

The Danger of Ignoring Prophets

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Last week I spoke about the threat of a nuclear Iran. I described the recent warnings against allowing Iran to obtain the bomb. Ever. Editorials in the *Washington Post*. Speeches by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Senator Menendez at the AIPAC conference, and again by Netanyahu before the Congress.

We don't know whether the final agreement with Iran will be better than what we know about the drafts of a bad agreement. But we do know that a bad agreement could be devastating to the world and particularly to Israel.

We will celebrate Passover in less than two weeks. Thinking about that celebration, and about prophecy, I thought of a story by Elie Wiesel. The title is "The Evening Guest."

This is not the first time I've read the story here. But the story carried new power for me today: We should not ignore prophecies of grave danger.

So I am going to read it again. As you listen, please reflect on the threats of terrorism and nuclear war posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran and its often repeated promises to annihilate the State of Israel.

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It was the first night of Passover. Our household, brightly lit, was preparing to celebrate the festival of freedom. My mother and my two older sisters were bustling about the kitchen. The youngest was setting the table. Father had not yet returned from synagogue.

I was upset: we were going to partake of the ritual meal with only just the family, and I would have preferred having a guest as in preceding years.

I recovered my good mood when the door opened and father appeared, accompanied by a poorly dressed, shivering, timid stranger. Father had approached him in the street with the customary welcome: *Kol dichfin yetei veyochal* ("Let him who is hungry come eat with us").

"I'm not hungry," the stranger had answered.

"That makes no difference; come along anyway. No one should remain outside on a holiday evening."

Happy, my little sister set another place. I poured the wine.

"May we begin?" my father asked.

"Everything is ready," my mother answered.

Father blessed the wine, washed his hands, and prepared to tell us, according to custom, of the exploits of our ancestors, their flight from Egypt, their confrontation with God and their destiny.

“I’m not hungry,” our guest said suddenly. “But I’ve something to say to you.”

“Later,” my father answered, a bit surprised.

“I haven’t time. It’s already too late.”

I did not know that this was to be the last *Seder*, the last Passover meal we would celebrate in my father’s house.

It was 1944. The German army had just occupied the region. In Budapest the Fascists had seized power. The Eastern front was at Korosmezo, barely thirty kilometers from our home. We could hear the cannon fire and, at night, the sky on the other side of the mountains turned red. We thought that the war was coming to an end, that liberation was near, that, like our ancestors, we were living our last hours in bondage.

Jews were being abused in the streets; they were being humiliated, covered with insults. One rabbi was compelled to sweep the sidewalk. Our dear Hungarian neighbors were shouting: “Death to the Jews!” But our optimism remained unshakable. It was simply a question of holding out for a few weeks. Then the front would shift and once again the God of Abraham would save his people, as always, at the last moment, when all seems lost.

The *Haggadah*, with its story of the Exodus, confirmed our hope. Is it not written that each Jew must regard himself, everywhere and at all times, as having himself come out of Egypt? And that, for each generation, the miracle will be renewed?

But our guest did not see things that way. Disturbed, his forehead wrinkled, he troubled us. Moody and irritated, he seemed intent upon irritating us as well.

“Close your books!” he shouted. “All that is ancient history. Listen to me instead.”

We politely concealed our impatience. In a trembling voice, he began to describe the sufferings of Israel in the hour of punishment: the massacre of the Jewish community of Kolomia, then that of Kamenetz-Podolsk. Father let him speak, then resumed the ancient tale as though nothing had happened.

My little sister asked the traditional four questions which would allow my father, in his answers, to explain the meaning and import of the holiday. “Why and in what way is this night different from all other nights?” “Because we were slaves under Pharaoh, but on this night God made us free men.”

Discontent with both the question and the answer, our guest repeated them in his own way: “Why is this night not different from other nights? Why this continuity of suffering? And why us, always us? And God, why doesn’t He intervene? Where is the miracle? What is He waiting for? When is He going to put Himself between us and the executioners?”

His unexpected interruptions created a feeling of uneasiness around the table. As soon as one of us opened his mouth, our guest would cut us short:

“You concern yourselves with a past that’s three thousand years old and turn away from the present: Pharaoh is not dead, open your eyes and see, he is destroying our people. Moses is dead, yes, Moses is dead, but not Pharaoh: he is alive, he’s on his way, soon he’ll be at the gates of this city, at the doors of this house: are you sure you’ll be spared?”

Then, shrugging his shoulders, he read a few passages from the *Haggadah*: in his mouth, the words of praise became blasphemies.

Father tried to quiet him, to reassure him: “You’re downhearted, my friend, but you must not be. Tonight we begin our holiday with rejoicing and gratitude.”

The guest shot him a burning glance and said: “Gratitude, did you say? For what? Have you seen children butchered before their mother’s eyes? I have, I’ve seen them.”

“Later,” said my father. “You’ll tell us about that later.”

I listened to the guest and kept wondering: Who is he? What does he want? I thought him sick and unhappy, perhaps mad.

It was not until later that I understood: he was the prophet Elijah. And if he bore little resemblance to the Elijah of the Bible or to the prophet of my dreams, it is because each generation begets a prophet in its own image. In days of old, at the time of the kings, he revealed himself as a wrathful preacher setting mountains and hearts on fire. Then, repentant, he took to begging in the narrow streets of besieged Jerusalem, to emerge, later as a student in Babylonia, messenger in Rome, beadle in Mayence, Toledo, or Kiev. Today, he had the appearance and fate of a poor Jewish refugee from Poland who had seen, too close and too many times, the triumph of death over man and his prayer.

I am still convinced that it was he who was our visitor. Quite often, of course, I find it hard to believe. Few and far between are those who have succeeded in seeing him. The road that leads to him is dark and dangerous, and the slightest misstep might bring about the loss of one’s soul.

My Rebbe would cheerfully have given his life to catch one glimpse of him, if only for the span of a lightning flash, a single heartbeat. How then had I deserved what is refused so many others? I do not know. But I maintain that the guest was Elijah. Moreover, I had proof of this soon afterward.

Tradition requires that after the meal, before prayers are resumed, a goblet of wine be offered the prophet Elijah, who, that evening, visits all Jewish homes, at the same moment, as though to emphasize the indestructibility of their ties with God.

Accordingly, Father took the beautiful silver chalice no one ever used and filled it to the brim. Then he signaled my little sister to go to the door and ask the illustrious visitor to come taste our wine. And we wanted to tell him: you see, we trust you; in spite of our enemies, in spite of the blood that has been shed, joy is not deserting us, we offer you this because we believe in your promise.

In silence, aware of the importance of the moment, we rose to our feet to pay solemn tribute to the prophet, with all the honor and respect due him. My little sister left the table and started toward the door when our guest suddenly cried out:

“No! Little girl, come back! I’ll open the door myself!”

Something in his voice made us shudder. We watched him plunge toward the door and open it with a crash.

“Look,” he cried out, “there’s no one there! No one! Do you hear me?”

Whereupon he leaped out and left the door wide open.

Standing, our glasses in our hands, we waited, petrified, for him to come back. My little sister, on the brink of tears, covered her mouth with both hands. Father was the first to get hold of himself. In a gentle voice he called out after our guest: “Where are you, friend? Come back!”

Silence.

Father repeated his call in a more urgent tone. No reply.

My cheeks on fire, I ran outside, sure I would find him on the porch: he was not there. I flew down the steps: he could not be far. But the only footsteps that resounded in the courtyard were my own. The garden? There were many shadows under the trees, but not his.

Father, Mother, my sisters, and even our old servant, not knowing what to think, came out to join me. Father said: “I don’t understand.”

Mother murmured: “Where can he be hiding? Why?”

My sisters and I went out into the street as far as the corner: no one. I started shouting: “H-e-e-y, friend, where are you?”

Several windows opened: “What’s going on?”

“Has anyone seen a foreign Jew with a stooped back?”

“No.”

Out of breath, we all came together again in the courtyard. Mother murmured: “You’d think the earth swallowed him up.”

And Father repeated: “I don’t understand.”

It was then that a sudden thought flashed through my mind and became certainty: Mother is mistaken, it is the sky and not the earth that has split open in order to take him in. Useless to chase after him, he is not here anymore. In his fiery chariot he has gone back to his dwelling-place, up above to inform God what his blessed people are going to live through in the days to come.

“Friend, come back,” my father shouted one last time. “Come back, we’ll listen to you.”

“He can’t hear you anymore,” I said. “He’s a long way off by now.”

Our hearts heavy, we returned to the table and raised our glasses one more time. We recited the customary blessings, the Psalms, and, to finish, we sang *Chad Gadya*, that terrifying song in which, in the name of justice, evil catches evil, death calls to death, until the Angel of Destruction, in his turn, has his throat cut by the Eternal himself, Blessed-Be-He. I always loved this naive song in which everything seemed so simple, so primitive: the cat and the dog, the water and the fire, first executioners then victims, all undergoing the same punishment within the same scheme.

But that evening the song upset me. I rebelled against the resignation it implied. Why does God always act too late? Why didn't he get rid of the Angel of Death before he even committed the first murder?

The ceremony was coming to an end, and we did not dare to look at one another. Father raised his glass one last time and we repeated after him: "Next year in Jerusalem."

None of us could know that this was our last Passover meal as a family.

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One week from this Friday we will celebrate Pesach, the Festival of Freedom. Again, as we have done for countless generations, we will declare at the end of the Seder, "Next year in Jerusalem."

We don't mean that each of us will go there. Rather, we declare our hope in the promise of Jerusalem, our hope for that place always to be there for us, a place where the Jewish people can live in freedom and safety.

May it always be so.

And let us say, Amen.