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Angel for Shabbat, Thoughts for Shabbat Parah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Shabbat Parah recalls the purification ceremony of the "red heifer" performed in ancient times. As we approach Passover, this Shabbat is designated as a time to purify ourselves for the upcoming observances. Although the "red heifer" purification has not taken place in several thousand years, we nevertheless retain the memory of this ceremony. The destruction of the Temples in antiquity were a serious blow to the Jewish People. But the Jewish religious genius has taught us to overcome tragedies, to remember them, but to dream of better days yet to come. In this spirit, I am offering an interpretation of the first Mishna of the Talmud.

An incident where [Rabban Gamliel's] sons returned from a wedding hall: They said to him, we did not recite Shema. He said to them: If the dawn has not arrived, you are obligated to recite… (Berakhot, Mishna, 2a)

Rabban Gamliel was the Nasi (leader) of the rabbinic academy of Yavne that served as the spiritual center of Judaism following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. He is credited with restoring central rabbinic authority at a time when the Jewish people was in tremendous distress. The Romans had not only razed the Temple, but murdered many Jews and forced many thousands into exile. This was one of the bleakest periods in Jewish history.

The Mishna reports that on a certain occasion, Rabban Gamliel's sons had arrived home very late, after midnight. They had been celebrating at a wedding. The Mishna does not actually say they were at a wedding, but at a *beit mishteh*, a place of drinking. Where ever they were, they were having a joyous time. They were so involved in the celebration that they did not recite the evening *Shema.*

The *Shema* is a short verse declaring the unity of God. It can be recited in a matter of a few seconds. Even if one were to include the three full biblical chapters designated as the *Shema,* this would entail no more than several minutes. How could Rabban Gamliel's sons be so pre-occupied with their drinking and celebrating that they could not find a few moments to say the *Shema*?

Obviously, Rabban Gamliel was concerned about his sons' spiritual life. He waited up long into the night until they returned home. They told him they had not recited the *Shema*; now it was after midnight and it was too late to recite it. Rabban Gamliel instructed them to say the *Shema*, explaining that the rabbinic requirement to say *Shema* before midnight was only to serve as a safeguard to prevent people from putting off the recitation too late. The actual rule is that one may recite the *Shema* until dawn.

Perhaps this episode should be understood in the following way. With the destruction of the Temple and the vast suffering of the Jews, many survivors—including the sons of Rabban Gamliel—were profoundly depressed. The foundations of their religious life were shaken. How could God allow such a horrific tragedy to befall the Jews? How could one retain faith in God after all that had transpired? Was there any point to studying Torah and fulfilling the commandments, pretending that religious life would continue as though nothing had happened?

The sons went to a party. They drank. They celebrated. At a time when the Jewish community was blanketed with sorrow, these young men chose to cut themselves off from that sorrow. Their rebellious spirit was so deep that they did not—would not—recite the simple verse acknowledging the unity and kingdom of God.

When they returned home, their father was waiting for them. "Did you say the *Shema*?" They replied: "It is too late!" What they may have meant was: the Jewish people has reached the pit of darkness, there is no future, no hope. It is impossible to declare the unity and kingship of God in the present circumstances.

Rabban Gamliel said: No, my sons, it is not too late. We may have reached and crossed a "midnight" in our history, but the dawn will come. Right now, we seem to be in a world where God has vanished, where His power has abandoned us. I understand your spiritual turmoil and your grief. But you must recite the *Shema.* The dawn will come.

Rabban Gamliel's sons, at the instruction of their father, recited the *Shema.*

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