

Leopold Bloom and Hope

A Profane and Profound Messiah

By Ehud Neor

[This is one entry in a series of posts positing a Jewish skeleton key for Ulysses. To see all the entries, go to: <https://www.pisgahsite.com/p/ulysses>]



Sketch of Bloom by James Joyce

The fifteenth blessing in the Amidah prayer is a petition for the hastening of the arrival of the Messiah. The fifteenth chapter of Ulysses, Circe, is a hallucinogenic literary whirlwind that takes place in a brothel, and it is there, in the most unlikely of locations, that Joyce chose to introduce the Messiah Bloom. The sacred is profaned, but not for the sake of profanity, rather, for the sake of introducing a new sacrament, one

based not on a blind subservience to a received tradition, rather based on the establishment of the Holy as life-as-it-is. This is not Joyce suggesting a new, agnostic, or humanistic belief in the stead of organized religion, rather, it is Joyce presenting a new literary artifact that posits a profound vision of human life in a way that was as true as he could make it, and in a way that is seen superficially as

prurient and base, but with the proper detachment can only be seen as a love letter to the Creation. This is the stuff of Ulysses and on this is based the book's claim on the intelligent reader's attention.

As the abstract structure and content of "Circe" demands close attention, so does the interesting fact that the fifteenth blessing of the Amida does not mention the Messiah directly (meaning, it does not use the word Messiah). Instead, it uses the phrase "the sprout of David":

"Speedily cause the sprout of David, Your servant, to flourish and exalt his power with Your deliverance. We hope all day for Your deliverance. Blessed are You, Adonoy, Who causes the power of salvation to sprout." [[Source](#)]

This follows the Jewish tradition that the Messiah will be of Davidic descent (a tradition adopted by Christians too.) The source of the word "sprout" or "branch" (Zemah in Hebrew) as a term for the Messiah is [Zecharia 6:12](#)

"and speak to him, saying, Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying, Behold a man whose name is Zemah, and who shall grow up out of his place; and he shall build the temple of the Lord:"

The appearance of Ish Zemach in Zecharia and the identification with the Jewish Messiah and Bloom, was dealt with in another essay: [Leopold Bloom, Jew or Not](#)

In this essay, the focus will be on another seminal Hebrew root that appears in the fifteenth blessing of the Amida.

In the chapter of Ulysses that introduces him, Bloom reads a prospectus dealing with the reclamation of tracts of the Holy Land. In his mind he sees a situation of modest "redemption" in Palestine, where there are "[Crates lined up on the quayside](#) at Jaffa, chap ticking them off in a book, navies handling them in soiled dungarees." The vision is

unsustainable:

No, not like that. A barren land, bare waste. Volcanic lake, the dead sea: no fish, weedless, sunk deep in the earth. No wind could lift those waves, grey metal, poisonous foggy waters. Brimstone they called it raining down: the cities of the plain: Sodom, Gomorrah, Edom. All dead names. A dead sea in a dead land, grey and old. Old now. It bore the oldest, the first race.

But yet, but yet. Though Bloom rejects the larger vision of the Zionist enterprise, he immediately incorporates its basic tenants in his own life: “Reclaim the whole place. Grow peas in that corner there.” Is a drama of exile and return part of Bloom’s appearance in Ulysses? Ellman reports that in a letter to Linati accompanying a copy of the schematic plan for Ulysses, Joyce wrote by way of generalization that his book is not only representative of “the cycle of the human body” but also “an epic of two races (Israelite-Irish)”.¹ That the cycle of the human body, in terms of ingestion-digestion-excretion, is indicative of Joyce’s redefinition of sacred and profane and an echo of exile and return can be deduced from his labeling of these actions as “intestinal congestion and premeditative defecation (holy of holies).” Or not. Can the Virag-Bloom-Zemach nexus, though strengthened by the fifteenth chapter-fifteenth blessing correspondence, really suggest that Joyce wants to present to the reader an archetypal pattern for redemption based on a Jewish precedent? The answer can be a qualified yes, though as with anything Joycean, answers breed new questions.

In Jewish tradition the concept of Holy of Holies has both a temporal and spatial element. The term refers to the innermost chamber of the Holy Temple, a place so holy and so close to the Creator that it was entered only one time during the year, by one person alone—the High Priest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It also refers to a specific animal sacrifice that

was offered every day. Joyce would have known that among the signs of the final redemption according to Jewish tradition are the rebuilding of the Temple and the renewal of the Temple service of animal sacrifice, along with the appearance of the Messiah. He would have also known of the seismic shift in Jewish theology coming on the heels of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, when Jewish prayer began to serve as a replacement for the Temple service, an intellectual and spiritual feat that many believe ensured the continued existence of the Jewish people. And once again, Joyce seemingly puts his stamp of disapproval on Zionist nationalism by having the Zionist pork butcher Dlugacz wrap his non-kosher purchase with the very prospectus that called for a Jewish return to Zion. Ironically, it was just this type of Jew, estranged from Jewish tradition, which provided the brawn and political will to achieve a Jewish return to Zion.

Did Joyce see Zionism as a Jewish renewal that did not include—could not include—Jewish clericalism? Did this Jewish renewal necessitate a refutation of the God of Israel and all of two thousand years of faithful Jewish history until the age of socialism? As always with Ulysses, the questions multiply.

The central question for one examining Jewish history and the Jews is simple: what sustains them? Looking through the years at their faithfulness to their beliefs in the face of unimaginable torture, one may suggest a simple stubbornness. Even if the observer would grant that the Jew's stubbornness is based on actual belief in their God, he would immediately raise the honest question: "until what point?" Having witnessed endless wandering, persecution, an entire people funneled into ovens, the question becomes: "until what point?" The answer to this question begs to be expressed of itself no less than the question itself begs this. There is no end point. The Jews will always be.

What has sustained the Jews and what sustains them today is hope. In the past (and in the present for traditional

observant Jews), that has been hope for the appearance of the Messiah and the redemption of the Jews. If one were a Zionist pork butcher, that hope would be focused on a national home, a safe haven for the Jews. "We hope all day for your deliverance." No matter what. Year after year. Joyce could see in his real-life Jewish Zionist friend in Trieste, Dlugacz, that even one steeped in Jewish tradition (Dlugacz was ordained as a Rabbi at a young age), though repudiating the tradition, cannot repudiate hope. This is a Jewish trait that can be universalized and as such would be of interest to Joyce. Bloom himself begins chanting to Stephen the Zionist anthem, "The Hope"

[What anthem](#) did Bloom chant partially in anticipation of that multiple, ethnically irreducible consummation?

*Kolod balejwaw pnimah
Nefesch, jehudi, homijah.*

Those who set themselves against that hope, as we have seen in the twelfth blessing of the Amidah and the twelfth chapter of Ulysses, are to be denied that same hope:



If it is hope that has sustained the Jews, it is hope that can sustain mankind. Here is the messianic message distilled from the Jewish sources: Always, forever, hope.