Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer

This week’s column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Study of Ritual—Study as Ritual

We do not study Torah primarily to find out what God wants us to do, and we certainly do not study our sacred texts to learn history or medicine. The act of Talmud Torah, the studying of Torah, is itself a mitzvah, a command. As with many commandments (eating matzah, putting on tefillin, etc), there is a berakhah, a blessing, that precedes the act. In Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals, and Weekdays (4), we find three linked blessings about Torah. The third of these is the familiar blessing recited by those called for an aliyah to the public reading of the Torah. The first of the series is in the normal formula, “Asher kid’shanu bemitzvotav, vetzivanu . . . ” (God has made us holy with commandments, and has commanded us . . . ); but the conclusion that we might expect (“ . . . to study Torah”) is absent; instead, we find the expression “ . . . la’asok bedivrei Torah” (“ . . . to occupy ourselves with matters of Torah”). The Hebrew verb is precisely the verb used for describing the way in which we earn a living in the world, our professions and crafts. This blessing invites us to see engagement with Torah as a profession, a craft, no less than anything else that occupies our lives.

The second of the three blessings (“Ve-ha’arev na”) begins with an unusual request; usually blessings of petition ask for things that can be touched and observed, such as successful harvests, good health, peace in the world, etc. This blessing ends with praising God as “the One Who teaches Torah to the People Israel,” but it begins with an experiential request. It does not ask that we should all be “A” students, mastering a full page of Talmud each day—and a couple of irregular verbs a well. It asks, instead, that we find the words of Torah to be “lovely in our mouths and in the mouths of our children.” We do not pray for successful learning, we pray for delightful learning.

This blessing lasts all day; we do not generally need to say the blessings again each time we turn to study Torah. The blessing is followed by a ritualized act of study (5) as we read the words of the Priestly Blessing from the book of Numbers and a short passage from the Mishnah and Gemara, affirming the radical view that rabbinic texts are Torah no less than words from the Five Books of the Written Torah. Even if we know these excerpts by heart, they are still repeated each day. The growing familiarity with these short passages engages us in a ritual of study; reflecting on these texts and on the words of the siddur guides us on the journey from ritual study to study as ritual. (Next week we will look at the more extensive selections on sacrifice, hermeneutics, and righteous deeds.)

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

Parashah Commentary

This week’s commentary was written by Professor Arnold M. Eisen, chancellor, JTS.

Jacob’s Fear

The Torah wants us to identify with the ancestors we meet in the book of Genesis; indeed, Abraham and Sarah and their children become our ancestors when we agree not only to read their stories, but to take them forward. Abraham “begat” Isaac in one sense by supplying the seed for his conception. He “begat” him as well by shaping the life that Isaac would live, setting its direction, digging wells that his son would re-dig, making Isaac’s story infinitely more meaningful—and terrifying—by placing him in the line of partners with God in Covenant. So it is with us. Nowhere is this impact of the ancestors more obvious than in the case of Jacob, who in this week’s parashah receives the name by which we heirs to the Covenant call ourselves to this day: Israel. The ancestors are us, if we accept the Torah’s invitation to make them so. We are them: the latest chapter in the story that they lived and bequeathed to us, and which we have chosen to live and bequeath to others.

Jacob is a particularly compelling ancestor for contemporary Jews because he is so very human. Just think of the words that come readily to mind as descriptions of his character: heel, trickster, schemer, cheat. The man exhibits courage from time to time. He can be noble, loving, wise. We

I don’t know about you, but I treasure Jacob’s very human response to God’s promise, at once an example of the very best of which we mortals are capable and of behavior that is transparently limited and self-serving. You do all this for me, Jacob tells God—you bring me home in one piece, you feed me and protect me—and I (who owe my very life to you!) will give back 10 percent and have you be my God! By normal human standards, the tithe seems generous, as indeed it is. By God’s standards and the Torah’s, however, given that we owe absolutely everything to God and own absolutely nothing, the offer looks quite different. The description given of Jacob at the start of this week’s portion is precious to me for the very same reason. The man who has just bested Laban with God’s help; who has escaped from Laban’s clutches with both his wives and all his children; who carries with him the promise that God will protect him as he now heads home and preparers to encounter the brother whom he wronged so grievously many years ago—this man Jacob, the Torah tells us (32:8), “was very afraid and distressed.”
A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Seeing the Image of God

After a 20-year absence from home and family back in the Land of Israel, Jacob journeys home. And like any of us en route to the home of our family of origin, anxiety and uncertainty (along with anticipation and joy) play core roles in the experience. To what extent will “old patterns” of sibling rivalry and other family tensions repeat themselves? Will we be able to break free of past hurt to move toward a more hopeful and joyful future? Such is the mindset of our patriarch Jacob as he heads back home, on the verge of encountering his brother, Esau—the same brother from whom he stole the blessing, the same brother that clearly had murderous designs against him for the deep pain inflicted. There is an elaborate and delicate dance that unfolds as Jacob approaches Esau: he sends messengers ahead, utters a prayer to God, divides his family into two camps (lest one half be destroyed so there will be a remnant), and like any wise supplicant, he offers gifts. Notably, Jacob instructs his servants, “And you will add, ‘And your servant Jacob himself is right behind us.’” The verse goes on, “For Jacob reasoned, “If I propitiate him with presents in advance, then face him, perhaps he will show me favor” (Gen. 32:21). The Hebrew root connected to the word for “face” repeats itself four times in this verse. What is the implicit message of the text?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

As panim, from p-n-h “to turn,” to take one’s direction towards somewhere, really means in general, the trend, the direction, that somebody is about to take towards an object, and only from that the conception of panim (face) originates—as being that part of the body in whose position, movement and glance is expressed . Here it means, “perhaps he will raise up my face which is now downcast. Let me look in the face again.” (Commentary on the Torah: Genesis, 502)

Faces reveal and conceal; faces invite closeness and suggest distance. It is much easier for Jacob to fix his countenance away from his brother, Esau. To do so is to ignore the other person—albeit not freeing one’s self from responsibility to the other. Jacob’s great challenge at this moment is about looking his estranged brother in the eye and realizing the burden and pain of the past. And to do this, Jacob must turn—precisely as Rabbi Samson Raphael suggests. His face must literally change its orientation at this moment. By doing so, his posture (both physical and emotional), will be transformed. Evidence of the import of this message is found immediately after Jacob’s encounter with his brother. Jacob urges Esau to accept his gift and movingly, powerfully declares, “For to see your face is like seeing the Face of God, and you have received me favorably” (Gen. 33:10). The Hebrew root for “face,” once again, repeats itself. And having wrestled with humans and divine beings, Jacob is now capable of shifting orientation.

This “face-to-face” encounter between Jacob and Esau is not only about reconciliation between brothers and becoming “Israel”—it is about seeing the image of God in an estranged loved one and moving a step closer toward peace.

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The Rabbis are both incredulous and understanding: incredulous that God’s chosen vessel for the Covenant should fear his brother at this moment despite God’s promise of protection; understanding of that fear because, as one particularly astute midrash points out (Genesis Rabba 76:1), fear comes naturally to human beings. Moses too is afraid, as he prepares to fight Og, king of Bashan (Num. 21:34), even though he bears a promise of divine protection and has just defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, as Jacob had just defeated Laban. The ancestors, like us, are mortals. They too have a lot to lose. Indeed, their encounters with “the living God,” far from immunizing them against fear, only make them treasure life all the more and so give them more to fear. Picking up on both words used to mean “fear” in this verse, Rashi (on Genesis 32:8) adds another layer of explanation: Jacob feared that he might be killed and was distressed that he might kill others (or, I would say, be responsible for their deaths). Jacob has been guilty of great wrongs in the course of his life. He desperately wants to be in the right from now on. He knows from experience that fear and vulnerability sometimes lead us to compromise of virtue. Put another way, Jacob wants to maximize the part of him that is Israel and minimize the part that is Jacob. Fear takes him in the opposite direction. He does not want to go there.

The Torah knows that its readers have much to fear and ample reason to fear it. We walk the streets, going about our daily business, as if we feared nothing, but that is often not the case. There are moments when adrenaline and courage rise to meet an imminent challenge—as when Jacob confronts Esau in this week’s parashah—and there are moments of quiet trepidation: a visit to the doctor, for example, or a conference in the principal’s office about a troubled child, or an interview that will determine if we get the job, the security that it entails, and the self-respect with which it is bound up.

I asked a JTS rabbinical student who teaches teenagers to ask them what they most fear. “Letting people down,” said one. “I feel like I have a lot of stress nowadays and I have a lot of people I NEED to make proud.” Such fear of failure is widespread among teens. The college application process is a time of particular anxiety. Love sometimes seems conditional on achievement: fail to be the person your parents and your friends want you to be, and perhaps they won’t love you as much or will not love you at all. (God’s “chosen people” have had this problem from time to time; aggravated by prophets who warned Israel that God was not pleased with them and by disasters that seemed to be proof of that displeasure.) One 20-something, when asked what that age-group fears, said this: “What are we not afraid of is probably a better question. I personally am afraid that I am not on the right path or that I don’t know what the right path is. I’m afraid that I’m not enjoying what I’m doing. I’m not afraid of what other people think about me, but I’m afraid that I’m not on the right path. I’m afraid that I’m not happy.” And then there are the times when those sorts of fears vanish, or seem small, in the face of immediate threats to health or life itself. We all learn to live with fear, if we are lucky. We cross the river, as Jacob does. We throw ourselves into life, which surrounds and contains fear with joy and blessing. We are filled with gratitude for what we most fear to lose.

I could not help but think as I read Jacob’s story this year that American Jewry is once more engaged by the specter of its own diminishment and disappearance. Jacob feared the death of his family—the Covenant family—at the hands of a vengeful brother. We worry that the story might soon find its place in “Bible as Literature” courses, but not be translated into the stuff of life, ethics, law, and policy. I think that Jacob’s great challenge at this moment is about looking his estranged brother in the eye and realizing the burden and pain of the past. And to do this, Jacob must turn—precisely as Rabbi Samson Raphael suggests. His face must literally change its orientation at this moment. By doing so, his posture (both physical and emotional), will be transformed. Evidence of the import of this message is found immediately after Jacob’s encounter with his brother. Jacob urges Esau to accept his gift and movingly, powerfully declares, “For to see your face is like seeing the Face of God, and you have received me favorably” (Gen. 33:10). The Hebrew root for “face,” once again, repeats itself. And having wrestled with humans and divine beings, Jacob is now capable of shifting orientation.

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