

Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer

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

Prayer: Invitation and Outcry

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month (DVAM), with many organizations and agencies working together to spread awareness and the understanding that this scourge is endemic in modern society—and that no religion and no sector of society is exempt. My friend and colleague Rabbi Lisa Gelber, associate dean of The Rabbinical School of The Jewish Theological Seminary, was invited by FaithTrust Institute to write the “Universal Prayer” for the call of unity that opened DVAM, and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (which convened the call) then created artwork to frame the prayer on a flyer. The prayer has found wide acceptance and recognition.

Why is it that these sentiments cast in the modality of a prayer have a more compelling power for many than an address, a speech, or a printed essay? I believe that the answer here is important, and underlies much of our engagement with liturgy and ritual. For many, prayer is a different form of communication than speech or rhetoric. Prayer—unlike even the most eloquent sermon, speech, or essay—invites and even demands us to utter the words, pronounce the statements, ask the questions.

Rabbi Gelber might have penned an essay expressing the hope that those who see violence against women as endemic would have their eyes opened. But her prayer has each of us demanding action from God. Rabbi Gelber might, like any leader, exhort followers to find strength to carry on the work each day, but her prayer compels each of us to seek that strength as a blessing from God.

Placing in our hands and hearts the words of a new prayer-text, Rabbi Gelber has challenged us to join our voices, hearts, and souls together; to become partners with God to eradicate this scourge from our nation and from this world. Let us turn to her words:

Holy One of life and love,

Bless us with the strength to greet each day with energy and purpose as we work to eradicate sexual and domestic violence and terror. Grant us the wisdom to recognize stumbling blocks for what they are and the creativity to maneuver our way around them.

Open the eyes of those who see violence against women and children as inevitable outcomes of the world in which we live; let them hear the cries of those in need; widen their hearts to hold the many faces of those in this world and beyond who demand our unending support; call forth compassionate words of change from their mouths and commitment to acts of justice and transformation from their hands.

Draw us together as a community of diverse narrative, culture and history, offering support through our presence and intention. Remind us that we are not alone . . . we are not alone.

Help us to engage in intentional practice of thanksgiving; let us be grateful for the accomplishments of those who came before us, the progress we have made and the prospect of a brighter tomorrow. When we are tired and veer towards complacency, stretch out Your hand and re-ignite the passionate fire for divine humanity that lives within.

You, who rolls away the darkness into the light, send us forth as messengers, truth tellers and witnesses to illuminate what is and demand with fortitude a world of safety and respect for women and children in body, mind and spirit.

Just as the dove found an olive branch in the receding flood waters, so too may we find signs of peace and the potential for hope and renewal. May that time come speedily and in our day.

And let us say,

Amen.

As always, I am interested in hearing 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

Va-vera 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Joel Alter, director of Admissions, The Rabbinical School and the H. L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music, JTS.

A Hand to Hold

Her beautiful 16-year-old Ishmael lying whimpering nearby from mortal thirst and her own death close at hand, Hagar—in Genesis 21:15–18—is about as pitiable as one might imagine. So when an angel asks, “*Mah lakh, Hagar?* What troubles you, Hagar?; 21:17), one has to wonder what the angel is thinking. “*What troubles you?*” Why, isn't it plain?

The angel assures Hagar that God will not only see the doomed Ishmael through, but that great fortune beckons: “Fear not, for God has heard the lad's voice where he is . . . A great nation will I make him” (21:17–18). The angel can be forgiven his innocent question, as Hagar heard the same message before. In chapter 16, when Hagar fled Sarai's abuse, the angel sent her back, saying, “I will surely multiply your seed and it will be beyond all counting . . . Look, you have conceived and will bear a son and you will call his name Ishmael. For the LORD has heeded [literally, God heard] your suffering” (16:10–11). The angel's message in chapter 16, inscribed in the boy's name, is that God will act in response to *Hagar's* suffering, by making her only child the father of many. As the child is not yet born, however, the name *Yishma'el* signifies that God hears Hagar.

In our chapter, though, the text plays with the question of who needs to be saved and whom God hears. At 21:16, despairing, Hagar sets (or casts) her ailing son down to die, sits a distance away, and raises up her voice and cries. Without having informed us that Ishmael, too, is crying, the text now tells us that “God heard the voice of the lad.” The angel directs Hagar to step back from her despair and act to save her son's life and prominent legacy. God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water that had been there all along: “She went and filled the skin with water and gave to the lad to drink. And God was with the lad” (21:19–20). The angel continues: “Rise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand, for a great nation will I make him.”

“Lift up the lad”: lift him up because he is so weak from thirst that he cannot move on his own.

“Hold him by the hand”: Bring him to the well to drink and be revived.

“For a great nation I will make him”: The present crisis is not his destiny; greatness is.

While Hagar presumably props her son up and revives him, she does *not*, in fact, lead him to the well: “She went and filled the skin with water and gave to the lad to drink.” Why, then, do we need “Hold him by the hand?” Wouldn’t “lift up the lad” be sufficient?

Another curiosity: True, Hagar has already heard directly from the angel that her life and that of her son are secure. Still, she has been banished from home, sent out by her son’s father to the wilderness with insufficient water and provisions. She has lost her way and, predictably, seen the water run out and her son collapse. At the end of her rope, she leaves her child to die and sobs. Aren’t *her* tears worthy of God’s attention? Why doesn’t God hear her and Ishmael both?

I think the answer lies with “Hold him by the hand.” When the angel tells Hagar to hold her son’s hand, it’s not to guide him to safety, but to save *herself*. Ishmael’s great destiny will save her as well. Hagar and Ishmael are without a family, stateless, and destitute; their prospects this day in the wilderness seem to be nil. The angel comes to tell her to hitch her star to her son’s; he will yet be great and she will share in his greatness. When the angel tells Hagar that God has heard the voice of the lad (rather than hers), it’s as if he is saying she’s already saved. She need only revive her son with the water that’s been there all along. The news that God will be with Ishmael means that he will enjoy a life of blessing, and so commences the story of a great and sustaining people.

Hagar believes that her banishment condemns her to ultimate failure as a mother. So consumed with panic at her hopelessness to protect her son, she is blind to the means for his rescue until God opens her eyes. But neither does she see that her own salvation does not sit upon her shoulders (unlike the bread and skin of water Abraham placed there). Ironically, her own salvation resides in the one she must save: “Hold *him* by the hand (italics added).”

Midrash Sehel Tov (by Menahem ben Solomon in Rome, 1239) draws out this point most poignantly:

[In telling Hagar to lift up her son and then hold Ishmael’s hand,] the angel announces his recovery: “First carry him, and then you will need only take his hand. He will guide *you* by the hand.” This recalls the passage in Isaiah 51:18, describing Jerusalem, the bereft mother figure: “She has none to guide her, of all the sons she bore; none takes her by the hand, of all the sons she reared.” Isaiah, like the angel before him, preaches comfort: *Hit’oreri, hit’oreri, kumi Yerushalayim!* Rouse yourself and arise, O Jerusalem!

In extremis, prayer offers us two insights: first, as God is with us, we must recognize that we have great capacity, wisdom, and strength. Second, that in adversity, we may already be blessed with the help we need. We are rarely truly alone in our quiet desperations.

We pray that if we open our eyes, there are wells to be found. When all appears lost, we mustn’t blame ourselves for our plight, cursing our foolishness and condemning ourselves by relying only upon ourselves. We must learn to look up, to discover wells of water, and to take the hand of those who will, in turn, save us. May God always train our eyes to see and guide our hands to reach out and to hold.

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A Taste of Torah

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

In Every Moment, the Choice Is Ours

Sight and vision play an important role in the two opening narratives of Parashat Va-yera. At the beginning of this week’s Torah reading, the newly circumcised Abraham, resting in his abode of Elonei Mamre, “looks up” and sees “three men rooted before him” (Gen. 18:1–2). Their appearance triggers a flurry of activity in the homestead of our ancestors as Abraham and Sarah scurry to perform the mitzvah of *hachnasat orkhim*, hosting guests in one’s home. These guests—these mysterious messengers—are pampered as they go on to deliver the news that Sarah will conceive. Juxtaposed to this story of generosity and kindness, we then encounter the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah. Interestingly, it opens with the same men setting out on their journey, and in sharp contrast to Abraham’s upwardly gazing posture, they “look down toward Sodom.” What are we to make of the joined positioning of these two stories?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

From the hospitable meal at Abraham, they stood up and looked towards Sodom . . . Sodom offered the most complete contrast to the simple pure atmosphere from which these men were just emerging. They had just seen the foundation of a nation laid on two factors: a) on sanctifying the body with all its urges and lures in pure moral submission to God in *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision) and b) on practicing universal brotherly love, as in the kindness which they themselves enjoyed in Abraham’s home. The hospitable meal at which they had just announced the first foundation stone of the future people of God offered such a contrast to Sodom, formed such a loftiness to the Sodomite debasement to which they now had to wend their way, that they “looked down to the plains of Sodom with criticizing gauging consideration.” For that is the meaning of *va’yashkifu*, that “they looked down.” (*Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 318)

Shakespeare was a master of juxtaposing opposites in his writings and, so too, Torah. The stark contrast between the example of our ancestor Abraham and the behavior of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah gives us pause to reflect on what it means to build an ethical and moral civilization. Rabbi Hirsch emphasizes this notion in commenting on the expression used for the men looking out toward Sodom, *va’yashkifu*. They look down, literally and figuratively, upon the evil that is unfolding in these twin cities. Abraham, on the other hand, looks up. The divine quality of the three men that have just appeared in his home shines through and through. And Abraham rises to the occasion. Hirsch sharpens our exegetical focus as we read through this text. For it is not simply the contrast that is of import, but also the need to recognize these moments as “the foundation of a nation.” Abraham’s descendants must sanctify their bodies and practice kindness to build a sacred future.

Indeed, every moment in life presents us with the choice between Elonei Mamre or Sodom—it is a decision between embracing the presence of God and our fellow humans or banishing the divine from our midst. May we always be blessed with the gumption and sight of Abraham, choosing the path of Elonei Mamre.

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