kibbutz Be'eri.

**My heart will not shine and I am not in the furthest West; the lost child has not returned,
How can I taste what I eat, and how can it be pleasant?**