

Why Is This Leil Shimurim Different From Other Ones?

I didn't grow up in a time or a place where the sense of fear was immediate. I didn't grow up in a police state, I didn't grow up in Nazi-occupied Europe, I didn't grow up in a totalitarian state, I didn't grow up during great economic turmoil. Sure, when I was a kid, we had those ridiculous school drills that required us to get underneath our desks in case the Russians launched a nuclear weapon. However, in terms of immediate fear? Not so much. So as a child and a teenager, the idea of Leil Shimurim, "A Night of Vigil" as told to us in the Torah, was exactly that, a narrative confined to our people's history. **Leil Shimurim Hu L'Adoshem L'Hotziam M'Eiretz Mitzrayaim Hu HaLailah Ha'Zeh L'Adoshem Shimurim L'Chol B'nei Yisroel** - *It is a night of vigil to the Lord for bringing them out of the land of Egypt; this is the Lord's night, a night of vigil for all B'nai Yisroel for their generations* (Ex. 12:42). As a result, the Leil Shimurim held an atmosphere of excitement, anticipation, mystery, almost excitement for what was imminently approaching: Pesach, the Seder, family, and friends gathered together to share an experience that was happening that night the world over; the recounting of our people journey from slavery to freedom, Yetziat Mitzrayim.

As I grew older, the closest I came to a Leil Shimurim, “A Night of Vigil” was when my wife was pregnant and we pulled all-nighters with two of our four children. Yet neither one occurred anywhere near Pesach, the closest being a month after Pesach on L’ag B’Omer. As a rabbi, I have spent Leil Shimurim in a hospital, waiting for the deceased to be picked up by the Funeral Home. I have spent a Leil Shimurim with a family as a loved one bodily functions began its final shut down before imminent death. However, all of those Leil Shimurim, all of the Nights of Vigil were focused upon individuals and people associated with those individuals. Those Nights of Vigil had nothing to do with a publicly stated date and commandment as the Leil Shimurim in the 12 Chapter of Exodus. did not necessarily occur on the 1st night of Pesach. No, this first night of Pesach, is a different kind of Leil Shimurim, the kind I heard about, the kind I read about, the kind of Leil Shimurim that has been soaked in fear, anxiety, concern, emptiness.

So, **Ma Nishtanah HaLailah HaZeh** - *Why is this night different from all other nights?* Indeed it certainly feels different, for this generation, for all of us here and now, **HaLailah HaZeh** is different. However, in 1918 the year of the Spanish Flu Epidemic, the Leil Shimurim that night wasn’t so different as this Leil Shimurim. And for the 6 consecutive Pesach Festivals, from 1347-1352, the Leil Shimurim of those years as the Bubonic Plague,

the Black Death swept through Europe, wasn't so different. I suppose one of the good things about being part of a narrative and covenant for over 3000 years is that we, as a people, as a nation, have a wide historical perspective. So we, as a nation has experienced this type of Leil Shimurim that is soaked in fear, anxiety, concern, and emptiness.

Whether it is this year's Leil Shimurim or the Leil Shimurim that occurred during other medical crises, this reminder **Leil Shimurim Hu L'Adoshem L'Hotziam M'Eiretz Mitzrayaim Hu HaLailah Ha'Zeh L'Adoshem Shimurim L'Chol B'nei Yisroel** (Ex. 12:42), raises a question. Who is doing the Shimurim, who is doing the guarding and for what purpose? It never dawned on me to think about it before because it always seemed so obvious. Under normal circumstances, The Leil Shimurim Hu L'Adoshem, The Night of Guarding (the Night of Vigil) was something that we did. We kept vigil, we kept guard as we re-enacted that first Pesach, in which Bnai Yisroel waited for the Malach HaMavet to pass over the houses with doorways marked in blood. We waited for that moment. We anticipated that moment. We anticipated that moment when slavery ended and freedom began. We waited and anticipated the moment when the future went from bleak and hopeless to bright and possible. We waited for the plague to pass to so we could leave our homes and begin a

new journey. The point is, we were the Shomrim, we did the “vigil keeping”, the waiting the anticipating. Of course, our ancestors weren’t just waiting for **HaLaila HaZeh** on *this one night*. They were waiting for centuries. The only difference is that finally they were given notification of when the imminent moment would occur. And like all moments for which we waited for a long time, for all moments which we anticipated and looked forward to, our ancestors, probably looked forward to **HaLailah HaZeh**, to this night with eager anticipation. Until this **HaLailah HaZeh**, I have never experienced any other kind of **Leil Shimurim**. Even if one place where there was tsuris, that wasn’t necessarily the entire globe, rather the Tsuris was confined to a particular place.

The answer depends on our understanding of the prepositional phrase **L’Adoshem**. **L’Adoshem** could mean “*to Hashem*” or “*for Hashem*”. The preposition will determine whether God is engaging in the vigil or object of B’nai Yisroel’s vigil. Also, how we understand Shimurim, and its root ShaMaR. ShaMar could mean keep or Guard as in Shomer Shabbat. However, ShaMaR could also mean “wait or “anticipate”. How these two words and phrases are understood will affect the way in which we make this year’s Leil Shimurim meaningful under the most trying times.

Moshe ben Nachman, the Ramban, the great 13th-century Meforash (commentator) explains that the Torah refers to the Leil Shimurim as a

“night of vigil for bringing them out of the land of Egypt” Ramban suggests that it was God who was the Shomer and God kept vigil. God was the one doing the waiting, waiting for B’nai Yisroel to finally have the Zchut - the merit, to be worthy of freedom. So at the Seder, the Leil Shimurim for the participants to anticipate the moment that night when God finally decided, yes, it is time to redeem. Thousands of years later, the Leil Shimurim demonstrates our anticipation of the moment when the miracle took place when God decided “now is the time”. From Ramban’s perspective, God was waiting for us.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephrayim Luntschitz, the Kli Yakar, the great late 16th early 17th century Rosh Yeshiva and Chief Rabbi of Prague explained the verse differently. He states, “It is a night of vigil to the Lord... a night of vigil for all B’nai Yisroel for their generation”. For the Kli Yakar, B’nei Yisroel is the one keeping vigil, and the nature of the Shimurim is not waiting, but guarding the mitzvah. We know this kind of “guarding” for it is the “guarding” associated with Shomer Shabbat - keep or observe the Shabbat. This Leil Shimurim- this Vigil was for both God and B’nai Yisroel. God anticipated and waited for us and we observed and guarded. The Kli Yakar continues, “y flame is in your hands and your flame is in my hands, you protect me and I will protect you”. So on that night, Bnai Yisroel

observed the Korban Pesach, and God protected them from that 10th plague.

Under difficult circumstances we will observe Pesach, we will proceed step by step through the Hagaddah. We will see the empty seats at our dining room table and not only think of relatives who have passed away but we will think of grandparents, children aunts uncles, cousins, and friends who normally gather with us and know that we are all keeping a Night of Vigil. This night is not like other Pesach night. On this Pesach night. We will not only Shamor - observe Pesach, the Korban Pesach, we will also observe those rules that will allow this plague to pass over us, we will “shelter in place” we will stay home, we will wear a mask, wear gloves, wash hands and by Observing by engaging in this type of Shamar, we can entertain the possibility of Shamar - waiting in anticipation when this plague will pass and we are will gather together with family and friends at next years’ seder and we will be able to gather together as a kehillah for future Chagim, and joyous occasions.

Chag Kasher v’ Sameach
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