Fri 3 Jan 2003
Veshamru
Congregation Adat Reyim
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Veshamru

Good evening and Happy New Year. I am glad to celebrate this first Shabbat service of 2003 with you here at Adat Reyim. I think that davening Maariv with friends is an excellent way to start the year.

During the next few minutes, I will talk about one of the prayers we chanted a little while ago – the Veshamru. In our Friday night Siddur, Likrat Shabbat, it is found on page 230.

Veshamru is lifted from the Torah. It is a quotation from Shemot (that is, the book of Exodus); in particular it is found in parsha Ki Tisa, Chapter 31, verses 16 and 17. The passage is placed just after God has given Moses detailed instructions on how to construct the Tent of Meeting. It is part of a larger passage stressing the importance of the Sabbath. Even though Israel is performing a holy task by constructing the Tent of Meeting, the Lord made clear that the Sabbath Day took precedence. Indeed, the Chafetz Chayim[i] states, "the Sabbath is equal in importance to all the mitzvoth," and he points to these verses from Exodus as one of the reasons for making that statement.

The English translation on the facing page of Likrat Shabbat, while a standard translation, misses much of the nuances and connections to other parts of the service that the original Hebrew conveys. The first Hebrew word is translated as "observe." This translation is in keeping with the Jewish interpretation of the text. The same Hebrew word is also used in the fourth commandment as listed in Deuteronomy, where it is translated the same way.

A few minutes prior to chanting Veshamru, we sang Lecha Dodi and used this same Hebrew word in referring to the fourth commandment of Deuteronomy. Thus, with the first verse of Lecha Dodi, the congregation foreshadows the opening word of Veshamru. However, the Hebrew root shin, mem, resh has as its primary meaning: to guard. The prayer we recited immediately before Veshamru is Hashkivenu. Hashkivenu uses the same word shin, mem, resh when it asks God to guard Israel. Indeed, the weekday Hashkivenu ends by blessing God who safeguards (that shin mem resh root again) Israel, although on Shabbat this last blessing of Hashkivenu is different from the weekday version. It changes the last blessing to "who spreads the shelter of peace over us and over all His people Israel, and over Jerusalem."

Thus on Shabbat, in the Hebrew at least, we go from requesting that God guard Israel to Israel guarding Shabbat. This connection between two parts of the liturgy, like the connection to the earlier Lecha Dodi, is missed if one looks only at the English translation in our Friday night Siddur.

A more interesting aspect of the Veshamru is the statement that it (the Sabbath) is a sign. For whom is it a sign? Rashi1[ii] and Saadya Gaon[iii] believed that it is a sign to the other nations of the world. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "and their seed shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed."[iv] On the other hand, Ibn Ezra[v] explains this passage in Exodus differently. It is not to the nations of the world that the Sabbath is a sign; rather the sign is for Israel. It is so <u>we</u> should grasp Israel's mission so that <u>we</u> learn

that it is the Lord that sanctifies Israel. As stated in the Amidah for Shabbat Mincha, “Your children will realize and know that from You does their rest come,
and through their rest, they sanctify Your name.”[vi]

The fact that Shabbat is a sign is the reason that teffilin is not worn on Shabbat. During weekdays observant Jews will lay teffilin as instructed by the second
and third paragraphs of the Shema. On Shabbat these signs are unnecessary since the entire day, as the Veshamru tells us, serves as a sign.

On Saturday morning, as part of the Kedushat Hayom (the middle blessing of the Sabbath Amidah) that begins yismach mosheh, the congregation also chants
the Veshamru. Our Saturday prayer book, Siddur Sim Shalom, translates the Hebrew as follows: “Moses rejoiced at the gift of his destiny when You declared
him a faithful servant, adorning him with splendor as he stood in Your presence atop Mount Sinai. Two tablets of stone did he bring down, inscribed with Shabbat observance. And thus is it written in Your Torah.”[vii] What follows immediately is the Veshamru, not the Ten Commandments or the fourth commandment, as
one would expect. Certainly, as Leibowitz points out, these verses are from Torah, so the preceding statement is accurate. Still, it would seem that citing the
fourth commandment after the phrase "two tablets of stone" is the natural quotation.

There are multiple theories as to how Veshamru came to be placed in this position.[viii] Ismar Elbogen feels the reason is the comparative length of the
passages.[ix] Rabbi Hayim Donin and Rabbi Dr. Joseph H. Hertz[x] felt that passages outside the Ten Commandments were used to instruct us that the words of
God are contained not only in the Decalogue. Leibowitz, basing herself on the Tur,[xi] claims it is because the three different versions of the Kedushat Hayom as
found in Maariv, Shacharit, and Mincha emphasize different aspects of Shabbat.

At the start of Shabbat, on Friday evening, the mystery of creation is emphasized. Thus the middle blessing of the Amidah in Likrat Shabbat reads in English,
“You consecrated the seventh day as Your own, for it marked the end and purpose of the creation … .” It is also Friday evenings when Vay’chulu is recited. At
the third service of Shabbat, mincha, the social aspects and the restfulness individuals feel from observing Shabbat is emphasized. Thus the middle blessing of
the Amidah contains the words “… a day of rest and holiness have You given Your people. … a rest of love and free will, a rest of truth and faithfulness, a rest of peace and tranquility … - a perfect rest.”[xii] In contrast, the Sabbath morning service emphasizes the bond between God and Israel. Thus the Veshamru, which uses the phrase “between Me and the children of Israel,” rather than the fourth commandment, is placed where it is. Later in this middle blessing we recite words
about how God did not grant Shabbat to the other peoples of the world; only to Israel did God give Shabbat.

The last sentence of Veshamru contains an intriguing image. The early Reform movement objected to its imagery and dropped this line from its early prayer
books,[xiii] although they have since loosened up and now its siddurim have the same Veshamru as the Conservative and Orthodox siddurim. The objection was
based upon a literal interpretation of this last line. After all, science has conclusively shown the world was not created in six literal days. Another reason
Reform deleted this last line was that God does not get tired like you or me. So I believe the feeling of the early Reform leadership must have been: why recite
that God rested? As I just stated, the Reform movement is not as literally dogmatic with regard to this last line of the Veshamru today, which is to Reform’s
credit. I find this last line inspiring; indeed, the Hebrew – which is even more anthropomorphic than the English in that the Hebrew literally says that God caught
His breath – is in my opinion a beautiful, poetic statement of an ideal to which I strive: working and accomplishing the first six days of each week and reflecting
and resting on day seven.

The more I study the Jewish service, the more I realize that it was not haphazardly thrown together. It is organized with purpose and with care. The Veshamru teaches us not only of God's relationship to Israel. It also teaches us that Shabbat is a reminder of that relationship and that Shabbat observance invigorates us for the other days of the week. May one of our New Year's resolutions be that this year we will do more to separate the seventh day from the other six days.

Happy New Year and Shabbat Shalom.

END NOTES

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[i] The Chafetz Chayim is Rabbi Yisrael Meir haKohen of Radin (1838 – 1933), who makes this statement in his book Sefer haMitzvoth haKatzar (the concise
book of Mitzvoth) in his discussion of negative commandment number 6. Feldheim publishers, 1990.

[ii] Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchaki (1040 – 1105), French Bible and Talmud commentator par excellence.

1[iii] Saadia ben Joseph (882 – 942) was head of the Sura academy in Babylon, although he was born in Egypt. He translated the Pentateuch into Arabic and was an opponent of Karaism.

1[iv] Isaiah 61:9. See Studies in Shemot, Ki Tissa 1, by Nehama Leibowitz, The World Zionist Organization, 1981. The analysis in this chapter, from which I have liberally taken, actually discusses Exodus 31:13.

1[v] Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089 –1164) was a Spanish biblical commentator and poet. He is famous for his grammatical and linguistic analysis of the Tanakh.

1[vi] Mincha service for Shabbos and Yom Tov, The Complete Metsudah Siddur, a new linear prayer book, 1990, Metsudah Publications, page 641.

1[vii] Siddur Sim Shalom, edited with translations by Rabbi Jules Harlow, The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogues of America, 1985, New York. I have some questions about the English translation (for example yismach seems to me to be future tense, not past tense, and thus a reference to the messianic age).

1[viii] Some scholars, such as Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin in his book, To Pray As a Jew (1980, Basic Books, page 114), feel that during Talmudic times the fourth commandment was in this position and the Veshamru replaced the recitation of that commandment rather than the Veshamru always being in that position.

1[ix] Ismar Elbogen, "Jewish Liturgy, A Comprehensive History," translated from the 1913 German edition, Jewish Publication Society, 1993, Section 16, page 97. Elbogen states that all known texts since the time of Rav Amram Gaon, circa 875 Babylonia, contains the Veshamru and not the Ten Commandments or commandment number four.

1[x] Donin op. cit., Hertz, The Authorized Daily Prayer Book, revised edition, 1959, Bloch publishing company, note starting on page 456.

1[xi] The Tur, by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher of the fourteenth century, was a code of Jewish law based on Maimonides Mishneh Torah. It remained the authority for more than two centuries until Rabbi Joseph Caro produced the Shulchan Aruch. Specifically, the analysis is based on Tur, O.H. 292.

1[xii] English translation on page 641 from The Complete Metsudah Siddur, op. cit.

1[xiii] In 1961, upon confirmation from my Reform Synagogue, Beth Or in Philadelphia, I was presented with a Union Prayer Book, which was the Siddur used in the late 1950s and early 1960s by the Reform movement. This prayer book, copyright 1940, revised edition 1959, has as its Veshamru's last line, "It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever."