Service of the Heart (שבודת לב): Exploring Prayer
This week’s column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Actions Speak Louder with Words

“Hareini muhan umezuman . . . I am ready to perform the mitzvah of dwelling in the Sukkah as instructed by my Divine Creator: ‘In Sukkot shall you dwell for seven days . . . ’” (Siddur Sim Shalom, 330)

With these words many of us enter the sukkah that we build in our homes, schools, and other centers of Jewish life. This formula, “Hareini/Hineni muhan umezuman . . . I am prepared and ready . . . ,” may be familiar from the Pesah seder (or elsewhere), where it is often recited before each of the four cups of wine.

These words invite us to consider an interesting and ancient problem concerning rituals: how do we ensure the “sincerity” of our acts? How do we find meaning in the (sometimes strange) actions required of us by Jewish teaching, by the Torah, and ultimately by God? Is it not, from some objective stance, just a little strange to eat meals, even sleep, for seven days in a fragile hut, and to wave four species (palm, myrtle, willow, and etrog) in the middle of the synagogue?

By reciting a berakhah (blessing), before these acts, we affirm that we do these things because “God has made us holy with Mitzvot and commanded us to . . . ” It is the recitation of this liturgical text, the berakhah, that in some way “changes” or elevates simple acts into sacred ones, ones through which we fulfill an obligation to God and link ourselves to the covenantal community of the Jewish People.

There are so many occasions upon which we recite blessings that inevitably the blessing itself can become “stale” and lose some meaning and significance. So the custom arose to add these kavanot (intentions) as a mental/spiritual guide prior to saying the blessing, to remind us of what we are about to do and why we do it. Among the medieval Kabbalists, some of these kavanot were extremely arcane, inviting the advanced practitioner to carry our sophisticated visualizations of the Hebrew letters of divine names and “higher realms.” In reaction to these increasingly obscure practices, simpler kavanot were introduced in Hasidic and other circles, and are now increasingly found in the liturgies of the Conservative and Reform movements, and in other creative circles.

We hope that these printed kavanot—along with more spontaneous words of teaching and introduction sometimes offered by rabbis, cantors, and teachers—deepen the meaning and spiritual significance of the acts around which our Jewish lives are built so that in these cases it could be said that “actions speak louder with words.”

Hag sameah to all. As always, comments and reflections are welcome: I can be reached at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

Parashah Commentary

This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, Vice Chancellor and Director of Community Engagement, JTS.

Every morning when I daven Shaharit—the morning service—in my home office, I face a picture that my father took from the vantage point of Har Nabo—the peak on which God took Moshe’s life, and where he was gathered to his ancestors. It looks into Israel and toward Jerusalem or, as Parashat Ha·azinu describes the scene, “Ascend these heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab facing Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving the Israelites as their holding . . . . You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it—the land that I am giving to the Israelite people” (32:49, 52).

The scene is simply heartbreaking. After years of dedicated service, Moses knows he is not to take the final steps into Israel with his People. He is not to cross the Jordan River and conclude the Exodus from Egypt with this generation of the Children of Israel. We cannot begin to fathom the extent of emotion that must have rushed through Moses as he faced the reality that he was not to enter the Land, but “die on the mountain” that he was about to ascend. What words were exchanged between Moses and God? What conversation is not recorded in the Torah? One of the most moving midrashim I encountered during rabbinical school was taught to me by my rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Alan Kensky. The commentary known as Midrash Petirat Moshe—the Death of Moses—adds pages upon pages of dialogue, debate, argument, and reason between Moses and God. It fills in the gaps in the narrative and, as Rabbi Kensky taught us, describes a scene that remarkably parallels the five stages of grief that Elisabeth Kubler Ross has enumerated for those coming face-to-face with the reality of death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Notwithstanding the intense emotional scene, Moshe is composed, and delivers one of the most compelling sermons of his career as the leader of the Children of Israel.
Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;  
Let the earth hear the words I utter!  
May my discourse come down as the rain,  
My speech distill as the dew,  
Like showers on young growth,  
Like droplets on the grass.  
For the name of the Lord, I proclaim:  
Give glory to our God! (Deut. 32:1–3)

The Hatam Sofer, commenting on the opening lines of our parashah, understands that Moses’s address to both the heavens and the earth shows us that the entire community stood as a collective unit. He says that Moses’s last words to the Children of Israel are not solely for those who encounter God in the realm of the spirit, but those who relate to God in the here and now as well. Of everything Moses has accomplished in his life, to be able to speak to the entire community after these wearing years of wandering—and to speak to them not as a tribe, faction, rebellion, or insurgency, but as a People—places him in a unique class of leaders. Indeed, there are times that the multiplicities of voices that often find it difficult to talk to one another cannot allow a single message of hope, of fear, of promise, or even of blessing to be heard.

As the Children of Israel stood huddled at the base of Har Nebo, listening to the last words they—or anyone—would ever hear from Moses, they had no notion of what they were to encounter as they emerged from the waters of the Jordan.

We can imagine the scene, and the emotional current is all too overwhelming. Standing today, seemingly as we do, on the precipice of history, the anticipation and fear are analogous. The political rhetoric weaves through the pages of our newspapers, and tugs at our hearts as we hear reports of red lines and ultimatums through every pundit outlet.

But we do not stand as the Children of Israel did on the banks of the Jordan as one. We are not the unified People Moshe addressed as he faced their future and his death. That is not to say that debate and discussion, disagreement and dissent are not welcome in the Jewish community. I firmly believe that Judaism encourages multiple points of view, and that Zionism is characterized by an equally disparate array of definitions. Those categorized as left and right both fervently believe in hatikvah bat sh’not alpayim—the hope of 2,000 years that lives and breathes in the modern State of Israel.

But what our generation of the Children of Israel suffers from right now is an inability to see itself as one People. Unfortunately, we mimic the broken American political discourse—if you can call it that—villify our brothers and sisters on the left and the right, and come dangerously close to the sinhat hinam (baseless hatred) that has wrought destruction on Peoplehood before. Now is a time when we must come to an understanding that, although we may not always agree on the actions of government—Israeli or international—or the policies of State, together our souls yearn deeply in our hearts and our eyes turn east, looking toward Zion.

That picture in my home office reminds me each morning that there was a time when we once stood as one People and gazed with hope and trepidation toward our future. At this time, at this moment, each of us needs to believe that od lo avdah tikvateinu—hope has not yet been lost.

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A Taste of Torah  
A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

As we near the final chapter of Moses’s life, Torah showcases a poetic masterpiece. Parashat Ha-azinu allows us to savor the final song of the leader responsible for guiding the nation toward freedom and on to the borders of the Promised Land. Strikingly, Moses calls upon the Israelites to turn to their past: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you” (Deut. 32:7). Why does Moses urge the Israelites to recall the past? What do the “days of old” hold for a nation on the verge of entering the Land of Israel?

Moses’s wish for the Israelites may be understood by viewing his poem against the illuminating background of the Jewish calendar. It is especially fitting as we journey through the season of repentance and commemorate Yom Kippur this week. One of the central themes of these High Holy Days is the notion of memory and remembrance. A whole section of the Musaf service on Rosh Hashanah is devoted to the theme of zikronot, our desire that God remember us and that God remember the merits of our ancestors. Not only that, in the Yom Kippur Musaf we devote a portion of our meditations to the liturgical section known as Eleh Ezkerah (These I Will Remember). As a People standing together on Yom Kippur, we recall some of the most difficult moments of our national history: exile from our homeland, Hadrianan persecution, blood libels of the Middle Ages, and the Holocaust. Set against this background of the Yamim Nora’im, the Days of Awe, Moses’s poetic plea at the end of his life is striking.

Far from employing memory as means of vengeance, the memory that Moses desires is one that will create a “nation of priests and a holy people.” Rememberance and memory are vital toward building a more hopeful future. Often it is the most painful of memories that serve as the fertile ground for repairing a broken world. Out of the pain of slavery from which the Israelites emerged and the bleak chapters of Jewish history alluded to in Eleh Ezkerah, we seek to create an alternative reality for the Jewish people. We ask that God remember us for life, and that we, taking our cue from God, remember that our desires is one that will create a “nation of priests and a holy people.”

Programs, JTS

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