

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS

Torah—Vision Beyond the Text (Part 2)

Let us continue exploring, in these weeks before Shavu'ot, the metaphors of Torah in our liturgy. In the blessing immediately before the Shema' in the morning service, we say "give light to our eyes through Your Torah" (*ha'er eyneynu beToratekha*) [*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 111], drawing upon the metaphor from the book of Proverbs that "Torah is light" (6:23). This connection of Torah (teaching) and light draws on a theme—common to many religions—that labels the attainment of ultimate understanding or a close or profound encounter with the Divine as "enlightenment."

This blessing, deeply connected with Torah, speaks much of love, opening with the words "*Ahavah rabah ahavtanu*" (With great love have You loved us) and offering a reversal of the biblical text of the Shema'. In the Shema', we are commanded to love God, but in this blessing we affirm that God has loved us, and that the great sign of that love is the Torah. Understood in this way, the Torah is not simply a code of legislation and values, nor even a gathering of teachings and source of wisdom. Torah becomes the very embodiment of the passionate connection between God and the Jewish People. This connection is taken even further in the Zohar (*Va-yikra*, 73): "*Kudsha Brich Hu, Orayta, VeYisrael-Had Hu!*" (the Blessed Holy One, the People of Israel and Torah are one!).

In the Talmud (BT Berakhot 17a), the simple biblical assertion that Torah is light becomes a central part of the beautiful and increasingly famous blessing offered by his students to Rabbi Ami when they left him: "May you see your world fulfilled in your lifetime . . . may your mind perceive wisdom . . . may you speak words of wisdom . . . and may your eyes shine with the light of Torah." This blessing, often offered to young people at b'nai mitzvah and to rabbinical and cantorial students at ordination or investiture, has been set to beautiful melodies.

The traditional text of the Prayer for the State of Israel (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 149) uses the phrase "send Your light . . . to its leaders and officials" almost certainly invoking Torah as a guide for the State through this invocation of "God's light"—in other words, Torah.

We find Torah in liturgy and ritual as the source of blessings, the pathway of love and source of guidance for leaders of nations . . . as well as for each of us. May (all) our eyes shine.

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

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Bemidbar

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Rabbinic Fellow and Director of Planned Giving, JTS.

How Do You Measure A Year?

"Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes. How do you measure, measure a year?"

The question asked in the chorus of "Seasons of Love," made ever more poignant by the tragic death of its composer-lyricist, Jonathan D. Larson, just months before *Rent* opened on Broadway in 1996, has been rattling lately in my mind. After all, we are doing an awful lot of counting this week: we count the final days of the Omer, and, as our parashah begins, take the census of the Israelite community. What does all of this counting have to do with the ways in which we measure what really matters?

First, the counting of the Omer, which culminates in Shavu'ot next week, is deceptively simple. All you have to do is count every night, increasing the count by one each day, and at the end you'll have reached Shavu'ot—a seemingly mundane mitzvah, the blessing over which is nothing more than praising God for the command to count. And yet it is for many one of the most difficult mitzvot to keep. Who among us remembers to count it without fail every night? Somehow not a year goes by without a slip-up. It turns out that counting days is not so easy after all.

One of the many differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Second Temple-era rivals, had to do with this counting. The Pharisees observed Shavu'ot on the 15th day after the first day of Passover (as we, their halakhic heirs, do as well). The Sadducees, on the other hand, celebrated Shavu'ot on the seventh Sunday after Passover. Their disagreement had nothing to do with how many days to count—that much was made clear in Leviticus 23:16, which instructs us to count seven weeks, the day after which would be day 50, Shavu'ot. According to Louis Finkelstein (z"l), JTS chancellor from 1940 to 1972, the disagreement had to do with when the counting began (*The Pharisees: The Sociological Background of Their Faith*, vol. 1, 115, as cited in Birnbaum, *The Shavuot Anthology*, 135).

"And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks," instructs Leviticus

(23:15). It is a seemingly clear instruction. But what does “the sabbath” here really mean? Does it refer to the first day of Passover or to the first Shabbat after that holiday? When, in other words, are you supposed to start counting? The abstract intellectual argument over linguistics became one of the more practical differences separating the two communities as they lived out their interpretations. Counting—knowing when to start, and how long to keep it going—matters a great deal.

This brings us to the second kind of counting we are doing this week. What is the point of God’s instructing Moses to take a census at the outset of the Israelites’ wanderings? Having been given the laws at Sinai in Exodus, with further instructions in Leviticus, the Israelites cannot move forward on their journey until a count of the people takes place. For many learners, these census lists make up the least interesting passages of the *humash*. Long and linguistically repetitive, the list of men according to their tribes totals in this count the historically improbable number of 603,550 (Num. 1:46). As the *Etz Hayim humash* commentary on the verse suggests, the number is impossibly large, “presupposing a population of more than 2 million supporting itself for 40 years in the Sinai Peninsula.” The commentary goes on to suggest a few ways scholars justify the count—maybe they were counting by military unit, or perhaps the numbers reflect the later census by King David in the book of Samuel. The question of the accuracy of the numbers invokes the same observation we had about the Omer: something so mundane and seemingly so simple as counting people gathered in an isolated camp in the desert, is yet so hard to get right. In this case, the problem seems more about exaggeration than accuracy, but it nonetheless brings to mind the dreaded public speech in which the speaker acknowledges a list of people deserving of honorable mention. How easy it is to overlook someone, or to forget in the moment one or two names. Listing people—like counting days—is more difficult than it seems.

Between the Omer and the census, we are counting this week our two most precious commodities: time and people. That both are impossible to count is a token of their importance: they are the foundation stones of our lives. It is a psychic-spiritual struggle to bring them into proper focus, to keep them in their rightful place at the center of our attention.

Fifty days will have soon passed since we celebrated our freedom around the seder table. Where did those days go, and what did we do that really mattered during these seven weeks? We head into our next holiday reading a parashah that pauses to count *people* before recommencing the narrative story of their lives. With whom have we spent these days? As Larson asked, how do we measure a year?

Albert Einstein famously quipped, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything worth counting counts.” With all of the numbers and counting pervading our week, let us not lose sight of the message they bring: that what counts the most is spending time with one another, and that we measure our years by counting day in and day out the moments we spend with others wandering with us, blazing paths together through the wilderness of life.

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A Taste of Torah

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

A Slow Walk to Freedom

With this coming Shabbat, we begin the fourth book of Torah known as the book of Numbers or Bemidbar. Having occupied ourselves with the details of the priests, purity, and ritual, we now turn our attention to the Israelite wanderings in the desert. Notably, Parashat Bemidbar is obsessed with order: a census, Levitical duties, and the spatial arrangement of the Israelite encampment. We read the extensive list of names, exact numbers of those belonging to each tribe, and the precise location of each tribe in relation to the Tabernacle. How are we to understand and grasp this obsession with order in the desert?

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor HaCohen explains,

The wondrous organization that we see in this week’s parashah sparks astonishment, especially given the accepted perception that “order” is not one of the main characteristic of the people of Israel. From this, we see that if indeed we are truly plagued by a lack of order, this, I believe, is one of the remnants of our exile that stuck with us. But here we see a people, freed from slavery, marching toward its independence, becoming educated and disciplined in creating order. It is not only a matter of aesthetics and glory. They cannot be a chaotic camp nor a flock of wayward sheep. They must learn to act as free people. Perhaps, within this, we find a pedagogical exercise that is meant to free them from their exilic mentality. Order and outward manners trains a person toward ordered thought and the routine of a life marked by honor and discipline. (*Likrat Shabbat*, 141)

And so the Israelite journey of 40 years in the desert, according to Avidor HaCohen, has exceptional pedagogic value for the Israelites. Slowly, they work toward discarding their slave mentality and transforming themselves into the free People that will inherit the Land of Israel. To achieve this goal, however, they must endure the chaos of the desert: extreme heat, desolation, and external enemies. It is no wonder, then, that God demands that the Israelites create order and discipline for themselves. All of the tribes and all of the individuals must learn their particular place within the community. They are commanded to bring spatial and spiritual order to a natural environment that lends itself to chaos and emptiness. Ultimately, it is the crucible of the desert that will set the stage for this nation to inherit the Land and become a free People worthy of becoming a “light unto the nations.”

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