

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies and Provost, JTS.

Psalm 27

The custom of reciting Psalm 27 during this penitential season is so widespread and the psalm seems so appropriate for the season, it may be surprising to learn that the practice has no basis in early sources. The first mention is by the kabbalist Benjamin Beinisch, who writes in 1706, "Here is a mystical secret . . . anyone who recites this psalm . . . even if there is an evil decree from heaven against that person, it may be annulled." The 13 occurrences of the divine name in the psalm, according to Beinisch, correspond to 13 channels of mercy that are "opened," and which give the psalm its power to "annul all harsh and evil decrees."

Later commentators generally relate it to a passage in the midrash Leviticus Rabbah. Leviticus 16:3 reads, "'with this' (*bezot*) shall Aaron come into the sanctuary." The ambiguous word "with this" serves as a stimulus for the midrash to identify the "this" that Aaron requires. There is a ready correlation between "with this" in the Leviticus verse and the same word in Psalm 27:3, in the phrase "in this (*bezot*) I trust." Whatever accompanies Aaron into the sanctuary on Yom Kippur also induces confidence in the psalmist, even when enemies surround him.

The midrash concludes with the language of Psalm 27:3 embedded in a prayer of thanksgiving (the additions are italicized): "Should an army of *the nations of the world* besiege me, my heart would have no fear; should *the nations of the world* arise against me, in this (*bezot*) I trust—in what you promised me [in saying] 'with this shall Aaron come [into the sanctuary],' returning at last to the Leviticus text that prompted the midrash.

In the midrash, the "enemies" of the psalmist are external. Later commentators often internalize them, identifying them with the psalmist's own evil inclination—in some ways the most terrifying enemy of all: "the evil inclination and all the forces of uncleanness that are brought into being by transgressions."

Psalm 27 is understood to have protective power and it is appropriate for us to invoke that power during this season. "Doing" *teshuvah* demands that we focus on those aspects of ourselves most in need of repair and also on our inability to effect that repair without God's help.

The psalm maps out the pathway to genuine *teshuvah* for us; by reciting and understanding it, we are able to travel that path. The psalmist begins with an expression of complacent self-assurance (Ps. 27:1–3), then the tone grows darker, progressing from expressions of yearning for God's presence and protection (Ps. 27:4–6) to petitions conveying insecurity and fear of abandonment (Ps. 27:7–12), and then in verse 13 to the edge of the abyss: "Had I not the assurance that I would enjoy the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living . . ."—the concluding ellipsis expressing the terror inherent in what is left unsaid.

The "normal" movement of biblical penitential prayer is from complaint to confidence, but Psalm 27 is precisely the opposite: stripping away the pretense of confidence brings the psalmist to the brink of despair. Assuming the role of the psalmist's audience, we recognize that we have only one true hope at the time of judgment, and that is the hope that God's love and mercy will bring about God's forgiveness. In hearing the psalmist's prayer and grasping its import, we ready ourselves for the Days of Awe.

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/x16758.xml

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Parashat Shofetim
Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9
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Parashah Commentary

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

"Alas, Poor Yorick": A Grave Affair

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorr'd in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it." (*Hamlet*, act 5, scene 1, lines 185–188)

As most everyone knows, these lines (even as they are often misremembered) are spoken as Hamlet lifts the skull of his father's court jester from the grave, and contemplates the common fate—decay—of both kings and court jesters. And while this sentiment would be a worthy topic of its own (see Eccles. 11:7–8: "How sweet is the light, what a delight for the eyes to behold the sun! Even if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be. The only future is nothingness!"), what, might you ask, has this to do with our weekly Torah portion?

A fair question, indeed. Among the far-ranging topics of our parashah is the following paragraph:

When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the LORD, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you. You must be wholehearted with the LORD your God. (Deut. 18:9–13)

I wish to call your attention specifically to the Torah's prohibition of "inquiring of the dead." Rashi seems to adumbrate Shakespeare, when he includes "one who asks questions of a skull" among the possible actions that would represent a violation of the biblical commandment. But the Torah is not imagining a philosophical discourse about life when it prohibits "inquiring of the dead," but

rather, in what is likely its original context, necromancy—an act whereby a person would either approach or occupy a tomb (see Isa. 65:1–4) and seek the presence of the departed in order that she or he might give some specific information that would be of supposed benefit to the questioner, or that the dead might intercede with God on behalf of the questioner. This is likely the background of the “witch at Endor” narrative in 1 Samuel 28, when King Saul wishes to communicate with his dead prophet, Samuel, before the fateful battle with the Philistines. It might be such a practice that was characterized by the prophet Isaiah in the following words: “Then deep from the earth you shall speak, from low in the dust your words shall come; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust” (Isa. 29:4). This is the practice that the Torah prohibits, and it equates the “abhorrence” of such an act along with one who would “consign his son or daughter to the fire” and all of the other various proscribed practices on the list.

What lasting impact, you might ask, might this section of the Torah have for us? Who among our people today “practices necromancy,” or “augury,” or any of the other terrible customs described by the Torah? Perhaps it is true that none indulge in these specific behaviors, but nonetheless many people do turn to other practices that contravene the intent of this biblical passage. I am referring to those who would visit (or travel to) a grave in order to seek intercession of the dead in beseeching that God might grant this or that request, even if this be a worthwhile one. For example, a single person despairing of ever finding a mate, or a woman who has thus far been unable to conceive, might visit the grave of some *tzadik* or holy sage in order to attract God’s attention to that individual’s plight. Or a person might go to the grave of a dearly departed loved one to ask that she or he act as an intermediary before God in granting the hoped-for request. However, despite the time-honored convention in some Jewish communities that sanctions these very acts, I would argue that the spirit—if not the exact words—of our Torah portion would continue to prohibit such practices.

As R. Moses Nahmanides (Ramban) explains in a long note on our section, “all human beings desire to know what the future has in store for them, and they will indulge in various types of ‘wisdom’ like these in order to learn this.” Nonetheless, and despite Ramban’s—and perhaps our—sympathy for those who would wish to know the future or would have a sincere prayer answered by any means, our passage concludes, “You must be wholehearted with the LORD your God” (Deut. 18:13). The Torah expects that “with united heart we will be dedicated to God alone, who alone performs all” (Ramban). Neither through necromancy nor through astrology nor through lucky talisman or charm must we know God, but only through our good deeds, performance of the mitzvot, prayer, and Torah study.

When we approach a grave, we must do so only to recall the wonderful things our loved ones, or the heroes of our people, did in the “land of the living,” and we must not do so in order to seek their assistance in our worldly affairs. We rather recite *el maleh rahamim*, to express our love for, and admiration and memory of the dead; and we recite kaddish, accepting God’s judgment and praising God’s name.

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A Taste of Torah

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

The Cairo Genizah, a rich treasure trove of Jewish history (60,000 fragments of this repository are housed at The Jewish Theological Seminary) rediscovered by Solomon Schechter toward the end of the 19th century, attests to the rich Jewish life that flourished in Egypt and beyond. Testimony to the success and richness of the Egyptian Jewish community over many hundreds of years is especially surprising given the pronouncement of this week’s Torah reading, Parashat Shofetim. In legislating laws concerning the appointment of king over Israel, Torah states emphatically, “he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the Lord has warned you, ‘You must not go back that way again’” (Deut. 17:16). How are we to relate to the Torah’s forbiddance of returning to Egypt? Is this a blanket prohibition on living in there, or is this decree somehow restricted in a particular way?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments,

If this simply meant to forbid a return to Egypt it would probably just have said it explicitly rather than placing an emphasis on the manner or way of the return . . . For in fact Egypt had been a land of refuge from Palestine from the earliest times of Jewish history. Abraham went down to Egypt because there was a famine in Palestine. For the same reason, Isaac was about to go there and was only restrained by direct instructions from God. Israel’s whole settlement in Egypt was only brought about by the famine in Palestine which made the sons of Jacob go repeatedly to Egypt to buy food. So that the natural fertility of the Egyptian soil gave Egypt an ascendant superiority over other countries and that made other countries, especially Palestine appear dependent on them. Accordingly, the meaning of this verse is that you will not go from Palestine to Egypt as in the past to obtain from there any national necessities which your own land does not supply. You are not to make yourselves dependent on Egypt. (Hirsch, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 339)

Torah then does not concern itself with the possibility of renewed Jewish settlement in Egypt. The biblical concern within the context of the Israelite king revolves around the quality of the relationship between Israel and Egypt. As the Israelites march toward freedom in their own land, they are cautioned about the fragility of their status. They are now a free people; and that freedom cannot be taken for granted. They are forbidden from returning to the same power dynamic—that is to say, they may not once again become dependent on Egypt. From this moment forward, they must demonstrate their economic and political independence. And more than that, Israelite dependence is on God—not on any human construct. By protecting their newfound status and nurturing their relationship with God and Torah, the Israelites ensure that they will never again return to the shackles of Egyptian slavery. One cannot think of a more important message as we enter the month of Elul and prepare for our sacred reunion with God, Torah, and community.

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