

A Warning Without a Date

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Water Poured in the Dark, and a Voice in the Night

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Three years ago this week, the people of Israel sat in their sukkot as we sit in ours now. The festival moved toward its close, toward Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, toward the day that has since taken a date for a name. We did not know. That is the sentence that every Jew who lived through that autumn carries: we did not know.

This week, as we sat down again under the schach, two reports appeared about what may have been said before that day.

Two reports, and their denials

On Friday, 25 September, The New York Times reported that the leader of the United Arab Emirates warned Prime Minister Netanyahu in late September 2023. On Saturday, The Atlantic reported that Egypt's then intelligence chief, Abbas Kamel, visited Israel on 26 September 2023 and warned that "Gaza would blow up," with no date and no target.

The Prime Minister's Office denies both reports. Tzachi Hanegbi and a UAE official have also issued denials.

I do not know which account is correct, and this essay will not pretend to. Inquiries and historians will weigh the evidence. My question is a different one, and it belongs to the season. What does it mean to hear a warning that has no date? What does it mean to receive a message and not understand it?

Water that has no taste

Of all the rites of Sukkot in the Temple, the strangest was the pouring of water. Each morning of the festival a golden flask was filled at the Shiloach spring and carried up to the altar, where the priest poured it into one of two silver basins set beside the altar (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). Wine was poured on the altar all year. Water was poured only on Sukkot.

The Sages explained the rite in terms of the year to come. "Pour water before Me on the festival," G-d says, "so that the rains of the year will be blessed for you" (Rosh Hashanah 16a). Sukkot is the season when the world is judged for water. We pour water now, at the turning of the year, as a prayer for rain we cannot yet see.

And the joy of that pouring was the greatest joy of the Temple year. "Whoever has not seen the joy of the place of drawing has never seen joy in his life" (Mishnah Sukkah 5:1). All night the courtyard blazed with light. The pious danced with torches. The Levites sang on the fifteen steps. And at dawn, the procession went down to draw the water.

The water was drawn in the dark. It was carried up before the day was fully light. It had no taste, no color, no fragrance. It carried a message about the coming year, and no one who poured it could say what the year would bring in its particulars. It was a message received in faith, not in detail.

The call in the night

There is a story in the book of Shmuel that I keep returning to. The boy Shmuel lies down to sleep in the Sanctuary at Shiloh, near the ark of G-d, “and the lamp of G-d had not yet gone out.” A voice calls his name. He runs to the old priest Eli: “Here I am, for you called me.” Eli says: I did not call; go back and lie down. It happens a second time. Then a third. The verse explains, with great gentleness: “Shmuel did not yet know G-d, and the word of G-d had not yet been revealed to him” (I Shmuel 3:7). Only on the third time does Eli understand, and teach the boy how to answer: “Speak, for Your servant is listening.”

The Torah does not blame the boy. He heard the voice. He rose each time. He simply did not know what he was hearing. The message was real and the listener was faithful, and still there was a gap between the call and the understanding. It took a third call, and an older teacher, for the gap to close.

I think of that gap when I read these reported accounts, which the Prime Minister’s Office denies, of a warning with no date and no target. I do not know whether such words were spoken, or how they were meant, or how they were heard. But I know that a warning without a date is a hard thing to receive. It is a voice in the night that says something is coming, without saying what or when. The human mind, and the human state, are built to act on particulars. A general dread is difficult to translate into orders.

Covenant, not blame

It would be easy, and in this election season tempting, to turn these reports into weapons. Some will treat the reports as settled proof; others will treat the denials as settling the matter. I want to stand somewhere else, not because the questions do not matter, but because Sukkot offers a different posture for asking them.

The sukkah is the house of the covenant. We sit in it together, all of Israel, under one roof of branches. The Sages taught that all Israel is worthy to sit in one sukkah. Whatever happened in those weeks of September 2023, it happened to all of us. The grief belongs to all of us. And the work of learning to listen belongs to all of us, too.

The Torah’s model for this is not accusation but the voice of a community. Less than a week ago, on Yom Kippur, we stood in synagogues and recited the confession in the plural: *ashamnu*, *bagadnu*, we have done wrong, we have betrayed. No one stood up to point at a neighbor. Each person struck his own heart and said “we.” The plural is not a way of dodging responsibility. It is a way of carrying it together, so that no single person is left alone with a weight that belongs to the whole house.

Questions of fact deserve honest answers, and the proper forums will pursue them. But the posture we bring to those questions matters, too. We can ask them as accusers, or we can ask them as members of one covenant who want, above all, to hear better next time.

Learning to hear in the dark

At dawn, after the night of dancing, the water-drawers reached the eastern gate of the Temple, turned their faces to the west, and said: “Our fathers who were in this place stood with their backs to the Sanctuary and their faces to the east, bowing to the sun. But we, our eyes are to G-d” (Mishnah Sukkah 5:4).

They made that turn in the dark, before the sun had risen, on their way to pour water whose meaning they could not see. That is the lesson I take from this week. We will not always receive warnings in the form we want: with dates and targets and clear instructions. Sometimes the call comes three times in the night, and we run to the wrong room. The answer is not despair and not accusation. The answer is to become, as a people, better listeners: humbler about what we know, more attentive to what we do not, and quicker to say, together, “Speak, for Your servant is listening.”

May the water we pour this week bring blessed rain, and may we learn to hear the voice before morning.

Sources

- Mishnah Sukkah 4:9 (the water libation and the silver cups)
- Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2 and Rosh Hashanah 16a (judgment for water on Sukkot; “pour water before Me on the festival”)
- Mishnah Sukkah 5:1–4 (Simchat Beit HaShoevah; the lights, torches and fifteen steps); Mishnah Sukkah 5:4 (“our eyes are to G-d”)
- I Shmuel 3:1–10 (the call to Shmuel in the night)

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