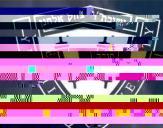


Passover Seder

April 15-16, 2014
College of Arts & Sciences
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WESTERN THOUGHT

Introduction

Irony, suggested Rabbi Norman Lamm in a 1970 sermon delivered at the Jewish Center in Manhattan, may well be the central theme of Passover. Although Purim stands out as the holiday of inversions and twists of fate, Rabbi Lamm directs us to the dramatic climax of the Exodus epic, when the Egyptian army deploys a full-scale military operation to recapture or else vanquish the entire Jewish population. Pharaoh marshalls his mightiest horses, well-wrought chariots, and highly-trained

A Shakespearean Sedition:
Elements of the Exodus in Shakespeare's Henry V

TRAPEDO: Although there is some debate when it comes to dating Shakespeare's plays, most scholars agree that his first commercial successes came in the early 1590s with his works depicting the reign of Henry VI, who lived from 1421 to 1471. Throughout his career, Shakespeare summoned former English kings to flourishing Elizabethan stages, dramatically representing the lives of King John, Richard II, Richard III, and Henrys IV, V, VI, and VIII. The vast majority of these plays about deceased sovereigns either open with the king striding the stage or his courtiers and nobles keeping counsel close by. Right away, the audience is meant to feel as if they have immediate and intimate access to royalty. Henry V, though, is a bit different. Shakespeare makes us wait for it. Instead, the play opens with a conversation between two clerics, the Bishop of Ely and the Archbishop of Canterbury, discussing a proposed bill threatening church revenue.

BISHOP OF CANTERBURY

If it pass against us,
We lose the better half of our possession,
For all the temporal lands which men devout
By testament have given to the Church
Would they strip from us? Thus runs the bill.

BISHOP OF ELY

This would drink deep.

BISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Would he drink the cup and all?

BISHOP OF ELY

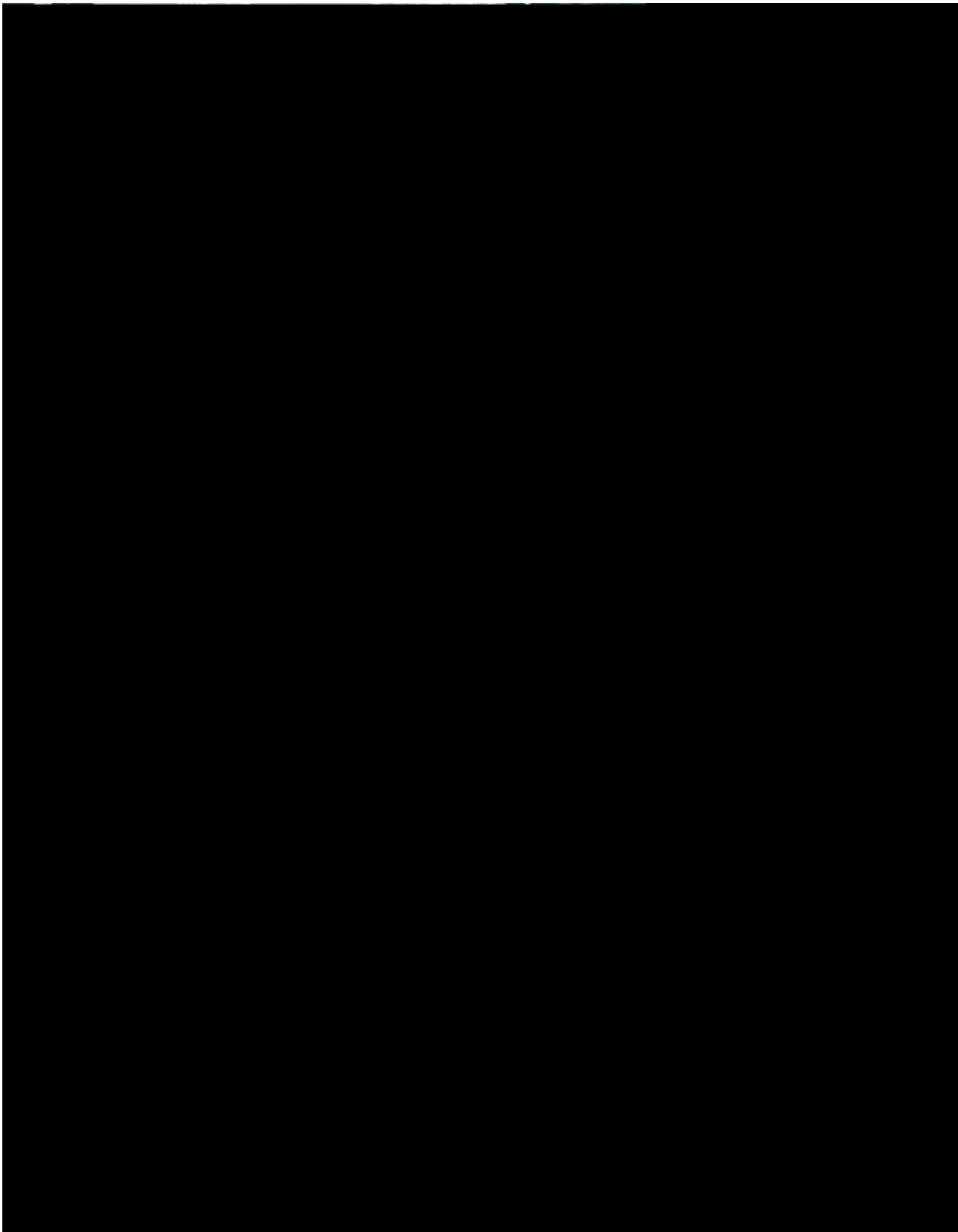
But, my good lord,
How now for mitigation of this bill
Urged by the Commons? Doth his Majesty
Incline to it or no?

BISHOP OF CANTERBURY

He seems indifferent,
Or rather swaying more upon our part

(Act 1, Scene 1)

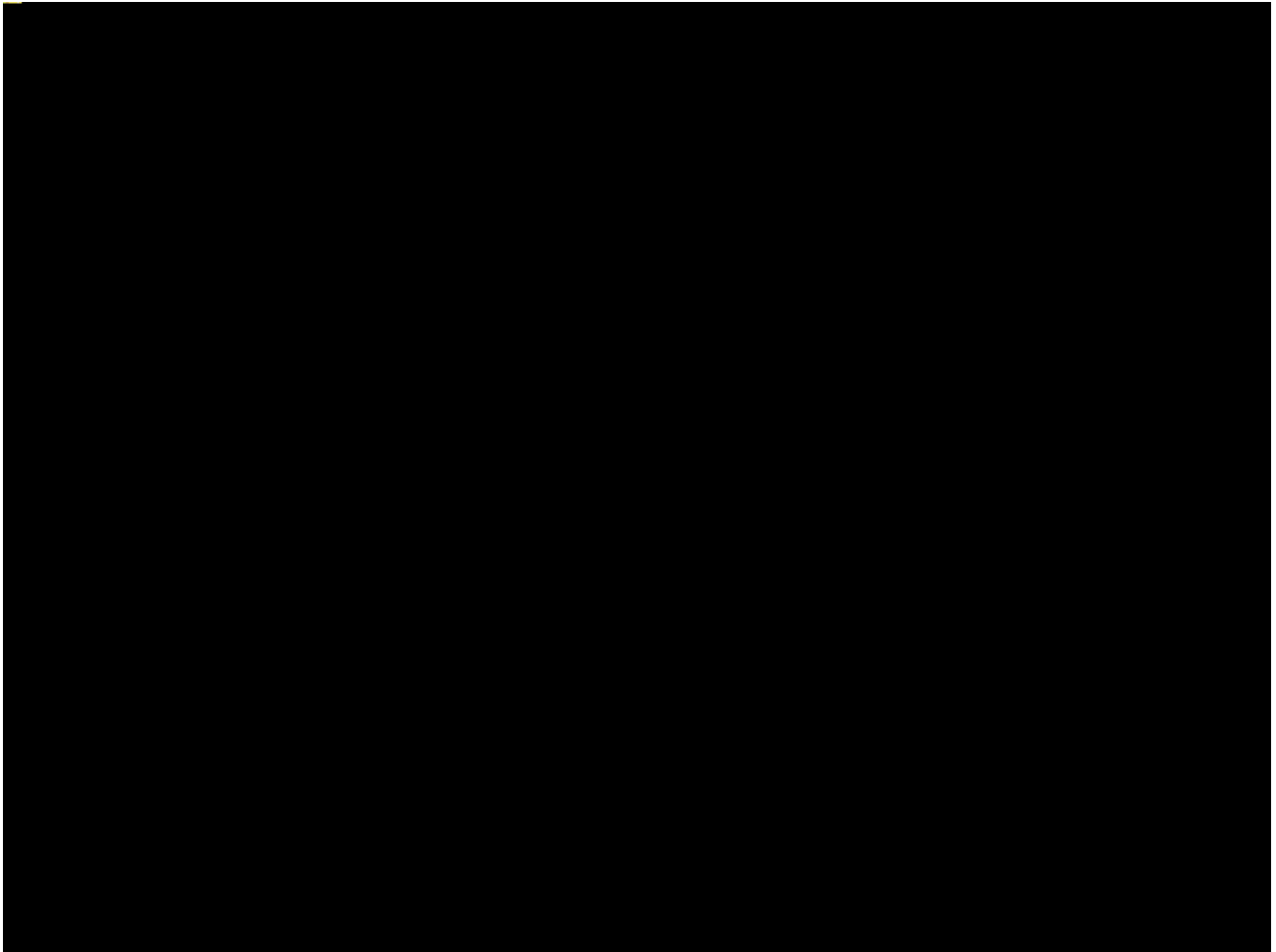
This conversation goes on for the first hundred lines of the play, and it seems like a strange place to start for a drama that, as the Chorus promises, will present "kingdom's princes"



King Henry V

outstrip men, they have no wings to fly from God.
War is His beadle, war is His vengeance, so that here
men are punished for before -breach of the King's
laws in now the King's quarrel. Every subject's duty is
the King's, but every subject's soul is his own

Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay
Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
Toward heaven to pardon blood. And I have built
Two chantries where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon. (Act 4, Scene 1)



The Siege of Jericho

Henry is essentially asking for forgiveness for his father's murder of Richard II. He addresses "God of battles," a distinctly Old Testament phrase, and I think that is very significant that what we're seeing in this play is a notion of God who is fundamentally manifest in the victories of that nation over its enemies. I think Shakespeare sensed a problem with the Christian God as a God of battles, given all this emphasis on peace and forgiveness in Christianity. There's this wonderful

CANTOR: And so indeed, the notion of God and the nation going together, that's what Henry brings about in this play. And this business of "sin upon my head," it's very characteristic of Henry that he's always trying to transfer the sin off his head to somebody else's. He's pretty clever in that way.

In the first act, he gets the archbishop to take the blame for the war on France, essentially first giving the go-ahead and then basically getting him to say that if it goes wrong, blame me. That's very convenient for Henry. In the second act, when Henry discovers that three nobles have been plotting against him, he first asks for advice on how to handle traitors. After they suggest traitors should be killed, Henry says, by the way, you are the traitors, and I'm going to have you executed. And they're stuck. They've just endorsed their own capital sentence. Similarly, Henry V has an extended conversation or struggle with some of the soldiers while he's disguised. Without realizing they are talking to the king, some of them claim that if they die in an unjustly disguised. V43 Tc 0.t'sd6vguised. V43 Tc 0fault.d6vguised. leare

But in plain shock and even play of battle,
Was ever known so great and little loss
On one part and on th' other? Take it, God,
For it is none but thine. (Act 4, Scene 8)

Here Shakespeare echoes Psalms:

For they inherited the land not by their own sword, neither did their own arm
save them, but Thy right hand, and Thine arm because Thou favored them
(Psalms 44:3- 4).

Hebrews gave credit to God over their victory over Pharoah and the Egyptian chariots. In the famous St. Crispin's speech before the battle in Act 4, Henry sets up his own Passover service: he basically says we're going to win this battle, and we're going to celebrate and have a feast, and we're going to talk about it, and you should teach your sons about it.

KING HENRY

Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day: then shall our names
Familiar in his mouth as household words
Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salis

TRAPEDO: All of this is so fascinating, and I'm especially charmed by the idea of a Shakespearean Seder. I agree that many of the lines from Henry's rousing speech to his troops before the epic battle have Exodus overtones. In fact, if we look at Holinshed's Chronicles, one of Shakespeare's historical source texts that he followed closely, the lines in the play that don't appear in the documented accounts of Henry V's speech from October 25, 1415, are the lines that you call our attention to. They sound almost lifted from Exodus. For instance, "And when thy son shall ask thee in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' thou shalt then say unto him, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt'" (Exodus 13:14), which we also read in the Haggadah concerning the Four Sons.

Shakespeare seems to borrow, perhaps, this temporal structure of projecting the past into the future as a means to ensure legacy, heritage, and continuity. In his commentary on this portion of Exodus, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, considers the rhetorical potential of the moment when Moses addresses the Israelites for the first time after they've been freed from two centuries of exile, slavery, and oppression. He notes that Moses had a few thematic options for this momentous occasion. He could have focused on the value of freedom, as Abraham Lincoln did in the Gettysburg Address. Moses could have pivoted to the new bliss in the land of milvre (l (r)c)2 (J)he J

Machiavelli as well. Machiavelli was fascinated by the story of Moses and ranked him up there with the great founders like Cyrus and Romulus; he found a kind of Machiavellian meaning in the story of Moses, who took these enslaved people out into a desert for 40 years to shape them up into a people who could maintain their independence, and that meant becoming an army too. And by invoking Moses in the background of Henry V

1 / % . * &: Thank you so much. This has been unbelievably enlightening, and this emphasis on coming back, reading again, and again, and the power that yields, is so important for us and for our listeners.

CANTOR: Well, you know, it's interesting that in many ways the best impulses of Shakespeare critics are Talmudic. They are learning to read a text, to consider arguments about the text, to go back and forth on reading the text. I don't think it's an accident that many of the great Shakespeare scholars have been Jewish. In that sense, there is, I think, a very interesting connection between studying Shakespeare and studying the Bible. And I like to think, in that sense, I was brought up to read Shakespeare. It didn't hurt that my mother had the same birthday as Shakespeare, April 23.