

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.

Harshness—Us and Them

In the preliminary service (*Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for Shabbat*, 66), there is a short paragraph remarkably written in the first person singular—using “I” rather than “we.” In the Talmud (BT Berakhot 16b), there are a number of personal prayers of the Sages, the prayers that they would say at the end of the *Amidah*. This text is attributed to Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and is inserted at this point in the service because it is similar in theme to the previous paragraph. There is a telling, and sometimes uncomfortable, phrase that begins very innocently, “*tatzileini hayom . . . me'azei panim*” (save me this day from those with “hard faces” [from the arrogant]). This is a reasonable hope and a fine, if unremarkable, prayer; it would be good to pass a day (or even longer) without encountering others who are arrogant. But that is not the end of the sentence. The prayer of R' Yehudah continues, “*ume'azut panim*” (and from my own “hard face” [my own arrogance]).

It is easy to see flaws in other people, and to seek to avoid being bothered by these flaws in others. The exquisitely nuanced construction of this phrase by R' Yehudah reminds us that it is precisely that which we dislike most in others that we are most likely to find within ourselves—if we look.

This inner discernment requires that we ask questions, hard and searching questions of ourselves. Perhaps it is no accident that this prayer of R' Yehudah is a preface to one of my favorite paragraphs of the preliminary service—the paragraph that asks of us all a searching series of questions: “*Mah anu, meh chayeinu?*” (Who are we, what is our life?).

The nature of humanity has not changed so much over the centuries and millennia, and it is reassuring and challenging to find in the pages of the siddur these phrases that alert us to our own foibles. Abraham Joshua Heschel famously wrote that “prayer is subversive”; perhaps the subversion is of our inner self-deception. I hope to expand on this idea of Heschel next week, especially in light of the compelling and moving commencement address delivered at The Jewish Theological Seminary's 119th Commencement Exercises by US Congressman John R. Lewis, an important leader in the Civil Rights Movement.

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

Shelah Lekha 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Robert Harris, associate professor of Bible, JTS.

Who Is Getting Stoned?

In 1965, Bob Dylan wrote these famous lines:

Well, they'll stone you when you're trying to be so good
They'll stone you just like they said they would
They'll stone you when trying to go home
And they'll stone you when you're there all alone
But I would not feel so all alone
Everybody must get stoned¹

Now, Dylan has claimed that—despite what many people have thought—this song is not about marijuana, and that he “never has and never will write a ‘drug song.’” So be it. The fact remains that the lyrics of Bob Dylan's songs are so fraught with ambiguity and nuance that one can subject them to lengthy, critical exegesis and still not arrive at a clear understanding (most definitely the mark of great literature, but that's a subject for another day). Our Torah portion similarly contains a vague statement about “getting stoned.” Let us examine one episode in the portion of Shelah Lekha (Num. 13–15).

Among other subjects, the parashah narrates the story of the spies, one from each tribe, whom Moses sends to scout out the Land. Specifically, let us join the narrative at the point that Joshua and Caleb (the two good or “heroic” spies) attempt to encourage the community—largely ineffectively—after the People express their fears that any effort to conquer the Promised Land will not be successful:

If the LORD is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land, a land that flows with milk and honey, and give it to us; only you must not rebel against the LORD. Have no fear then of the people of the country, for they are our prey: their protection has departed from them, but the LORD is with us. Have no fear of them! As the whole community threatened [literally, “said”] to pelt *them* with stones, the Presence of the LORD appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites. [Num. 14:8–10]

In the paragraph above, note the ambiguity of the italicized pronoun: the entire community said that they would pelt “them” with stones, but whom precisely were they threatening?

In answering this question, both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra, two of the greatest medieval biblical commentators, interpreted the unclear pronoun as referring to Joshua and Caleb. Although neither commentator clarifies why he makes that identification, presumably it is because Joshua and Caleb begin their speech in verses 6 and 7: “And Joshua son of Nun

and Caleb son of Jephunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rent their clothes and exhorted the whole Israelite community: ‘The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land.’” Therefore, the two spies who speak positively about the Land are the immediate antecedent to the pronoun—problem solved.

Or is it? Jacob Milgrom would beg to differ. In his magisterial commentary on the book of Numbers (published in the Jewish Publication Society’s Torah commentary series), he states that “‘them’ refers to Moses and Aaron,” and directs us to consider verse 5: “Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites.” Particularly, since both this verse and the one that contains the ambiguous pronoun (verse 10) contain very similar language regarding the action of “the entire community,” it is quite possible that Professor Milgrom’s interpretation is correct. However, since the pronoun is confusing, perhaps it would be best to state that the *peshat*, or interpretation that best fits the context, indicates that the growing discontent among the community threatened all of the “good guys” (i.e., Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb).

The Babylonian Talmud, however, contains a midrash (farfetched, to be sure, as we would say in Yiddish) that further complicates our understanding of the pronoun *them*. It notes the ambiguity in verse 10, and claims that it was *God* whom the rioters threatened to stone:

As the whole community threatened to pelt them with stones [is followed by] the Presence of the LORD appeared in the Tent of Meeting. R. Hiyya b. Abba said: It teaches that they took stones and hurled them against God on high! (Sotah 35a)

Thus, Rabbi Hiyya interprets the juxtaposition of the words “the Presence of the LORD” to the ambiguous pronoun *them*, which means that the pronoun *includes* the LORD, and R. Hiyya therefore concludes that the Children of Israel literally took stones and threw them also at God.

Even if the midrash here is surely fanciful, and the actual intended victims were only the human heroes, it seems to make little difference to God. Consider the following verse in the Torah:

And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? (Num. 14:11)

Whoever was getting stoned, God seems to recognize that the community’s discontent was really directed at God’s own Divine Self, and that the miracles that God had performed on the People’s behalf were to no effect.

The rest of the story, alas, is all too familiar: God is angry enough to destroy the People; Moses intercedes on their behalf, and God commutes their punishment and sentences the people to wander in the desert for 40 years. One thing, at least, is clear: doing the right thing often carries risks, whether to human actors (*peshat*) or to God’s own Divine Presence (*derash*). Or, as “Rabbi Zimmerman” phrased it: “Well, they’ll stone you when you’re trying to be so good.”

¹Bob Dylan, “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35.” Copyright © 1966 by Dwarf Music; renewed 1994 by Dwarf Music; <http://www.bobdylan.com/us/songs/rainy-day-women-12-35>

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A Taste of Torah

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

The Torah reading of Shelah Lekha is literally and figuratively an “eye opening” parashah. Quite strikingly, our narrative this week is bookended by sight. At the very beginning of the parashah, Moses speaks to those selected for the reconnaissance mission into the Land of Israel. He instructs them, among other things, to “Go up there into the Negev and on to the hill country, and see what kind of land it is” (Num. 13:17–18). Similarly, sight closes the parashah: the Israelites are commanded to make tzitziyot, fringes on their garments. God declares, “Look at it and recall all of the commandments of the Lord and observe them” (Num. 16:39). In the first instance, sight becomes a stumbling block for the spies as this all important sense triggers fear and panic; while, in the second instance, sight is meant to spark memory and to encourage observance. How may we understand the depth of sight—especially in relation to tzitzit, a commandment the Jewish People continue to observe faithfully in the modern day?

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, also known as the *Sfas Emes* writes,

The word *tzitzit* (fringe) is interpreted by Rashi as coming from the verse, “He peers between the cracks” (Song of Songs 2:9). The purpose of this *mitzvah* is to open a Jew’s eyes. That is why the Talmud teaches that “one who is careful about the commandment of the fringes merits greeting the Divine Presence,” since it says, “and you will see Him.” Tzitziyot are mentioned three times in this passage, parallel to the three times in the year when Israel were to “be seen” (the Three Pilgrimage Festivals) . . . We are God’s witnesses, and of a witness it is said, “If he sees or knows” (Leviticus 5:1). Knowing is higher than seeing; knowing is the rung of Moses himself. Perhaps that is why they were given the commandment of fringes. When they fell from their rung by no longer fully accepting Moses’ leadership, they would have need of this “seeing,” a step lower than knowing. (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, *The Language of Truth*, 241–242).

tzitz

Seeing is multivalent: for it is not only a physical sense to which the Torah refers, but also a spiritual and interpretive dimension. Unlike the experience of the spies at the beginning of the parashah, Israelite “seeing” should open both the eyes and the heart. It is a seeing that should lead us to embrace a deep, rich, and resonant truth; and it should bring us a step closer to becoming “God’s witnesses.” The negativity engendered by seeing at the opening of our parashah becomes redeemed and “repaired” through the blessing of tzitzit. The knotty texture of the fringes combined with the stark contrast between the blue and white should remind us all of the nature of our spiritual and worldly treks—the challenges that one encounters along the journey to “acquire” observance, as well as the eternal challenge of “acquiring” the Land of Israel.

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