Lies, Cries--Arise: Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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The Psalm associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah seems to be a strange choice. It is Psalm 12, a Psalm that Martin Buber has described as a prophecy “against the generation of the lie.” The Psalmist cries out: “Help, O Lord, for the pious cease to be…They speak falsehood each with his neighbor, with flattering lip, with a double heart they speak.” The generation is led by oppressors who say “our tongue will make us mighty,” who arrogantly crush the downtrodden.

Buber comments: “They speak with a double heart, literally ‘with heart and heart’…The duplicity is not just between heart and mouth, but actually between heart and heart. In order that the lie may bear the stamp of truth, the liars as it were manufacture a special heart, an apparatus which functions with the greatest appearance of naturalness, from which lies well up to the ‘smooth lips’ like spontaneous utterances of experience and insight.” (“Good and Evil,” New York, 1953, p. 10)

The Psalmist is not merely condemning his “generation of the lie,” but other future generations that also will be characterized by lying, bullying, oppressing; that will be led by smooth talking and corrupt demagogues. But the Psalmist turns prophet in proclaiming that God will arise and protect the victims of the liars. Truth will prevail. “It is You, O Lord, who will guard the poor, You will protect us forever from this generation.” And yet, the Psalm ends on a realistic note: “But the wicked will strut around when vileness is exalted among humankind.”

Although God will ultimately redeem the world from the “generation of the lie,” this will not happen right away. As long as people submit to the rule of the wicked, the wicked will stay in power. In the long run, God will make truth prevail

over lies. In the short run, though, it is the responsibility of human beings to stand up against tyranny, lies, and arrogant smooth talking liars. If the wicked are not resisted, they will continue to strut around and feel invincible.

What does this Psalm have to do with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah, known in our tradition as Zeman Simhateinu, the time of our rejoicing? On a simplistic level, the Psalm might have been chosen because it opens with "Lamnatseah al ha-Sheminith," to the Chief Musician on the Eighth (the "eighth" being a musical instruction). Since it mentions eight, it is thus connected with Shemini Hag Atsereth, the eighth day closing festival.

It would seem, though, that our sages must have had something deeper in mind in choosing Psalm 12 to be associated with this festival. In the Amidah of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we include prayers asking the Almighty to inspire awe in all His creations and to have humanity acknowledge Him as Ruler of the universe. We pray for a time when "iniquity shall close its mouth and all wickedness vanish as smoke when You will remove the rule of tyranny from the earth." On Succoth, our ancestors offered 70 offerings in the Temple, symbolically praying for the well-being and harmony of all humanity (understood by the rabbis to be composed of 70 nations). Psalm 12 is an appropriate continuation of these themes, and is a fitting reminder at the end of the holiday season that we depend on God to bring truth and peace to humanity.

But Psalm 12 adds an important dimension. Although we certainly must pray to the Almighty for redemption, we also bear responsibility for the sad state of human affairs. Prayer alone isn't enough to solve our problems. We need to muster the courage to stand up against lies and tyranny, to uproot "the generation of the lie."

Throughout the world, we see examples of simple people rising up against harsh and powerful tyrants. They risk their lives, their livelihoods, their families—but they have reached the breaking point where they can no longer tolerate the unjust tyrannies under which they live. Many suffer and die in the process—but ultimately, it is hoped that the masses of good people will prevail over the dictators and demagogues. People in power rarely cede their power peacefully and gracefully. The entrenched powers will do whatever they need to do to maintain their control.

Fortunately, we live in free societies. Although we certainly have our share of imperfect rulers and leaders, we also have a system that allows for change and peaceful transition. The people can take control by voting, by peaceful protests,

by peaceful strikes. Many people are not willing to stand up and be counted. They are happy to pray for God to bring peace and truth to the world. They are comfortable letting others take the risks of fighting the establishment’s power base. Psalm 12 comes at the end of the holiday season to remind us: yes, God will make truth and justice prevail; but in the meanwhile, evil will persist as long as we let it persist.

Unless we are willing to stand up against the tyrants and demagogues, they will continue to crush us. They will continue their lies and p.r. spins and political manipulations. The concluding lesson we should take from this holiday season is: building a true, just and moral community and society depends on us.