

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.

Turn Aside (*Haseir*) Evil Forces

Last week, we began to explore *Hashkiveinu*, the blessing unique to the evening service that asks for peace through the night and renewed life in the morning (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, 140).

The Hebrew word *Haseir* (turn aside) is deployed twice. In the first instance, it is applied to “enemies, plague, sword, famine, misery,” from which we reasonably seek respite at night. *Haseir* is then repeated, and applied to the Hebrew word *satan* in the expression “and turn away satan from in front of us and behind us.” So how are we to understand this occurrence of *satan* in our daily, Shabbat, and festival liturgy? Our own *Siddur Sim Shalom* employs the euphemism “Remove the evil forces that surround us.” However, Rabbi Reuven Hammer, in his commentary *Or Hadash* (ad loc), reminds us that “the concept of Satan, an accusatory angel, is found in Job (Ch 1; 6) where it is *not* a name, but a title: *ha-Satan*, the accuser, a member of God’s heavenly court whose task it is to serve as a prosecuting attorney.” Rabbi Hammer notes further that “The word is sometimes used in reference to human accusers as in Psalm 71; 13 ‘Let my accuser (*sot’nai*) perish in frustration!’”

We can certainly discern an approach that seeks to explain the phrase “and turn away satan from in front of us and behind us” by speaking of “evil forces” and human accusers. For example, Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz (Orthodox chief rabbi of the United Kingdom and British Empire) interprets the phrase to mean the “evil impulse, the lower passions which are a hindrance.” A more literal approach is taken by the medieval commentator Abudarham, who juxtaposes this phrase with the mention of four angels in the traditional prayer recited just before falling asleep (Micha’el, Gavri’el, Uri’el and Rapha’el).

There is certainly support to be found for those who read and understand the text in a more rational vein: the text recognizes the darkness that lies within each of us, and is a prayer to dispel that darkness. Some modern versions of the siddur have removed the phrase entirely. However, I find the following phrase asking God to shelter us, “*b’tsel k’nafekha*” (In the shadow of Your wings), to be a plea for refuge from a spiritual challenge or foe and a recognition of the reality of the spiritual adversary.

Though space here does not allow a fuller exploration, Satan is a core entity in much of Jewish folklore, and in many spiritual and mystical sources. But each evening, the words of the siddur cast Satan aside and guide us to embrace and seek shelter from God, the Source of all Life.

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

Pinehas 5773

Parashah Commentary

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

Comfort Food

When my friend Eleanor's mother passed away several years ago, the email from her husband providing the shiv'ah details included the following request:

There is no need to bring anything, just *you*. Eleanor has been with her family for the past few weeks, and has been surrounded by fatty quiches, sugary deserts, and an abundance of ham—none of which she eats. So, if you are constitutionally incapable of coming without bringing something, she'd prefer fruits, vegetables, breads, and soups, but absolutely no need to bring anything. Really. *You* will be the perfect comfort.

Comfort food. Whether it's chicken soup or chocolate chip cookies, the concept is basic: certain foods provide us with emotional gratification. Beyond that, though, this message raises some essential questions—questions about offerings. When we go to help someone—in times of mourning, illness, or just a basic potluck pitch-in—do we give them what we need to give, or what they need of us? How are we to know, if we are not explicitly told, what will please, comfort, or help someone else the most? And the religious corollary to this line of thinking: do our answers change when it comes to bringing an offering to please or comfort not our friends, but God?

I remembered that email from Eleanor's husband as I reencountered Parashat Pinehas this week. “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Command the Israelite people and say to them: Be punctilious in presenting to Me at stated times the offerings of food due Me, as gifts of pleasing odor to Me” (Num. 28:1–2). What God commands of us—in varying iterations for the daily offering, Shabbat, new months, and festivals—is a well-balanced meal. Some protein (the burnt offering, be it lamb, bull, or some combination thereof); a carbohydrate (the grain offering, prepared with a little olive oil); and a beverage (the libation offering). Abravanel notes that the *tamid*, the daily offering, consists of the most basic staples of the Israelite diet. This basic meal, offered twice a day, includes “gifts of pleasing odor (*re'ach nichochi*) to Me.”

Bible scholars consider this a “linguistic fossil,” a throwback to an ancient Near Eastern theology that held that gods needed food and created humans to attend to their domestic needs. We do not read the verse so literally; we understand that the sacrificial cult outlined in Numbers 28 and 29 (and Leviticus and elsewhere) is about worshipping God, not literally feeding God. Nonetheless, we see in even symbolic terms that God requires a very specific menu of comfort food.

In a world without a Temple, what might we offer God that brings the pleasing odor, the *re'ach nichoach*? The midrash plays with the phrase, turning *re'ach nichoach* into *nachat ru'ach*, or

what in Yiddish would be referred to as *shepping nachas* (deriving great pleasure).

There is a pleasurable disposition (*nachat ru'ach*) before God because God has given a command and God's will has been done. So the expression is used when an (expensive) bull is offered, and also when a head of small cattle or bird is offered, in order to teach the lesson that he who offers much and he who offers little is alike before God, for God neither eats nor drinks (i.e., is not placated by receiving more rather than less) . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "My children! It is not because I eat or drink that I told you to offer sacrifices, but on account of the aroma which should remind you that you must be sweet and pleasing (*nochim*) to Me like a pleasing aroma (*nichoach*)." (Sifre Numbers 143 and Numbers Rabbah 21:19, as cited in *The JPS Commentary to Numbers* by Jacob Milgram)

Over time, the four cubits of halakhah replaced the sacrifices, a connection we feel explicitly as we read these chapters. It is after all the *minhah* (grain offering) that becomes in the mishnah (Berakhot 4:1) the afternoon prayer of the same name. What might we offer that would be sweet and pleasing to our Lord? Halakhah guides us, but raises more questions than it answers as we navigate our relationship to that rabbinic inheritance as individuals and as a community. Is tzedakah given to Jewish causes or worldly ones? How do we create a Jewish family that honors its members of other faiths? Does God prefer white lies or brutal honesty? Prayer three times every day or only when we are so moved?

The penultimate sentence of the parashah, which concludes the instructions for the offerings according to the calendar, is wonderfully prescient and may be the key to unraveling these questions as we read this week. "All these you shall offer to the Lord at the stated times, in addition to your votive and freewill offerings, be they burnt offerings, grain offerings, libations, or offerings of well-being" (Num. 29:39). What a surprise! All of those other offerings—the two chapters' worth that God wants—are *in addition (I'vad)* to the ones we want and are moved to offer.

Wouldn't we expect the reverse? That first we do what we have to do, and then what we want? Eat your vegetables first, and then dessert? Do your homework first, and then go play? In reality, we humans tend to consider what we want and need first. Only with great will, discipline, and a sense of self-sacrifice do we place the needs of others, and God, before our own. When we do it, we derive our own *nachat ru'ach* (satisfaction of spirit). Sometimes, anyway. From the tension between these two bookend verses—the opening wherein God states God's needs, and the closing where our own religious needs, which might be quite different—the spiritual mystery lies.

Like us, God finds comfort in certain offerings more than others. *Nachat ru'ach* is not easy to conjure in another being, be it divine or human. Professor and former JTS Chancellor Ismar Schorsch wrote on this very parashah,

We do not perform God's will to please God. The religious life is its own reward. We pray daily not because we are commanded, but because of the inner contentment that it brings. What was once external and imposed has at last been internalized by us into a source of self-fulfillment . . . Worship effects no change in God, but it can surely transform our lives by exposing us to God's presence. (cited in *Canon Without Closure*, 565)

If we are successful in living a religious life that becomes its own reward, then the email from Eleanor's husband comes to feel just right: bringing just ourselves will be the perfect comfort for God and for one another.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Zealotry, Good and Bad

At the end of Parashat Balak, we are introduced to the extreme character of Pinehas. The Israelites once again stray from God and Torah as they engage in the cult of Baal Peor, pursuing Moabite women and engaging in idolatrous practice. Pinehas, the son of Eleazar, is witness to an Israelite man engaging in lewd behavior with a Midianite woman. Rather than turning to Moshe as the leader of the People, Pinehas takes justice into his own hands and tragically murders the Israelite man and Midianite woman. At the beginning of this week's parashah, Pinehas is surprisingly rewarded by God with an everlasting "covenant of peace." How are we to understand the behavior of this zealot? Even more disturbing is the sense that his vigilante behavior is divinely rewarded. And to what extent is he similar to another zealot in our history, Eliyahu Hanavi (Elijah the Prophet)?

Shmuel Avidor HaCohen explains,

Rabbinic commentary draws a direct line between the characters of Pinhas and Eliyahu HaNavi. The rabbis teach: "Pinhas—this is Eliyahu!" The figure of Eliyahu HaNavi appears, on the one hand, as a zealot, who is zealous for the cause of God. We see this within his persistent, relentless and zealous behavior. Eliyahu himself declares, "For I am zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts" (I Kings 19:10). On the other hand, it is also said of Eliyahu, "Behold, I send you Eliyahu HaNavi before the coming of the great and awesome day of God. He will return the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents" (Malachi 3:23–24). In declaring that Pinhas is Eliyahu HaNavi, the sages of Israel teach us about the essence of zealotry. Zealotry for God is a good thing but it must lead to a positive and constructive goal. The zealotry of Pinhas is blessed because he is given a "covenant of peace" and the zealotry of Eliyahu concludes in the realization of peace between children and their parents. Only zealotry such as this can be blessed. (*Likrat Shabbat* [translated from the Hebrew], 169)

While zealotry too often leads to destructive ends, Shmuel Avidor HaCohen reminds us that such consequences are not preordained. "Healthy" zealotry can and must lead to positive ends. Pinehas, who demonstrates both justice and violence, must learn to balance his behavior with a divine dose of peace. God does not reward Pinehas arbitrarily. His reward is the antidote to his earlier behavior, and the hope is that he will learn from his past. It is a similar situation with Eliyahu Hanavi. Eliyahu has little tolerance for the wayward behavior of the Israelites living in his day—to the point that he flees to the Sinai and declares himself the lone loyalist to the God of Israel. The prophet Malachi blesses Eliyahu with the perfect antidote. For, ultimately, it is Eliyahu who will heal familial wounds—bringing children and parents close to each other—thereby actualizing the perfect *tikkun* (repair) to the zealousness of Eliyahu's younger days. Positive outcomes can be the fruit of zealotry and passion. It is up to us to guide such gifted and energetic personalities in the "right" direction.

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