

Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Study of Ritual—Study as Ritual (Part 2)

Last week, we looked at the three blessings recited traditionally each day, affirming that the study of Torah is a mitzvah, a source of beauty for all generations, and that God is (continually) giving Torah (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, 4). Today we explore an unusual type of textual engagement that follows these blessings, both immediately and through the unfolding cycle of the siddur. The blessings are followed directly by three texts (*ibid.*, 5): the *birkat kohanim* (Priestly Blessing, Num. 6:24–26); a selection from the Mishnah (Pe'ah 1:1); and a selection from the Talmud (BT Shabbat 127a). Each of them is intriguing.

The Priestly Blessing is found in multiple places in the liturgy: in the “reader’s repetition” of the *Amidah*, and on Shabbat eve at home, when parents bless their children. Traditionally, the text is recited word by word by the contemporary descendants of the *kohanim* in a powerful ritual during the *Musaf* (additional service) on festival days. In the morning liturgy, however, the text is not an act of blessing offered by one person (or group) to another, but a text for study. There is a vast array of commentaries on the text that delve into the language, structure, and context of the words. The encounter with these verses so early in the morning, after the blessings for study, invites us perhaps to explore and delve into the meaning of blessings in general, and of these ancient words of blessing especially.

The immediate succession of selections from rabbinic literature affirms a critical value: these rabbinic texts are themselves Torah. The brilliant introduction by the Rabbis of the concept of the “Dual Torah” asserts that the word *Torah* does not simply reference a single, completed text: the term *Torah she-bikhtav* (Written Torah) refers to the Five Books (Genesis to Deuteronomy); *Torah she-be'al peh* (Oral Torah) refers to the expansive texts of the rabbinic period, and is applied by some scholars to writings and teachings of even our own times. Our rabbis do not write commentaries, they write “Torah.” The selections taken together imply that study of Torah is infinite and of infinite value, and they identify core values such as visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and making peace that derive from Torah and are understood to be a consequence of engaging in its study.

While a single lecture or seminar on these texts may well be fascinating, the daily encounter drives these values from the analytic to the subconscious mind. We internalize the values—and the development of intricate and beautiful musical settings emphasizes this point. We adorn these rich and fascinating texts through music because our encounter with the texts transcends “mere” engagement with the ideas.

A little later in the daily service, the traditional siddur offers an array of texts (biblical and rabbinic) concerned with the sacrificial system on the basis that, absent the ability to offer the sacrifices, study of the relevant laws is the next best thing. The Conservative Movement replaces texts about sacrifices with texts about acts of *tzedakah* and *hesed* (*ibid.*, 9–11).

The ritualized use of rabbinic texts occurs on other occasions, as well. For example, on Shabbat and festivals, the *Musaf* service concludes with a series of texts from the Talmud concerning the spices added to sacrificial offerings and the psalms recited by the Levites each day in Temple times. This material is followed by the famous *Amar Rabbi Elazar* text that affirms the value of scholarship as a source of peace in the world, ending (as does the



Torah from JTS

Va-yeishev 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, director of the National Ramah Commission of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

The Power of Redemption

The theme of oppression and redemption is repeated throughout Parashat Va-yeishev, as we read of many instances in which pain and suffering lead to freedom and joy.

The Joseph narrative is a story filled with highs and lows. First, Joseph is rescued by some of his brothers from certain death at the bottom of a pit. “And Reuben heard about this and saved him from them and said ‘Let us not take his life’” (Gen. 37:21). “They looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead . . . Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites’” (Gen. 37:25–27).

In Egypt, Joseph is rescued from Ishmaelite slavery when he is purchased by Potiphar as a household servant. He not only survives, but he thrives in that environment. “The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master” (Gen. 39:2).

After becoming the trusted head of Potiphar's household, Joseph again falls into captivity, and lands in an Egyptian prison because of the sexual desires and scheming of Potiphar's wife. “She caught hold of him by his garment and said ‘Lie with me.’ But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside” (Gen. 39:12). Eventually, his refusal leads her to accuse him of inappropriate behavior, and Joseph once again finds himself imprisoned.

This week's parashah ends ominously, with Joseph seemingly forgotten. Although Joseph stands out in prison as a brilliant interpreter of dreams, when the chief cupbearer is released and restored to a high position in Pharaoh's court, the Torah states, “Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him” (Gen. 40:21). We know, however, from next week's parashah, that Joseph will once again be redeemed and become the chief leader of Egypt, and that the pattern of oppression and redemption will continue throughout the biblical narrative: the Israelites face starvation, but are saved by coming down to live in Egypt; the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, but eventually are freed and become an independent nation.

For more information about JTS programs and events, or to learn more about JTS, please visit www.jtsa.edu.



This theme of redemption, of being saved and raised up from low places, is quite relevant as Hanukkah approaches, and is a common theme throughout biblical literature—and indeed throughout Jewish history. When we celebrate Hanukkah, we remember a time in our history when we suffered under Greek oppression, only to gain our sovereignty and rededicate our Holy Temple.

From this perspective of Jewish history, we are truly fortunate to be living as Jews in the 21st century. While Jews (and the State of Israel) still face threats, we are mostly secure, live in a time of national redemption in our own land and prosperity in much of the Diaspora. And even in many of the nations that oppressed us in recent decades (Russia, Ethiopia, Syria, etc.), Jews are now either free or have mostly emigrated to freedom. Has the pattern of redemption and oppression finally been broken, or do we continue to face existential dangers?

Some argue that while physical threats have mostly dissipated, our soul as a nation faces unprecedented challenges as assimilation threatens to undermine our accomplishments in all lands outside of Israel—and for some, even within Israel.

These questions are paramount to anyone working with Jewish education, as our perspective has a critical impact on the national self-esteem of our youth. Will they grow up waiting for the next disaster, or confident in a future filled with opportunity? As parents, educators, and leaders, what message do we want to convey, and in what environment can we best convey it?

When the Ramah camping movement was created in Conover, Wisconsin, in 1947, Jews throughout the world were still numb from the pain of the Shoah and the deep scars of destruction. Yet the promise of a new beginning in our ancient homeland also had a deep impact upon the leaders of JTS and Conservative Jewry. While there is no definitive history on why Ramah's founders chose the word *ramah* as the camp's name, I believe that this recurring theme of redemption was critical.

Ramah is a Hebrew word for a high place. When the Israelites experienced their historic redemption from slavery in Egypt, the Torah tells us that they left Egypt "*b'yad ramah*." Translations of this phrase in Exodus 14:8 vary widely, but most understand *yad ramah* to signify both hands and heads held high. The image is of a redeemed people filled with pride, not defeat and dejection.

Another reference to *ramah* occurs on the second day of Rosh Hashanah in the moving haftarah from Jeremiah 31:14: "*Kol b'Ramah nishma*—A voice is heard in Ramah." Could this be the origin of the name "Camp Ramah?" While we might reject this reference given its context—Rachel weeping for her exiled children, refusing to be comforted—the following verses add consolation and hope in the context of redemption: "There is hope for the future, said the Lord, and your children shall return to their borders" (*v'shavu vanim ligvulam*).

In times of struggle or sadness, we all need the hope provided by Jeremiah, who describes Rachel's "voice in the wilderness" of Ramah. Her weeping was soon followed by joy and gladness, with "our children returning to their borders."

All of our experiences in Jewish education, from day school to camp, from youth group to congregational school and more, need to grapple with the themes first presented to us in Va-yeishev and the Joseph story, as we have inherited a history filled with highs and lows, oppression and redemption.

As we read the stories about the redemption of Joseph and celebrate the freedom associated with Hanukkah, let us hope that more of our youth experience the joy of Jewish living that will bring us closer to our ultimate redemption.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

Parashat Va-yeishev 5774

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

The Land of Sojourning

After the relative insecurity and turbulence of Jacob's life (masquerading as his brother Esau, taking flight to Laban's home, becoming the victim of deception vis-à-vis a wife and his wages, and the wrestling match of last week), Parashat Va-yeishev opens with the hope of the patriarch transitioning into a calmer stage of life. One of Rashi's more famous comments is connected to the opening verse of the parashah: "Jacob was settled in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan" (Gen. 37:1): Jacob sought to live peacefully but the misery of the Joseph episode pounced on him." But more than that, inherent in the opening verse is a contradiction of sorts. While *va-yeishev* (was settled) implies a sense of permanence and settlement, *eretz m'gurei aviv* (the land of his father's sojourning) suggests fragility and temporality. Why does Torah refer to the land of Canaan, the territory promised to the descendants of Abraham as a gift and inheritance, as a land of "sojournings"? How could the patriarch be settled in a land that was one of merely "sojournings" and not stability?

Professor Zeev Falk offers dramatic insight into our verse. Falk first demonstrates his surprise by querying, "Why is the land referred to as one of 'sojournings' rather than 'the land that I give to you' (Genesis 28:13) or 'the land of your ancestors and your birthplace' (Genesis 31:3) or 'the land of your birth' (Genesis 31:13)?" Interestingly, he hypothesizes that "perhaps Jacob felt alienated and alone in the land after the rape of his daughter Dina, or he felt closer to his family in Haran or he didn't want to rely on the blessing of the land and so described his connection to the land as being one of ancestral sojourning" (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 81).

What is the wisdom behind Professor Falk's comment? One's connection to and feeling about a land may be a function of the native inhabitants, familial connections, as well as one's personal history. Far from the Land of Israel being given to our ancestors on a silver platter, each of our patriarchs wrestled with his unique relationship to it. Our patriarchal experience with respect to the land dovetails well with a later talmudic teaching: "the land of Israel is acquired through suffering" (BT Berakhot 5a). Faced with the disturbing behavior of the natives of the land, the great distance from his familial connections, and the experience of his "fathers," it is no wonder that Jacob is settled in the land of "sojourning," for he too is a stranger in the land. External and internal forces propel Jacob into this complicated relationship, and ultimately become the harbinger of a prolonged and oppressive sojourn in the land of Egypt.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.