

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Cantor Jack Chomsky, president of the Cantors Assembly; cantor of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Columbus, Ohio; and representative of the Cantors Assembly to the JTS Board of Trustees.

Nusah: A Key to the Meaning of Prayer

Of all the traditional melodies in the liturgical year, I have long been impressed by the remarkable musical setting of the kaddish preceding the prayers for *Geshem* (rain) at Shemini Atzeret, near the conclusion of the fall festival, and *Tal* (dew) at the beginning of Pesah in the spring).

It has been abundantly clear to me for many years that the arrival of rain or dew at the right time and in the right amount was crucial to the survival of the people who chanted or heard the prayer. This life-or-death connection with meteorological phenomena wasn't so clear to me: for most of us, food has come from the supermarket, not from the farm adjacent to the town in which we live. Nonetheless, the sense that survival hinges on the proper agricultural outcome is clear in this ancient melody.

The kaddish, in its various forms, is ubiquitous in Jewish communal worship. Hazzanim know the many different melodies associated with different parts of different services. A few are of particular melodic or modal interest—but none is like the *Geshem-Tal* kaddish, which covers more than an octave in its centuries-old *nusah*. In the Ashkenazic tradition, it is chanted in a minor key with a surprising amount of melisma in the basic *nusah*. (*Nusah* is a term that denotes the customary wording, melody, and mode for our prayer traditions. These traditions are at least hundreds of years old, and precious as a connection to the religious culture available to us in our prayers.) And part of the melody is also identical to what we chanted just a week earlier during *Ne'ilah* on Yom Kippur—again, a rather fateful moment as the gates of Yom Kippur close.

This melody occurs prior to the *Geshem* prayer itself—a complex *piyyut* (liturgical poem) exhorting God to send water for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and the tribes of Israel—with biblical references embedded in each text; some modern versions include reference also to our matriarchs.

The deep emotional expression of the *Geshem* melody for the kaddish preceding the *Geshem* prayer helps open us to this poetry and understand it as a life-affirming plea to God and to nature. It also connects our emotions to the concern and hope for well-being for our farmers in Israel, here, and around the world, as well as for the people whose life and sustenance depend on the outcome of the agricultural process.

If you weren't already planning on a visit to synagogue this Shemini Atzeret (Monday, October 8), please consider doing so—for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Rebecca, and everyone.

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Parashat Sukkot Day Six
Exodus 33:12–34:26 and
Numbers 29:26–31

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Ayelet Cohen (RS '02), Director, The Center for Jewish Living at The JCC in Manhattan.

Immediately on the heels of the intense spiritual work of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot challenges us to turn our lives inside out again, this time quite literally. The Talmud tells us that for the duration of Sukkot we must leave our permanent dwellings and reside in temporary dwellings (BT Sukkah 2b). By its very nature, the sukkah must feel temporary; we must experience the elements in a way that we do not when we are at home. By leaving the comfort and protection of our homes, making the temporary permanent and the permanent temporary for the duration of the holiday, we are more vulnerable and thus more open. We are able to meet the intention of *tze ul'mad* from the Passover seder, and, like the Israelites in the wilderness, in that interstitial space have the opportunity to experience revelation.

We are commanded to “rejoice on the festival,” leading us to think of the holidays as a time of family gathering and celebration: our closest friends and families crowded around an overflowing table. But the Rambam challenges us to go further, reframing our interpretation of celebrating the bounty of the holiday.

When one eats and drinks one must also feed the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, along with all other poor and destitute. But one who locks the gates of one's courtyard, and eats and drinks with one's own family but does not feed the poor and disheartened, is not rejoicing in the commandment, rather rejoicing in one's own belly. (Mishnah Torah Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18)

Especially on Sukkot, when we experience more than at any other time of the year what it means to be vulnerable to the elements, we must push ourselves to share our bounty with those who are disenfranchised and those who have no food or no homes. For far too many people, home is always fragile, and vulnerability is a permanent state. The 12th-century scholar Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) believed that Sukkot helped reinforce the fact that our wealth and comfort is a gift from God.

Do not say to yourself, “My own power and the strength of my hand have won this wealth for me” (Deut 8:17); remember that the Eternal is your God who gives you strength to achieve wealth. Therefore, at the season of the harvest, people leave their homes, which are full of everything good, and dwell in sukkot, as a reminder that in the wilderness we had no possessions and no homes in which to live. For this reason, the Holy One established Sukkot at the time of the harvest, that the people should not be overly proud of their well furnished houses. (Rashbam, Leviticus 23:43)

The Zohar introduces the concept of *ushpizin*, spiritual guests who are the counterparts to the physical guests in our sukkah. “One must gladden the poor, for the portion of those [spiritual guests] one invites must go to the poor” (Zohar 103b–104a). Fittingly, Abraham, known for his own hospitality toward wayfarers, was the first guest on the list of *ushpizin*, further developed by the Kabbalists to include Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David. The tradition developed through the generations, and has expanded to include matriarchs—Ma’yan, created an *ushpizot* chart that includes Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Avigail, Huldah, and Esther. Many families have expanded the custom to symbolically invite other ancestors or historical figures into the sukkah—a wonderful opportunity to teach our next generations about significant people whose presence we want to invoke around our table. Jewish social justice organizations, such as American Jewish World Service and Bend the Arc (formerly Jewish Funds for Justice), have created materials that challenge us to apply the principle to thinking about global justice and immigration policy.

JTS Artist-in-Residence Tobi Kahn’s remarkable *Ushpizin* project further expands this tradition. Kahn invited 19 artists to create a panel exploring the question of who we might want to welcome into the sukkah. The artists, who come from a great variety of traditions and experiences, each bring their own perspective to this question, and have created a beautiful and diverse array of panels that are on display in JTS’s Adele Ginzberg Women’s League Sukkah. One panel is a collaboration between artist Maya Orli Cohen, my sister, and me. It reflects our shared concern that Jewish communities truly embody the value of expanding our sukkah to include those who seek a place within.

Like many rabbis, the most common spiritual questions I face are from people who fear that they are not welcome in Jewish communities. They fear—and too often have gotten the message—that because of their economic or work status, level or type of Jewish education, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, nationality, Jewish status, age, physical or mental ability, level of Jewish observance, or belief or disbelief in God, they are not fully welcome in Jewish life. It is these questions that my sister and I address in our panel.

Our *Ushpizin* panel is mirrored, and includes two passages in Hebrew and English translation. One is a verse from the fraught reunion of Jacob and Esau, “When I look at your face it’s like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 30:10), the other is poet and liturgist Marcia Falk’s reframing of the parental blessing, “Be who you are, and may you be blessed in all that you are.” Looking into the panel, one sees one’s own face, the text, and the reflection of the sukkah. Each viewer becomes the honored guest in the sukkah. Each person sees their divinity reflected at home in the sukkah.

The tradition of *ushpizin* teaches us that it is our obligation to make others welcome. Of course, being an outsider is a quintessentially Jewish experience, so in case we have forgotten, on Sukkot we make ourselves a little less comfortable, and try to feel what it is like to be the stranger. Tobi Kahn’s project deepens our

experience of this tradition, taking it in a new direction while returning it to its source; reminding us to invite not only spiritual, otherworldly guests, but asking us to expand our hospitality, our generosity, and our concern for those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised in tangible, concrete ways.

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A Taste of Torah

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

As we approach the end of the Five Books of Moses with our celebration of Simhat Torah, we arrive at Parashat Vezot ha-Berakhah. Like his ancestor Jacob, Moses issues a moving blessing to each of the Tribes of Israel as he approaches his death. Having just read Parashat Ha-azinu, which contain many expressions of critique and rebuke, we are revived by Moses’s final words as he parts from the Nation that he led to freedom and to the borders of the Promised Land. How may we understand the juxtaposition of these words of rebuke and utterances of blessing? How do they give us a window into the leadership of Moses?

Israeli rabbi Rav Shmuel Avidor Hacoheh (z”l) explains,

The time has come for our great leader, Moses, to part from the nation. At the beginning, Moses imparts words of harsh rebuke and severe warning to the people. He delineates their national failures over the course of forty years of wandering in the desert; he details the weaknesses of the nation; and he doesn’t ignore their stubborn shortcomings. He even mentions the severity of the punishments that will be meted out to the people if they abandon the straight path . . . But at the moment of his parting, he does not say his farewell with an air of anger and rage; rather, his parting words are a declaration of blessing. A true leader does not simply appease the masses. He tells them the truth, even if the truth is bitter. He exposes misdeeds, he cautions against corruption, and he issues warnings. Together with all of this, the leader should embrace his people with love and understanding. Moses leaves his people with “this blessing.” (Avidor Hacoheh, *Likrat Shabbat* [in Hebrew], 218)

The moving exegesis of Rav Hacoheh could not have come at a better time. With the United States moving toward a presidential election, and murmurings of a possible early election in Israel, we would all do well to remind ourselves of the substance of a solid leader. For a leader, as our commentator points out, is not one who simply paints a rosy picture of the future. A true leader is one who challenges his or her people to introspection. Difficult questions should be asked. The people should be challenged, morally and ethically. The nation should look backward, taking stock of past misdeeds, and then forward toward a more promising future. Both in the United States and Israel, our political leadership should embrace and internalize the wisdom of Rav Hacoheh.

As we take refuge in the sukkah over the next few days, let us remind ourselves not to take refuge in complacency and delusion. Too often, elections are about painting unrealistic expectations. Let us all learn to be in touch with reality, continue the introspection that began with the month of Elul, and may we actively work toward creating a future of blessing.

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