

Date: 22 Nisan 5786 (April 9, 2026)

Torah Portion: Sh'mini

Topic: The Three Watches of the Night, Part 2

As previously mentioned, night represents the darkness of exile—*hester panim* (הסתר פנים), the concealment of the Divine Presence. The Sages teach that this night is divided into watches, each marked by a distinct sound, each revealing a different dimension of galut (גלות, exile).

In the first watch of the night, the braying of the donkey (*chamor*, חמור) is heard. This sound signifies the heavy yoke imposed upon Yisrael during periods of subjugation. The donkey, whose very name alludes to *chomer* (חומר, materiality), represents existence reduced to burden and utility. Under foreign dominion, Yisrael became like a beast of burden—taxed, exploited, and drained of strength. Empires extracted wealth, labor, and dignity, imposing *mas* (מס, forced labor) and crushing decrees. In this stage, exile is primarily physical: הגוף (*ha.guf*; the body) is oppressed, and האדם (*ha.a.dam*) is reduced to survival. As expressed in the lament of the prophets, “They have placed a yoke upon my neck” (cf. Lamentations 1:14). The braying of the donkey thus echoes the קול של עול (*kol shel ol*, “the voice of the yoke”)—the cry of a people bent under imposed servitude.

In the second watch of the night, the howling of dogs (*klavim*, כלבים) is heard. This corresponds to a deeper and more terrifying dimension of exile. The Gemara (Bava Kamma 60b) teaches: “If dogs are howling, the Angel of Death (*malach ha-mavet*, מלאך המוות) has entered the city.” Here the suffering of Yisrael intensifies from economic oppression to existential threat. This stage reflects eras of persecution, martyrdom, and religious coercion—times when Yisrael was not merely burdened but targeted for destruction.

The Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel) sharpens this distinction by contrasting the Greek exile with that of Edom. The Greeks sought to sever Yisrael from YHWH by outlawing Torah, Shabbat, and covenantal practices. Their decrees were ideological; executions were a means to enforce assimilation. By contrast, Edom’s hostility penetrates deeper. Its aim is not merely to alter behavior but to eradicate existence. The decrees themselves often function as pretexts, anticipating disobedience in order to justify destruction. Thus, under Edom, persecution becomes absolute: not only הגוף (*ha.guf*; the body), but גם הנפש (*gam ha.ne.fesh*; the soul), and even the very identity of Yisrael are placed under assault.

This stage finds expression in the history of pogroms, expulsions, and burnings—moments when Yisrael sanctified the Divine Name through *mesirut nefesh* (מסירות נפש, self-sacrifice). It is the קול של סכנה (*kol shel sakanah*, “the voice of danger”), the cry of mortality itself echoing in the night.

Yet in the final watch of the night, the Gemara presents a strikingly different image: a child suckles, and a woman speaks with her husband. Here the symbolism shifts from destruction to continuity.

The relationship between Yisrael and the nations is likened by the prophets to that of a woman and her husband, as it is written: “O YHWH our Elohim, other lords besides You have ruled over us” (Isa. 26:13). When a husband becomes displeased, he sends his wife away; so too Yisrael has been driven into exile—banished, displaced, and scattered among the nations. From the destruction of the First Temple to the expulsions of Spain and beyond, exile has often taken the form of forced separation, of being cast out from place to place.

At the same time, the image of the suckling infant points to another dimension: the gradual weakening of Torah knowledge during prolonged exile. The upheavals of centuries—displacement, persecution, and instability—have diminished the capacity for sustained Torah transmission. The scholars of Yisrael, once rooted in centers of learning, became like infants dependent upon earlier generations. Just as a nursing child (*yonek*, יונק) draws sustenance entirely from its mother, so later תלמידי חכמים (*tal.mi.dei cha.cha.mim*) rely upon the teachings of earlier luminaries, drawing from the wellsprings of the past rather than generating חדשים (*chi.du.shim*, new insights) with the same breadth.

Yet this image is not solely one of decline—it is also one of survival. A nursing child lives. A couple speaking maintains relationship. Even in exile, Torah is not extinguished; it is transmitted, preserved, whispered from generation to generation. This is the קול של חיים (*kol shel chayim*, “the voice of life”)—quiet, fragile, yet enduring.

Thus, the three watches of the night portray a progression of exile:

servitude (*avdut*, עבדות),

danger and death (*sakanah u-mavet*, סכנה ומוות),

and finally displacement and diminishment—yet with continuity.

Servitude, death, religious coercion, expulsions, and the erosion of Torah knowledge—these are the tribulations Yisrael has endured, cast into the depths of the *galut* (exile) night. Helpless before the braying of the donkey and the howling of dogs, Yisrael persists through the final watch, sustained by קשר (*kesher*, connection), by תורה (Torah), and by the enduring imprint of the *tzelem Elokim* (בצלם אלוהים).

And yet, the tradition insists that night is never eternal. As recited in the morning blessings:

“Ha-me’ir la’arets v’la-darim ברחמים עליה”

(המאיר לארץ ולדרים עליה ברחמים)

“Who illuminates the earth and its inhabitants with mercy.”

The night of exile will ultimately give way to dawn—the אור חדש על ציון (or *chadash al Tzion*, “a new light upon Zion”).

Shalom.