

Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer

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

Mizmor LeDavid (Psalm 23)—Time, Text, Melody

Psalm 23 is beloved in much of the English-speaking world for affirming a certainty of the divine presence—even in times of dread and adversity—in the most hauntingly beautiful language. The paean to the Psalm by 19th-century American pastor Henry Ward Beecher is widely cited. “The twenty third psalm is the nightingale of the Psalms. It is small, of a homely feather, singing shyly out of obscurity; but oh! it has filled the air of the whole world with melodious joy, greater than the heart can conceive” (*Life Thoughts*).

It is interesting to me then that this psalm has not found its way into any regular part of our fixed liturgy. In contemporary times, perhaps influenced by surrounding culture and faith communities, it is frequently included at funerals and in the Yizkor (memorial) service. The metaphor of God's presence “in the valley of the shadow of death” (*b'gey tzalmavet*) is so lyrically compelling, and fresh to the contemporary ear, that the varied liturgies for the end of life seem like a natural context.

More interesting perhaps is the embrace of the Psalm at the third meal of Shabbat, *se'udah shelishit*, where it is sung along with other poems that guide the individual toward the divine—not in philosophical reflection or covenantal command, but in love and yearning. In this context, the critical metaphors are “You have anointed my head with flowing oil,” suggesting the merging of physical and spiritual delight on Shabbat, and the final words “and I will dwell in the House of God for Eternity.”

The final hours of Shabbat look toward the messianic future, to the time when all will be one; in the *Amidah* for Shabbat afternoon, the text speaks of the most profound tranquility, evoking the deep and universal peace for which we yearn in a busy and troubled world. (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 236). The phrase “*nafshi yeshovev*” (You restore my soul) hangs enigmatically between the weekly power of Shabbat to restore our spiritual life, and the hope/promise of an ultimate restoration in the messianic future.

The grammar of our psalm reflects (anticipates) the profound shift between description and encounter that we find also in the structure of blessings and in the poem *Adon Olam*. The opening speaks about God in the third person—“God is my Shepherd”—but in the time of challenge, “in the valley of the shadow of death,” the psalmist speaks not *about* God, but *to* God: “*Atah imadi*” (You are with me). This is perhaps a more challenging poem than we first think—it is certainly lyrical, certainly of faith, but born out of dark times in a challenging world. In fact, it is a very contemporary teaching from an ancient book about their own relationship to the text, and to the musical settings.

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.

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Torah from JTS

Hayei Sarah 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.

Life: Quantity vs. Quality

“And the span of Sarah's life was 127 years—the years of Sarah's life” (Gen. 23:1; my translation). Whenever I read this verse, I feel a deep sadness that is only intensified by the story that follows. Let me explain.

There are many ways of measuring a life. One possible metric is quantitative: “She lived to a ripe old age.” Another is qualitative: “He had a good life.” Health can be used as a yardstick (“She had all her faculties until the day she died”), as can money (“He made a comfortable living”), accomplishments (“He was a world class scientist”), adventure (“She traveled the world over”), integrity (“He was always a straight shooter”), and piety (“He never missed minyan”).

Now let us imagine Sarah's friends—let's call them Iscah, Naamah, and Tirzah—talking as they are on the way to pay a shiv'ah visit to Abraham. What would they say about her life? How would they assess it? Let's listen in as Iscah begins to speak.

“It was a terrible marriage. Let's face it, Abraham always put himself first. Remember when there was a famine here and they had to move to Egypt for a while? Sarah told me that Abraham asked her to say that she was his sister so that the Egyptians would not kill him in order to steal Sarah away from him. His words were that she should do this ‘so that it will go well with me’ (Gen. 12:13). Well, it sure did go well with *him*. After Pharaoh nabbed Sarah, he gave Abraham sheep, oxen, slaves—you name it! And Sarah? She was a prisoner in Pharaoh's palace. She must have been frightened out of her wits! Fortunately for Abraham's sake, God sent plagues against Pharaoh and his household, at which point Pharaoh gladly handed Sarah back to Abraham. Sarah was saved because God had chosen Abraham. I think Abraham had a better relationship with God than he did with his wife!”

Tirzah breaks in: “And Sarah had so much trouble getting pregnant! She finally offered her maidservant Hagar to Abraham hoping that Hagar would have a child with him whom she could then adopt as her own. Well, you know the rest. Hagar got pregnant, all right, but when she realized that she was giving Abraham what he wanted, something that Sarah couldn't provide, she began acting as if *she* were running the household, not Sarah. And when Sarah complained to Abraham, did he offer to intervene? Did he kick Hagar out of his bed? No! ‘It's your maid,’ he said, ‘Do whatever you think is right.’ So Sarah harassed

Hagar until she ran away. I'm no psychologist, but I've got to imagine that some of her mistreatment of Hagar was redirected anger at her husband."

Adds Naamah, "So finally God promises Sarah a son. And when He informs Abraham that Sarah is going to give birth to the child for whom she has waited so long, what is Abraham's first concern? 'Ishmael, what's going to happen to Ishmael?' Not only that: when God first tells Abraham that he and Sarah are going to have a son, he laughs, thinking to himself, 'Can Sarah and I have a child at this stage of our lives, when I'm 100 and she's 90?' But when Sarah does the same thing, God gets indignant. 'I can do anything I promise. Does Sarah doubt me?' And instead of pointing out to God that he had had the same reaction, Abraham says nothing. Talk about an unsupportive spouse!"

"And," says Tirzah, "when Sarah finally gives birth, a new source of tension is created. Sarah had to deal with Hagar's derision when Hagar was pregnant with Ishmael. Then, when Ishmael was born, she had to live with the pain of being childless while her maidservant had provided her husband with a son. So finally she has a son—problem solved, right? No; Ishmael isn't happy about Isaac's arrival on the scene, and he begins playing around with Isaac in ways that Sarah finds alarming. Her sense is that Ishmael wants to claim part of Isaac's rightful inheritance. So she goes to Abraham and demands that he send away Hagar and Ishmael. Now admittedly this must have been a painful moment for Abraham. But he had to make a choice: it was going to be either Isaac and Sarah or Ishmael and Hagar. But he doesn't take action until God tells him to listen to Sarah. His thoughts are about Ishmael, not about her."

"But it didn't stop there," says Iscah with a sigh. "Sarah finally had what she wanted—a son (Isaac)—and no rival for him as the heir and no rival for Abraham's attention and affection. And then, one morning, Abraham takes Isaac on a journey. The horrific nature of the journey is something Sarah learns only after their return. God had finally granted Sarah's wish and given her a son. And now, He commands Abraham to sacrifice that son! Abraham was unhappy when he was told to send away Ishmael, but he says nothing when God tells him to slaughter Isaac! In fact, he gets up early so he can carry out this barbaric mission as soon as possible! Well, this was the last straw. When Abraham and Isaac returned and Isaac told her what happened, her heart just couldn't take it. I'm not going to say that she died young, but she still had many good years left in her. It's a tragedy, and Abraham and his God are to blame."

"And now the kicker," says Naamah. "After a lifetime of putting his own dreams before Sarah's, when she finally dies, he's suddenly the dutiful husband. Nothing but the best for her; he's willing to pay top shekel for her burial site. Where was this solicitude while she was still alive? What a cruel joke!"

And so I read the first verse of this week's Torah portion and sigh. What can the Torah tell us about Sarah's life? It spanned 127 years. What kind of life was it? A life most of which consists of details best left out of the eulogy. Better to say, "She lived 127 years" and leave it at that. Yes, it is a tragedy that, had God and Abraham acted differently, her life could have been one of happiness and fulfillment. Sometimes all we get is the time.

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A Taste of Torah

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

"In Every Moment, the Choice Is Ours"

Sight and vision play an important role in the two opening narratives of Parashat Va-yera. At the beginning of this week's Torah reading, the newly circumcised Abraham, resting in his abode of Elonei Mamre, "looks up" and sees "three men rooted before him" (Gen. 18:1–2). Their appearance triggers a flurry of activity in the homestead of our ancestors as Abraham and Sarah scurry to perform the mitzvah of *hachnasat orkhim*, hosting guests in one's home. These guests—these mysterious messengers—are pampered as they go on to deliver the news that Sarah will conceive. Juxtaposed to this story of generosity and kindness, we then encounter the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah. Interestingly, it opens with the same men setting out on their journey, and in sharp contrast to Abraham's upwardly gazing posture, they "look down toward Sodom." What are to make of the joined positioning of these two stories?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

From the hospitable meal at Abraham, they stood up and looked towards Sodom . . . Sodom offered the most complete contrast to the simple pure atmosphere from which these men were just emerging. They had just seen the foundation of a nation laid on two factors: a) on sanctifying the body with all its urges and lures in pure moral submission to God in *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision) and b) on practicing universal brotherly love, as in the kindness which they themselves enjoyed in Abraham's home. The hospitable meal at which they had just announced the first foundation stone of the future people of God offered such a contrast to Sodom, formed such a loftiness to the Sodomite debasement to which they now had to wend their way, that they "looked down to the plains of Sodom with criticizing gauging consideration." For that is the meaning of *va'yashkifu*, that "they looked down." (*Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 318)

Shakespeare was a master of juxtaposing opposites in his writings and, so too, Torah. The stark contrast between the example of our ancestor Abraham and the behavior of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah gives us pause to reflect on what it means to build an ethical and moral civilization. Rabbi Hirsch emphasizes this notion in commenting on the expression used for the men looking out toward Sodom, *va'yashkifu*. They look down, literally and figuratively, upon the evil that is unfolding in these twin cities. Abraham, on the other hand, looks up. The divine quality of the three men that have just appeared in his home shines through and through. And Abraham rises to the occasion. Hirsch sharpens our exegetical focus as we read through this text. For it is not simply the contrast that is of import, but also the need to recognize these moments as "the foundation of a nation." Abraham's descendants must sanctify their bodies and practice kindness to build a sacred future.

Indeed, every moment in life presents us with the choice between Elonei Mamre or Sodom—it is a decision between embracing the presence of God and our fellow humans or banishing the divine from our midst. May we always be blessed with the gumption and sight of Abraham, choosing the path of Elonei Mamre.

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