

To Tashlich or Not to Tashlich? Does the Tashlich Service Have Pagan Roots?

by Tim Hegg

In the emerging Torah Movements, we rightly desire to distinguish between holy and profane. This desire has become all the more intense since we have realized how much paganism was intertwined with some of the religious rituals in the Christian Church, which, for most of us, was the place of our first awakening to God and to His Messiah, Yeshua. So scrutinizing the rituals that have been passed on to us through the traditions of Judaism is also a worthy enterprise.

One such ritual is that of the Tashlich Service. It became a tradition for the Jewish community, on the afternoon of Rosh HaShanah, to gather at a body of water and to dramatize the words of Micah 7:19,

He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast (תְּשַׁלַּח, *tashlich*) all their sins into the depths of the sea.

Standing before the body of water on the day of Rosh HaShanah, the people are reminded of the call to return to the Lord, and to repent of sin that has lingered. But one of the strong emphases of the Rosh HaShanah liturgy is the acceptance of one's repentance by the Almighty. "A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish" (Is. 42:3). One need never fear that repentance will be rebuffed by the Compassionate One. Moreover, even the smallest act of repentance is fully received by the Almighty. He happily dwells with the contrite heart:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.
(Ps. 51:17)

For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Is 57:15)

Thus, in concert with the truth that God receives the repentant sinner, cleansing them of their sins, the Tashlich ritual consists of gathering stones as symbolic of one's sins, and throwing them into the water. The reality of the simple ritual is stunning: never could one recover the rocks once they have sunk into the depths of the sea. They symbolize the manner in which God removes sins: they are forever gone. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:12).

As followers of Yeshua, and those who have come to believe that only through His death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession as our High Priest can sins be atoned, we realize in the ritual of Tashlich that it is God's work, not ours. Surely we are required to repent, but even this is given to us by His gracious hand (cf. Acts 5:31; 2Tim. 2:25). Thus the ritual of Tashlich is yet one more tangible expression of our faith, that our own sin, which would condemn us before the bar of God's unflinching justice, is entirely and forever removed from us through the gracious and sovereign work of God's cleansing through sacrifice and life of Yeshua.

In recovering a Torah perspective of our faith in Yeshua, and in living out this faith in a Hebraic way, we also have come to realize how profitable are the physical expressions of that faith. While the Christian Church became engrossed in the platonic separation of the physical and non-physical worlds, historic Judaism has always rejected this dualism on the basis that the physical world, created by God Himself, is good and not to be rejected. Living out the commands of Shabbat, for instance, in which one ceases from their physical labors and enjoys a physical rest, the reality of a spiritual rest is that much more understood and appreciated. When we bind tefillin on the arm and forehead, this obedience to the commandment bears deep significance to the manner in which God's commandments are to be bound up

in one's heart and soul. As we wear tzitzit upon the four corners of our garment, we recognize a physical reality that touches the world of our thoughts and intentions. Indeed, life in the Torah is life that has its abode upon the ground of this world's existence. Our worship is tied to the here and now, not an attempt to escape to the ethereal world of Augustine's platonic idealism. We have come to appreciate the sublime nature of sitting in the humble abode of a Sukkah rather than longing for the otherness of a cathedral atmosphere that mimics escape into the heavenlies. In short, we have come to understand that our duty as God's children is not to escape this world, but to prepare within it a place fit for His dwelling. We don't find an automatic disconnect between what is seen and what is unseen.

So stooping to gather a few pebbles on the afternoon of Rosh HaShanah, and casting them into the "depths of the sea" as a reminder of what God has done for us in His Son, Yeshua, is not, in and of itself, contrary whatsoever to our general mode of worship and *halachah*.

But is the Tashlich ritual born out of pagan practice? Have we adopted a pagan ceremony and tried to give it new meaning? Is the Tashlich ritual similar in kind to the use of the High Places, which Israel herself tried to cleanse and use anyway, even though she was commanded to destroy them and never to use them in the course of her worship? Some have claimed that this is the case, and that Tashlich, like much of Christmas and Easter, partakes of a syncretism that mixes things that essentially differ. Such a warning is valid: if, indeed, the Tashlich ritual is simply a reworking of a pagan ritual, then we should divest ourselves of it. God has given us His ways of worship—we don't need to borrow anything from the world of the demons.

The first point put forward by those who claim Tashlich has its origins from pagan rituals is its relatively recent practice. We do not find the ritual mentioned in either the Mishnah nor the Talmuds, and one would expect that if the ritual was as old as these rabbinic materials, it would receive some mention. Nor do we find it described in the early body of midrashim. In fact, its first explicit mention is by R. Jacob Mölin who died in 1425, in his "Sefer Maharil." Some, however, seek to trace the origins of the Tashlich ritual to the Zohar, and kabbalistic mysticism. According to Scholem ("Zohar" in *Ency. Judaica*, 16.1208), the Zohar was composed between 1270 and 1300. The passage that is cited by those who think Tashlich is the product of kabbalism is vol. III, 101a:

HOWBEIT ON THE TENTH DAY OF THIS SEVENTH MONTH IS THE DAY OF ATONEMENT; IT SHALL BE AN HOLY CONVOCATION UNTO YOU. R. Hiya quoted here the verse: "A Psalm of David, Maschil. Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. XXXII, 1). 'What', he said, 'is meant by Maschil? The waters that give wisdom to those who seek to find that place which is called maschil (lit. he that giveth heed). And because it is called so, forgiveness and complete freedom depend on it.

It is not clear whatsoever that this passage from the Zohar has the Tashlich service in mind, though later rabbis have made that connection. J. D. Eisenstein ("Tashlik" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*) is correct in saying that the Zohar "...perhaps, refers to this custom" (emphasis mine). In fact, when one reads the relevant passage, it is difficult to say that it does. First, this section in the Zohar is related specifically to Yom Kippur and not Rosh HaShanah (though, of course, the two are vitally connected by the Sages via the intervening days of awe). Moreover, the reference to the "waters that give wisdom" is not referencing the Tashlich ritual (though it is understandable how the kabbalists might have made this connection). The "waters that give wisdom" in the kabbalistic scheme of things relates to the primeval waters over which the Ruach Elohim hovered.

R. Eleazar came forward first and expounded the verse: The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth, even the Lord upon many waters (Ps. XXIX, 3). He said, ' "The voice of the Lord" is the supernal voice presiding over the waters, which flow from grade to grade until they are all collected in one place and form one gathering. It is this voice which sends them forth each in its course, like a gardener who conducts water through various channels to the requisite spots. "The God of glory thundereth": this is the side that issues from Geburah (Force), as it is written, "Who can understand the thunder of his mighty deeds

(*geburotov*)?” (Job. XXVI, 14). “The Lord upon many waters”: this is the supernal Wisdom, which is called Yod, and which is “upon the many waters”, the secret source that issues therefrom.’ (*Zohar*, Bereshit, section 1, 31b).

The kabbalists understood the primeval waters as related to the first of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton, and ultimately to the second through the fourth sefirot. Connected with Ps 65:10, the “stream of God” is a pneumatic force “through which man arrives at the study of Torah, as the Lord instructed...—through the merit of good deeds a man arrives at the study of Torah” (quoted from Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* [Princeton, 1987], p. 137, quoting *The Bahir*). Thus, the imagery of water in *Zohar*, 3.101a is not speaking of the Tashlich service, but of the mystical, gnostic world of the sefirot in which the primeval waters are considered the source of hidden wisdom. That some of the later kabbalists may have connected this passage in the *Zohar* to the Tashlich service does not substantiate its origins in kabbalah. For the kabbalists connected their mysticism to all of the rituals of Judaism, including, and especially those rituals that are clearly a matter of biblical law. One need only read the mystical approaches to the Pesach seder offered by the kabbalists to see this. But, of course, no one would suggest that the Pesach seder has its origins in the kabbalah.

But it is not only the kabbalists who have re-interpreted standing traditions to fit their particular philosophies. Most religious movements have done the same. The Roman Catholics find their mass and heretical doctrines of transubstantiation in the death of Yeshua, and in the re-mapped rituals of the Pesach ceremony. And the Protestants re-interpreted the same Pesach celebration of the seder into their Eucharistic ceremonies. Neither of these have anything to say about the actual origins of the Pesach seder. In like manner, to claim that the Tashlich ritual has pagan origins simply because the kabbalists have used it is a *non sequitur*. It is equally wrong to presume that because one cannot trace the Tashlich service to ancient times it is automatically suspect.

Connecting the Tashlich service to a similar syncretism found in Christmas and Easter is comparing things that have no real connection. Christmas, by its very name, is founded in the Roman Catholic mass, and incorporated clear pagan symbols of idolatry, such as the yule log, the Christmas tree, and mistletoe, gleaned from the Celtic religions of the forest spirits. Easter conflates a celebration of Yeshua’s resurrection with the worship of Eostre, a goddess of the Saxons, who was likewise connected with the fertility and reincarnation myths of the ancients, from which the symbol of the Easter Egg was derived. One is at a loss to see how gathering pebbles to throw into the water as a symbolic enactment of Micah 7:19 has any such connections to pagan rituals.

So what should we, as followers of Yeshua within Torah communities, do with the Tashlich service? First, it obviously is not a biblical commandment, and so it is optional. Participation should be a matter of one’s own choice, and no one should be ill-judged for not participating. Likewise, those who engage in the tradition should not be maligned either. Let each one participate in accordance with their conscience before the Almighty. Secondly, we should not be persuaded by the claim of some that the Tashlich ritual is derived from the idolaters. While its historical origins are unknown, there is no clear evidence to prove that it is derived from pagan rituals. Thirdly, the fact that the kabbalists have used the ritual within their gnostic, mystical religion does not render the ritual itself evil. The deceiver makes it his business to take good things and use them for evil. If in so doing he wrests the good from the hands of the righteous, he has won yet another battle.

As for me, I will stand at a body of water on the afternoon of Rosh HaShanah, and having meditated upon the glorious work of my Savior, and the words of Micah 7:19, I will gather some pebbles and throw them into the water, to be forever lost to me, as are my sins from the record book of the Almighty. And I will rejoice that my name is written in the Lamb’s book of life. And I have a sense that many of my brothers and sisters in Yeshua will do the same.