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.

"My Soul Thirsts for You"

"My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You" (Ps. 63:2).

With these words the Psalmist expresses the deepest yearning for God. In earlier essays we looked at the organized "service" of God, but the Psalmist reminds us what Divine service is truly about. Many among us recognize and recall our own moments of yearning for God, the profound desire to encounter God directly—not through the metaphors of our teachers but rather knowing and experiencing the reality of the Divine.

It is not so often that a full response is found to this yearning, this passion; yet the yearning, or even the memory of the yearning, abides, inspiring and guiding us to seek out and renew the ancient quest. Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us: "The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God" (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, p 107). For Heschel, God is the bedrock, the foundation upon which all else rests.

Rabbi Martin Cohen, in his learned and wise translation and commentary *Our Haven and Our Strength: The Book of Psalms*, reads the next verse as providing a clear and reassuring memory: "Surely I have seen You in the sanctuary; I have merited to see Your power and glory" (Ps. 63:3). The expressed yearning for God is anchored in a memory of an earlier experience. However, the Psalm can also be read to express doubt and a challenge: "So, I looked for You in the Holy Place to see Your power and Your glory." Perhaps we discern that the visit to the Holy Place was a failure—and there was no revelation, no encounter. Only the yearning remains, unrequited in the Holy Place but unforgettable.

There are many who must share this experience—visiting the Holy Place (any place of organized worship) in search of a connection with God, and seeming to leave empty handed. Following such a "failure," it becomes easier to judge the "Holy Place" as devoid of "Holiness." The Psalmist moves on (Ps. 63:5–6) to find fulfillment in regular worship, and Heschel teaches us about the relationship between individual spirituality and communal prayer:

> There is a permanent union between individual worship and communal worship, each of which depends for its existence upon the other . . . Prayer will not come about by default. It requires education, training, reflection, contemplation. It is not enough to join others; it is necessary to build a sanctuary within, brick by brick, instants of meditation, moments of devotion. (Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays.* p. 262)

Holiness is to be found among our holy communities, for God has promised us: "When you seek Me you will find Me; if you search for Me . . . I shall let you find Me, says God" (Jer. 29:13–14).

Our Haven and Our Strength: The Book of Psalms, Rabbi Martin Cohen's commentary and translation that was mentioned above, is an ideal companion for every modern person seeking to encounter the meaning and wisdom of the Psalms. It was published by the Aviv Press of the Rabbinical Assembly in 2004.

A fuller version of Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer, *including media links, can be found in the online version at www.jtsa.edu/x16748.xml*

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Reeih
Deuteronomy 11:26–16:17
August 18, 2012
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Parashah Commentary

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

Our favorite Indian restaurant was jam-packed when we arrived, one of those nights when every table is full and you are so close to the diners at the table next to yours that, despite your best efforts, you cannot tune out their conversation. Halfway through our meal, a woman and a young man who was unmistakably her grandson were seated at the two-top next to us. Even without the grandmother's large *chai* necklace, they looked (as my Russian Jewish father-in-law would say) "typically Jewish," and given our neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, there was nothing atypical about that.

Try as we might to concentrate on our own conversation, we could not—they were, after all, only inches away. The grandson had just returned from a life-changing semester abroad in India, and was intoxicated by the experience. He ordered proudly from the menu, explaining the dishes to his grandmother and how they differed from what he had eaten there. He described how he had decided to major in Eastern Religion and hoped to get back to that part of the world. He talked about the Bhagavad Gita and the teachings of his favorite Hindu masters. His grandmother listened patiently, but seemed bewildered by her grandson, who was unshaven and long-haired but otherwise looked just like her, yet was learning Sanskrit and had had his world thrown open by a country, people, and culture completely foreign to her. She never said it, but you could see it in her eyes: "India? What does that have to do with you, a nice Jewish boy?"

As Jewish Americans, we have the greatest blessing our people has ever known: freedom. A freedom that grants us not only the ability to vote and educate ourselves and live as full citizens of our great nation, but also to explore faiths and traditions and cultures besides our own and to choose any of them for ourselves. If the Hindu masters move my soul more than the teachings of the Rabbis—well, it's a spiritual free market in 2012 America. I can choose to be whoever I want to be.

The most important question of our time is, therefore: Why should I? Why should I choose a Jewish life? And more than just a "Jewish" life—which might consist of nothing more than bagels, gefilte fish, and a penchant for *Seinfeld* reruns: Why should I choose a life of *mitzvah*, of Jewish commitment and action, when there are so many other compelling religions and spiritual paths?

Choice, choosing, chosenness: all themes that emerge in Parashat Reeih. The Deuteronomic voice is concerned with persuading us to live according to the path laid out in the previous four books of the *humash*, and it is clearly wary of the fact that we do have a choice in the matter.

"See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin you this day; and curse, if you do not" (Deut. 11:26–28). Reward and punishment, blessing and curse. Choose Judaism because bad things will happen if you don't. How antiquated and defensive this seems, and how absurd when read literally. As Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky (*z"l*) wrote:

> We often call Halakha "Jewish law," but the flouting or abrogation of Halakha carries no sanctions. No court or police enforces these rules . . . And in the post-Holocaust era, few believe in supernatural sanctions, neither in God's reward and punishment of the nation through history, nor in the judgment of the individual in an afterlife. Halakha exists today, in the Jewish Diaspora of the twentieth century, as rules without sanctions, strictures without consequences. The performance of a *mitzvah* (commandment) is its own reward. ("Toward a Liberal Theory of Halakha," *Tikkun*, July/August 1995, p. 42)

No, I will not choose a life of mitzvah because I will be rewarded if I do, and cursed if I do not. I choose a life of mitzvah because "the performance of a *mitzvah* . . .is its own reward." Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote, in his gloss of the verse about the blessing (Deut. 11:27):

> Very significantly it does not say here, as it does in the following verse at the curse, *im tishm'u* but *asher tishm'u*. The actual fulfillment of God's commands is already in itself a real part of the blessing, which not only follows the obedience but starts to be realized by and with the carrying out of the mitzvah. The mental and moral act which is accomplished every time we faithfully obey the Torah is itself a blessed progress, a step forward of our whole being, and with every mitzvah-act we bless ourselves. (Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, rendered into English by Isaac Levy. 1962.)

I could go to India, or the church across the street, or become part of any of a host of secular humanistic communities whose adherents live deeply meaningful and fulfilled lives. Any would likely bring me to the end I seek. But there is one thing I cannot do: I cannot not choose. I have to choose something. If I choose well, if I choose something that works—and Judaism enjoys the status of being one of the world's great religions precisely because it works—then that choice will in and of itself be its own reward, a step forward of my whole being.

Is my choosing a life of mitzvah, then, arbitrary? To a certain extent, yes. One of the parashah's other attempts at persuading us to choose Judaism is: "For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: the Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be his treasured people" (Deut. 14:1). Most contemporary American Jews bristle at the idea of Jewish "election" or chosenness. It reflects neither our understanding of a God who has created multiple forms of religious expression and loves all Creation equally and mercifully, nor our conviction of the biological equality of all races and nations. But one bit of this verse cannot be ignored, and this I offer as part two of the answer to the "Why should I?" question: that we Jews are chosen to uphold a certain spiritual path. Not because God loves us more, not because it is the best path, but because, as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan put it:

> Mankind is not all of one piece and, in the task of preserving and developing the spiritual heritage of the human race, the various historic groups have to assume responsibility, each one for the maintenance of its own identity as a contributor to the sum of human knowledge and experience." (*The Meaning of God in Modern Religion*, 96)

There are, after all, only about 15 million of us; given that we have to choose some way of living and meaning-making, why not choose this one?

In my own life, as I read through Deuteronomy this time around and watch for the new moon of Elul to come on the horizon next week, I find myself blessed for the moments of this year in which I have been able to deepen my own practice of halakhah, the new steps I've been able to take, and even the strictures that have grounded some of the most important pieces of my life. Is my choosing arbitrary? Could I have found myself feeling similarly blessed had I chosen other paths this year? Probably. But having chosen this life, I find myself feeling deeply the words Frymer-Kensky wrote in the *Tikkun* article: "The ultimate purpose of the Halakha is to infuse our daily biological and social activity with a sense of divinity, purpose, and community, so that we can truly live in the path of God."

As we headed out of the restaurant that night, I engaged in one of my very few acts of unsolicited *keruv*. I handed the grandson my business card. "Your journey sounds amazing," I told him, smiling. "If you ever consider coming home, call me."

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A Taste of Torah

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

Parashat Reeih looks ahead toward the entry of the Israelites into the Land. Apart from the excitement and anticipation of becoming a settled nation, Torah expresses deep concern with regard to the native peoples and their idolatrous practices. Deuteronomy 12:2–4 emphatically declares, "You will utterly destroy all the places where the nations you will dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains and the hills, and under every leafy tree. Tear down their altars, destroy their monuments, and burn their devotional sites with fire. Cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their names. You will not do likewise to the Lord your God." This chilling legislation is historically bound and must be understood within the biblical context. As a young nation, still insecure in its path, Israel is fragile. God fears that the practices of the native peoples will lure the Israelites into idolatry. And so, by wiping out the devotional sites of the Canaanites, they express their loyalty and devotion to the Israelite God. Yet, is there more that can be gleaned from this understandable but disconcerting command?

The classic medieval commentator Rashi shares two interesting insights sparked by Deuteronomy 12:4, "You will not do likewise to the Lord your God." He writes, "It is a prohibition addressed to one who would blot out the name of God from any sacred writings or would pull out a stone from the altar . . . Another possible meaning is that you should not behave like the native peoples so that your sins would cause the sanctuary of your ancestors to be laid waste" (Rashi, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*).

Far from rooting the verse in its literal context, Rashi chooses a midrashic route so as to make this text more relevant to his 'modern' audience. Rashi teases out two central messages for us. First, the legislation of Deuteronomy 12:2–3 commands the Israelites to blot out the names of the gods that were being worshipped by the Canaanites. And so, clearly, one should "not do likewise to the Lord." God's Name in the Hebrew language is sacred. And so one must respect the Divine Name so as to draw a clear distinction between the way we treat our God and the way we are commanded to treat idolaters and their gods. Second, Rashi employs an ethical and moral spin in understanding our verses. The Israelites must act ethically. Violation of the commandments not only leads to one's own depravity but also carries with it the potential to destroy God's sanctuary. Rashi's brilliant and timeless insights allow us to embrace a most troubling passage of Torah and find the relevance that resonates with our modern souls and ethical Jewish living.

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