

Service of the Heart (תדובע בלה): Exploring Prayer

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

“No'am Adonai” (the Beauty of Adonai): Psalm 27 and Elul

“*[L]ahazot beno'am Adonai ul'vaker b'heycho*” (To gaze upon the beauty of Adonai, and to visit in God's sanctuary) [Ps. 27:4]

From the beginning of the month of Elul, Psalm 27 is added to our services, containing the enigmatic phrase above.

The psalmist seems to ask for a measure of revelation from God that was denied even to Moses. In Exodus 33:18, Moses asks: “O let me see Your glory,” and the response from God is “no-one may see Me and be living.” What, then, is sought by the author of our psalm, and to what extent can we find ourselves in this quest?

In the coming weeks, many of us will spend many hours engaged in the liturgy of the season—the melodies, the texts, the sounds and actions and smells that are so familiar—beloved to many, dreaded by some. In between seeking the meaning of the texts, hearing the message and emotions of the melodies and chants, and discerning the wisdom and humanity in the sermons and teachings presented to us, there are those who will seek to encounter the Divine Presence that inspires and is the source of all our prayers—in fact, the source of all.

There is no specific moment in all the hundreds of pages of the *mahzor* where we might say, “This is the moment”—this is where God is to be encountered. For some, the spirit of holiness and the Divine Presence infuse and inspire all that happens within the synagogue and our rituals. For others, it is not so clear, not so apparent.

There are many who see the words of Psalm 27 not as a demand made to God, or in any way as a certainty, but as a hope, a dream that some insight, some moment of encounter with the numinous will indeed take place. The psalm goes further and promises (or inspires) that the encounter with God will be one of beauty (*no'am*). Some will find this encounter in words, others in melody, and some in silence. My teacher in London, Rabbi Lionel Blue, writes,

God may speak to us in a chance remark we overhear, through a stray thought in our mind, or by a word from the prayerbook that resonates in us. Perhaps a side door is the only door we have left open to God, the others we defended and barred, so God must steal into us like a thief in the night . . . So we chant our prayers and sing our hymns to prevent a few moments' silence, for God speaks in the silence.

As we prepare for the Yamim Nora'im this year, let us look to loosen our defenses a little, to spend a little more time in the House of God, and perhaps we too will be blessed with our own experience of God's beauty.

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

Ki Tetzei 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Marc Gary, executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer, JTS.

We Have Met the Enemy, and the Enemy Is Us

“The war tried to kill us in the spring.”

Those are the opening words of Kevin Powers's elegiac and darkly beautiful novel of the war in Iraq, *The Yellow Birds*. As with all great writing about war and human conflict—such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Red Badge of Courage* (to which Powers's novel has been repeatedly compared)—the book's focus is not on battlefield maneuvers and strategy or even the confrontation with enemy soldiers, but rather on issues of personal responsibility and morality. How does war affect the human soul?

Our Torah portion, Ki Tetzei, begins with a verse that raises these issues in a stark and discomfiting manner:

When you take the field [lit., go out to war] against your enemies, and the Lord your God delivers them into your power and you take some of them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her and would take her to wife, you shall bring her into your house. (Deut. 21:10–11)

These verses introduce the law of the captive woman, which prescribes the circumstances and conditions under which an Israelite soldier may marry a woman captured in war. Even though the Torah seeks to discourage the practice and soften its impact on women, the law offends our modern sensibility and sense of justice. It seems to sanction forcible marriages and allow soldiers to take sexual advantage of captive women. The Rabbis of the Talmud understood the law as a moral compromise, premised on the idea that it is in the nature of men (and the Torah is clearly speaking here of men) to succumb during war to their basest instincts (BT Kiddushin 21b–22a). In the view of the Rabbis, the behavior would take place anyway, so it would be better to regulate and discourage it than to ignore it. And so we must ask: Is it futile and indeed self-contradictory to speak of the *morality* of war?

We will shortly commemorate the centennial anniversary of the beginning of World War I. Since that “war to end all wars,” the United States has fought five major wars (including our ongoing war in Afghanistan), and the State of Israel has been engaged in armed conflict throughout almost its entire existence. Our situation finds a parallel in biblical history: the book of Judges makes a point of recording that “the land was at peace for forty years” (Judg. 3:11, 5:31) or “for eighty years” (Judg. 3:30), as if to emphasize that such interludes were few and far between. Surely it is worth a moment to reflect not on the various justifications offered for the numerous wars, but rather on their spiritual impact on those who bear the burden of battle as well as on those of us who wait at home for their return.

The opening line of our parashah (quoted above) raises an interesting question: Why does the Torah say “when you go out to war against your enemies”? The phrase “against your enemies” seems superfluous—armies always go to war against enemies; whom else would they go to war against?

Yochanan “Jeff” Kirshblum offers an important insight in his commentary on Deuteronomy entitled *Thinking Outside the Box*. He suggests that the “enemies” referred to here are not the opponents on the battlefield, but rather *ourselves*—or more particularly, our *Yezer Ha’rah* (evil inclination), the tendency within us to free ourselves from God’s insistence on moral conduct regardless of the circumstances. That is the enemy with which we must do battle during times of war.

In this internal battle for the preservation of our moral compass, tradition teaches that we have two critical weapons: our compassion and our unwavering commitment to the principles of Torah that define our faith. Although at one time we in the United States were (as Israel has been for all of its existence) a nation of citizen-soldiers, today not only are most of us far removed from the front lines, we rarely give much thought to the realities of the wars that are fought in our name. But indifference to the suffering caused by war—even the suffering of one’s enemies—hardens the heart of societies just as surely as it hardens the hearts of individuals. The Rabbis of the Talmud were keenly aware of that fact. In a remarkably moving midrash, we learn that the one hundred shofar sounds at our Rosh Hashanah services correspond to the one hundred groans by the mother of Sisera (a Canaanite general killed in the war against the Israelites during the time of Deborah), as she waited in vain for her son’s return (Judg. 5:28; Tosofot BT Rosh Hashanah 33b, s.v. Shiur, citing a non-extant midrash). Sisera was a brutal despot whose death was our People’s salvation, but nonetheless we are reminded every year by the shofar blasts to be compassionate toward those who have been left widowed or childless by war’s destruction, regardless of who their loved ones were or on which side they fought. During the war in the Falklands/Malvinas, the chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth, Immanuel Jakobovits, displayed great courage but also perfectly reflected Judaism’s insistence on maintaining unbridled compassion when he publicly declared, “Even terrorists have mothers, and we must not be indifferent to their anguish” (United Synagogue lecture on “The Morality of Warfare,” May 25, 1982, reprinted in Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800–2011*).

And yet, compassion—however powerful and necessary—is not enough to preserve our moral bearings in times of war. Judaism demands that we remain committed to who we are and what we stand for as Jews. As Rabbi Jacob Philip Ruden said during the early days of World War II, God’s laws “look different in the glow of incendiary bombs and against the growling, angry background of explosion and fire and death,” but “they are indeed eternal and changeless” (“God in the Blackout,” Oct. 2, 1940, reprinted in Saperstein). Remaining true to the Torah’s imperatives by which the Jewish People have been defined is to wage battle against the notion that war is a license to trample on our sacred principles. A case in point is the biblical demand that we preserve the God-given natural resources of our world. That law remains constant in war and peace; it is not abrogated even in the heat of battle: “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees” (Deut. 20:19). So too, as the thunder of war approaches, our insistence upon universal moral principles cannot waver. The Torah demands that “when you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace” (Deut. 20:10). Expanding on this verse, Maimonides makes clear that the terms of surrender must include the acceptance of fundamental moral obligations: “If they make peace and accept the Seven Commandments commanded to the Sons of Noah [prohibitions against idolatry, murder, adultery, incest, etc.], then one must not kill a single life” (Hilkhot Melakhim 6:1). Even—and perhaps especially—in times of violence and death, we must reassert our humanity and the commitment to live according to the eternal principles of Torah.

In the midst of World War I, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise asked, “Can We Win the War without Losing America?” (May 20, 1917, reprinted in Saperstein). That question has reverberated throughout our history. From the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus during the Civil War to the internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II, to the pervasive surveillance of private communications today, we have repeatedly faced the question: How much moral compromise does war demand? That is the struggle implicit in the opening verse of our parashah, for it is true that when a nation takes the field in war, it also confronts an inner enemy, and that confrontation too will decide the nation’s fate.

May the One who brings peace to the heavens also bring peace to us, to all the People of Israel, and to all the inhabitants of our world, and may it be soon.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Ethics in War

Parashat Ki Tetzei opens by teaching one of the biblical ordinances related to ethical conduct in war. Specifically,

[W]hen you take the field against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your power and you take some of them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her and would take her to wife, you will bring her into your house . . . She will spend a month’s time in your home lamenting her father and mother; after that you may possess her and she will be your wife. Then should you no longer want her, you must release her outright. (Deut. 21:10–14)

While acknowledging this specific case as disturbing to our modern ethics and sensibilities, one must also read these verses closely and sensitively within their historical context. Far from advocating the immediate “possession” of the woman by an Israelite victor, Torah legislates the woman’s need and right to mourn for her father and mother over a given period of time. Only after this month of reflection may the Israelite then take her as a wife. What does Torah teach us by acknowledging the very real and painful emotions of the captive?

Professor Ze’ev Falk explains,

It is your obligation to honor the emotions of the daughter vis-à-vis her parents. A parallel passage to this may be found in the biblical narrative addressing the nest of a bird: “You will not take the mother bird from her children. You will surely send the mother bird away and only then will you take the baby birds” (Deuteronomy 22:6–7). Here the obligation is to respect the emotions of the mother for her children. Injuring the mother along with the children is considered exceeding cruelty because it precisely undermines the elementary obligation to be fruitful and to multiply. Compare: with regard to Jacob fearing Esau, “Deliver me . . . else I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike” (Genesis 32:12); “on a day of battle when mothers and children were dashed to death together” (Hosea 10:14); and the prohibition cited numerous times that “one should not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 23:19, etc.). Perhaps it is for this reason that destroying a whole city represents unique cruelty because it is done together with killing all of the children of the city: “I am one of those who seek the welfare of Israel! But you seek to bring death upon a city and mother of Israel!” (II Samuel 20:19). (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 441)

Even though war against a brutal enemy is justified, the chaos of war cannot lead to moral and ethical decay. Torah and Professor Ze’ev Falk’s commentary underscore the extent to which Scripture honors emotional and familial bonds. Such connections and emotional relationships increase our humanity. Those who pursue terrorism and senseless conflict do so without regard for family, religion, humanity, and God. Fundamentalist furor annihilates lives indiscriminately. And it is in the emotional bonds of family that we, as a sacred tradition, affirm life.

May Torah continually serve as our guidepost—making us keenly aware of the emotions and pain of our fellow human beings—and may Scripture lead us to a place of healing and peace among all the nations of the world.

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