

It Happened at Midnight

On the first night of Passover, after the seder meal, Jews traditionally recite a poem, a *piyyut*, called "It Happened at Midnight" (וַיְהִי בַחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה *Vayehi Ba-hatzi Ha-laylah*). It was written in the 6th century by Yannai, who lived in Eretz Yisrael. The verses recount many miracles that happened in Jewish history at midnight, on the first night of Pessah. The most important one is the Exodus from Egypt, which explains why it is included in the seder. Indeed, the Torah says the process for the Exodus started at midnight:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה כַּחֲצִית הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם

Moses said, "Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians." [Exodus 11:4]

וַיְהִי אֶחָד בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַיְהִי הַכֹּהֵן כָּל־בְּכוֹרֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

In the middle of the night the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt. [Exodus 12:29]

First, it must be noted that in Judaism, midnight is not necessarily 12am but is literally the midpoint of the night, halfway between sunset and sunrise. That point is called *chatzot*. In winter, when nights are long, midnight is after 12am; in summer, when nights are short, it is after 12am. It varies every day.

In all, thirteen miracles are listed in the poem, all happening on the first night of Pessah at midnight. We will first list them, then try to answer the question: What is so special about midnight?

The other twelve miracles are as follows:

-God allows Abraham to defeat the four kings who kidnapped his nephew Lot:

וַיִּחָלֶק עֲלֵיהֶם אֶחָד בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו וַיִּגְבֹּהּ

At night, [Abraham] and his servants fought against them and defeated them. [Genesis 14:15]

-God threatens King Abimelech after he takes Sarah away from Abraham:

וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָמָה בַּחֲלוֹם הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הִנֵּנִי מֵת עַל־הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־לָקַחְתָּ וְהוּא בָעֵלָתָּ בָּעֵל:

And God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman." [Genesis 20:3]

-God tells Laban in a dream to lay off his son-in-law Jacob:

הַשֹּׁמֵר לֹךְ פֶּן־תִּדְבֹּר עִם־יַעֲקֹב מְטוֹב עַד־רָע:

Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad. [Genesis 31:24]

-God allows Jacob to prevail against the being who attacked him at night.
[Genesis 32:25-30]

-God allows the judge and prophetess Deborah to defeat Sisera, the Canaanite general:

מִן־שָׁמַיִם נִלְחָמוּ הַכּוֹכָבִים מִמְּסֻלּוֹתָם נִלְחָמוּ עִם־סִיסְרָא:

The stars fought from heaven; from their courses they fought against Sisera.

[Judges 5:20]

-God allows King Hezekiah to prevail over Assyrian King Sennacherib, who was besieging Jerusalem:

That night an angel of the Lord went out and struck down [the Assyrians]. [2 Kings 19:35]

-God makes King Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the Temple and took the Jews to Babylonia in captivity, dream that his idol was destroyed. [Daniel 2]

-God reveals to Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar's dream was the prelude to the fall of four great empires. [Daniel 2]

-God allows the killing of King Belshazzar, who was the son of King Nebuchadnezzar and who oppressed of the Jews:

בַּיָּלִילָא קָטִיל בִּלְאִשְׁצָר מֶלֶכָא כַּשְׂדִּיא [כְּשִׁדְאַה:]

That very night, Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. [Daniel 5:30]

What happened was that King Belshazzar gave a banquet at which artifacts of the destroyed Temple were profaned in revelry. A hand appeared and wrote a mysterious sentence on the wall. Daniel translated it as a threat against the king. That very night the king was slain.

-God delivers Daniel from the lions' den. [Daniel 6:19-22]

-God gives insomnia to King Achashverosh in the story of Purim:

בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא נִדְדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ:

That night, sleep deserted the king. [Esther 6:1]

He then passes time reading through his kingdom's chronicles and discovers that Mordechai the Jew had saved his life:

There it was found written that Mordecai had denounced ... two of the king's eunuchs ... who had plotted to do away with King Achashverosh. [Esther 6:1-2]

That brought Mordechai in the good graces of the king.

The final verse of the poem turns to the future. Isaiah's prophesy of redemption will be fulfilled also at midnight:

אֵלַי קָרָא מְשַׁעִיר שְׁמִר מִה־מַּלְיָלָה שְׁמִר מִה־מַּלְיָל:

אָמַר שְׁמִר אָתָּה בֶּקֶר וְגַם־לַיְלָה אִם־תִּבְעָעוֹן בָּעִיּוֹ שָׁבוּ אִתּוֹ:

A call comes to Me from Seir: "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" The watchman replied, "Morning came, and so did night. If you would inquire, inquire. Come back again." [Isaiah 21:11-12]

Mysterious! Saadia Gaon and Rashi interpret this passage as follows:

God, how much is left of the night -- the times of trouble? God, how much is left of the night? God replied: I have the ability to make the morning shine for you; and I also prepared night for the wicked at the end of time. If you want to hasten the end of the Exile, return to Me in repentance.

That final verse is *Karev Yom* קָרֵב יוֹם is usually sung:

קָרֵב יוֹם אֲשֶׁר הוּא לֹא יוֹם וְלֹא לַיְלָה
רָם הוֹדַע כִּי לֵךְ הַיּוֹם אֲףי לֵךְ הַלַּיְלָה
שׁוֹמְרִים הִפְקִיד לְעִירְךָ כָּל הַיּוֹם וְכָל הַלַּיְלָה
תֵּאִיר כְּאוֹר יוֹם חֲשֻׁכַת לַיְלָה

Karev yom, karev yom, asher hu lo yom velo laila. (2)

Ram hoda, hoda, hoda, Ki lekha hayom af lekha halaila. (2)

Shomrim hafked, hafked le-irkha, kol hayom vekhol halaila. (2)

Tair, tair, tair, tair. Tair keor yom cheshkhat laila. (2)

It means:

Bring near the day that is neither day nor night.

Most High, make known that Yours is the day as well as the night.

Appoint guards over Your city all day and all night.

Brighten, as if it were day, the darkness of the night.

This hearkens to the prophecy of Zechariah, which we sing at the end of the Alenu prayer at services:

וְהָיָה יוֹם־אֶחָד הוּא יִגְדַע לִיהְיֶה לֹא־יוֹם וְלֹא־לַיְלָה וְהָיָה לַעֲתֵּי־עָרֶב יִהְיֶה־אוֹר:

וְהָיָה יְהוָה לְמִלְךָ עַל־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה יְהוָה אֶחָד וְשִׁמוֹ אֶחָד:

There shall be a continuous day—only the Lord knows when—of neither day nor night, and there shall be light at eventide... And the Lord shall be king over all the earth. On that day, the Lord shall be One and His name One. [Zechariah 14:7,9]

Thus, in messianic days there will be no night, that is, no fear or trouble; only day, that is only confidence and rejoicing.

Other things happened at midnight in Jewish tradition, such as Ruth's visit to Boaz, which led to her marrying him and becoming the ancestress of King David and the future Messiah:

וַיְהִי בַחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּתְּרֵד הָאִישׁ וַיִּלָּקֶת וַתִּהְיֶה אִשָּׁה שֹׁכֶבֶת מִרְגְּלָיו:

In the middle of the night, the man gave a start and pulled back—there was a woman lying at his feet. [Ruth 3:8]

Now let us ask the central question: What is so special about midnight, that God should choose that time to perform miracles?

After all, in the popular mind, midnight is a scary time. Edgar Allan Poe's raven comes "upon a midnight dreary". The ghost of Hamlet's murdered father appears around midnight. There is a French expression that goes: *Minuit, c'est l'heure du crime*. — Midnight is crime time.

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that King David woke up at midnight to study and praise God. Indeed, one of his psalms says:

תִּצְוֹתֶיךָ לַיְלָה אֶקוֹם לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ עַל מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדִיקֶיךָ:

I rise at midnight to praise You for Your just laws. [Ps. 119:62]

The Midrash comments:

Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Elazar bar Menachem: What would David do? He would take up a harp and lyre and put them by his head [before he went to sleep], then at midnight he would get up and play them. When the scholars of Israel heard the music, they would say, "Well, if King David is engaged in Torah study [at this hour], then we should all be doing the same!" [Soon,] all of Israel could be found engaging in Torah study. [Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 7:4]

The Baal Haturim, from 14th-century Spain, said: "God performs miracles for the righteous at midnight." Rising at midnight sweetens the harsh judgments. [Likutey Moharan 1:149]

The Kabbalah tells us that getting up at midnight to study is meritorious. The Zohar says:

Come and see: when a person rises at midnight to engage in Torah, the Holy Blessed One, focuses on him. [Zohar 2:13a]

Indeed, the *Selichot*, the penitential prayers preceding the High Holy Days, are said at midnight.

Perhaps midnight is simply a time when all is quiet, when there are no distractions, when people can concentrate and meditate on what's important, with no interruption, whence its privileged position in Judaism?

Chag kasher v'sameach.