

Of Jewish Cities, Holy and Secular

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Borrowing an interpretive method often used by the rabbis themselves, we might read our passage from Midrash Psalms 20:4 as an allegory for the collective experiences of the Jewish people throughout history. Here the cemetery along the road might be understood as the sufferings endured by Israel in the present; the father might be seen as the rabbinic sages addressing their anxious constituents, who beg to know when the dark night of the exile will finally end; and the city beyond the cemetery might be viewed as the redemptive culmination of history, eagerly anticipated especially during times of sorrow. According to such a reading, the passage seems to affirm the consoling view that the appearance of death and destruction along the road of life is a sign that the messianic in-gathering of exiles is nigh. (The view that redemption might follow closely on the heels of sorrow is not uncommon in the rabbinic tradition; consider Rabbi Johanan's saying in Sanhedrin: "When you see a generation ever dwindling, hope for [the Messiah]").

To identify redemption with a city as I am proposing would be entirely fitting to the rabbinic imagination, given the traditional view that whatever else the messianic drama might entail, the rebuilding of Jerusalem will be among its definitive triumphs. And here, we might shift our approach to this brief text from allegory to prophecy. For, unlike, say, the Augustinian tradition—with its emphasis on a purely allegorical, heavenly Jerusalem—the rabbinic tradition insists on a literal rebuilding of the earthly Jerusalem, whose streets shall resound with "the sound of mirth and gladness" (Jeremiah 33:11). Thus the "city" that will eventually be reached according to our passage might be read both figuratively and literally—as a sign that redemption is just around the bend, and as a reminder that this event will unfold within a city, specifically the

holy city and perpetual site of Jewish longing, Jerusalem.

The idea that history will culminate with some glorious arrival in a holy city is such a basic feature of the Jewish imagination that it has survived into the modern period, often reappearing in altered and secularized forms. In the context of the American Jewish experience, the association between redemption and Jerusalem provides a tacit subtext for collective imaginings of New York City, the initial point of contact between generations of Jewish immigrants and American soil. Countless narratives of Jewish immigration include some sort of evocation of the Statue of Liberty rising up just before New York harbor as the symbol of Jewish hopes in the New World. If Jewish immigrants found a new home in America rather than the Land of Israel, this makes little difference for the deep structure of the salvation narrative itself, which harks back to traditional Jewish eschatologies. Here, too, the scene of redemption is a city, and, as in our midrashic passage, here, too, it comes after a prior encounter with a cemetery. After the nightmare of the Russian pogrom—so goes the great collective story of American Jews—comes arrival in New York harbor.

But equally striking about the role of New York City in the modern Jewish imagination is the deep ambivalence with which it is often regarded. Unlike, say, Vilna, which was often referred to with unequivocal praise as "Yerushalayim d'Lite" (Jerusalem of Lithuania), New York City is imagined just as frequently as a disorienting, chaotic space that must ultimately be abandoned. Consider the beginning of Israel Jacob Schwartz's widely read Yiddish epic *Kentucky* (1925), in which the poet recalls his arrival in the "maelstrom of New York, on the shore of the yellow Hudson." In Schwartz's narrative, the protagonist finds his way into the wilderness of Kentucky, ultimately discov-

ering his own personal Zion in the American South. Or consider one of the definitive movies about the Jewish encounter with America, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), especially the scene in which some of the first lines of spoken dialogue in the history of Hollywood are heard. In this scene, the Jewish son promises his mother that once he makes it big in America he'll buy her a home in the Bronx, far from the chaos of the city. ("Oh yes, we're gonna move up in the Bronx. A lot of nice green grass up there, and a whole lot of people you know.") If the collective story of American Jews includes a sojourn in New York City, this is not necessarily the kind of final destination that our midrashic passage imagines for the father and son wandering along the road of exile.

One reason Jews have been ambivalent about imagining New York City as their final destination stems from American attitudes toward the idea of a city. The American sense of salvation, quite unlike the Jewish one, is premised on the possibility of starting over from scratch, of building a new home in a place untouched by history. This image of salvation can hardly be reconciled with the image of a city. After all, cities record in their built environments the accumulated data of lived experience, foisting on the city dweller precisely the kind of awareness of the past and its burdens that the quintessential American hopes to overcome. Cities are also associated in America with vice, squalor, and ostentatious display, mortal threats to the kind of purity Americans generally associate with salvation. Insofar as Jews have absorbed these native biases, they, too, have tended to see New York City as but a stop along the way to greener pastures.

The poet Charles Reznikoff, who never wavered in his dedication to urban culture, bears witness with particular sensitivity, irony, and wit to the contrasting ways New York City has presented itself in the Jewish imagination.

Here is one of his numerous works in a mode that has been called "urban haiku":

God and Messenger

The pavement barren
as the mountain
on which God spoke to Moses—
suddenly in the street
shining against my legs
the bumper of a motor car.

The cityscape first appears to the poet as an analogue of Sinai, site of the foundational theophany—the appearance of God—in Jewish tradition. In place of the light of the divine, however, the poet notices the bumper of a motor car, possibly careening toward him. If the first three lines evoke the city as a new kind of portal to the divine, a new Sinai, the final three seem to undermine this idea: In place of holiness, the poet discovers brute materiality, the negation of spiritual vision (and a threat to life and limb). And, yet, on another reading, these lines might actually sustain the analogy connecting New York City to Sinai. For the modern poet, as for the ancient messenger of God, a barren landscape has suddenly become a place of "shining." The motor car brings the kind of sudden change that in traditional haiku comes from an object of nature (recall Basho's famous haiku: "the quiet pond / a frog leaps in / And a splash.") Thus Reznikoff suggests how the modern city can be seen as a place of surprise and beauty, even majesty. Reznikoff's poem thus testifies to what Walter Benjamin calls a "profane illumination," a recognition of unexpected mystery and "pristine intensity" in an everyday object.

By suggesting a parallel between Sinai and New York City, Reznikoff invites us to cultivate a flexible mode of perception, capable of shuttling between holiness and the profane, between chosenness and anonymity, between

a sense of being blessed and a fear that one has been cursed. Having dispensed with the view of history described by our midrashic source as a unidirectional path leading from suffering to redemption, the secularized modern Jewish poet turns toward the multiple meanings that are accessible in the city we already inhabit. The holy city is no longer expected at the end of the road. It is discovered, in rare glimpses and strange epiphanies, in the midst of daily life on the streets of New York.