

Service of the Heart (עובדת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS

For the Sake of my Brothers, Sisters, and Friends

The siddur is full of selections and quotations, from the Bible, the Talmud, Midrash, and even the mystical Zohar. There is great fascination and reward to be found in "unpacking" the paragraphs and pages to which we return so often in the cycles of community (and private) worship.

Toward the end of the Shabbat *Musaf* service, we find a remarkable selection from the Talmud, opening with the words "Amar Rabbi Elazar amar Rabbi Hanina . . ." (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 182). The short passage is complex in structure, and is hard to translate into English because it rests upon interpreting Isaiah 54:13 using an arcane wordplay. However, there are many different approaches to understanding texts and the experience of prayer—and I invite a new approach to this *Musaf* passage and the way we experience it.

Let me first turn to the text itself. *Shalom* occurs six times in the passage, including the final word. Five of these instances occur in biblical proof texts (Isaiah and Psalms) that support or elaborate upon this opening assertion: "*Talmidei chakhamim* (Sages/scholars) increase **shalom** in the world." This is a remarkable claim, because we know that the Talmud is full of debate and discussion. We must learn, then, that debate and disagreement are not incompatible with peace; the quotation from Psalm 122:6 is instructive no less in modernity than long ago. The Psalmist asks peace for "achai vere'a" (my brothers and friends), and the text seems to suggest that if we see those with whom we might debate and disagree as brothers, sisters and friends, only then will our work, discussions, and debates increase peace in the world. It is not the issues themselves, but the relationships among the community members that are most critical.

Now let us look beyond the text. Too often in synagogues the "Amar Rabbi Elazar . . ." passage is omitted for want of time at the end of a long service, and we lose a chance to engage not only with a text that yearns profoundly for peace, but also with an inspiring collection of music it has inspired. Some of the greatest hazzanim have interpreted this text, and in more modern times participatory melodies have been composed by Shlomo Carlebach and the group Safam, among many others. This moment in the service is an opportunity for our souls to be engaged by soaring melodies, and for hearts to be inspired as congregations sing together, "May God's People be blessed with Peace" (Ps. 29:11).

The electronic version of this essay (found at <http://learn.jtsa.edu/content/commentary/va-yiggash/5773/sake-my-brothers-sisters-and-friends>) offers links to some musical settings of the text discussed in this piece.

As always, I am interested to hear 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

Parashat Va-yiggash
Genesis 44:18–47:27
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, Vice Chancellor and Director of Community Engagement, JTS

Unanticipated Consequences

Joseph's brothers got very lucky. What started as an act of malice inspired by jealousy and spite turned out to secure the future of the Jewish People. Did they imagine the implications of their action? Did Joseph's brothers know that their initial plot of murder and their eventual sale of Joseph into slavery would ultimately save their own lives? No, they did not. Looking back to Parashat Va-yeishev, we see their ultimate goal: "Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!" (Gen. 37:20). Their initial cruelty is tempered by Reuben and Judah, but what remains clear is their motivation: that the dreamer's dreams would no longer influence their individual and collective standing in the family.

But we know where the story ends. As readers of Torah, we see the ripple effects of Joseph's sale into slavery: as the narrative unfolds, we watch as Joseph moves quickly from the depths of despair to a position of influence and prominence at the right hand of Pharaoh. It is in this role that Joseph saves his family and ours.

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do as follows: load up your beasts and go at once to the land of Canaan. Take your father and your households and come to me; I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you shall live off the fat of the land.'" (Gen. 45:17–18)

Sociological scholar Robert K. Merton would have categorized Joseph's eventual rise to a position of authority in Pharaoh's court and his ability to move Jacob's entire clan to Goshen and sustain them with the bounty collected during the years of plenty in Egypt as "unanticipated consequences of purposive social action" (*American Sociological Review* 1:6, Dec. 1936). In his article by that title, Merton builds the case that there are five primary causes of unanticipated consequences: ignorance—we simply can't know everything that could happen as a result of an action; error—we can make an incorrect judgment when trying to solve a problem; immediate interest—our personal involvement in a situation can eclipse the potential enduring impact of what we do; basic values—what we believe to be true

may compel or forbid particular actions; and self-defeating prophecy—our personal fear can drive us to force a solution before the problem is actually a problem.

Mired in a myriad of emotions that clouded their judgment and prevented them from seeing the potential impact on the trajectory of divine promise, Joseph's brothers acted without considering the unanticipated consequences. Or, in Merton's language,

[T]he exigencies of practical life frequently compel us to act with some confidence even though it is manifest that the information on which we base our action is not complete . . . situations which demand immediate action of some sort will usually involve ignorance of certain aspects of the situation and will bring about unexpected results." (900)

There is no doubt that Joseph's brothers had not considered the implications of their action. They had heard the dreams; they knew that Joseph saw himself as the heir who would stand in line behind Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Why didn't they believe in this destiny? Why couldn't they see the divine plan?

I believe that their actions reflect a mind-set that is antithetical to Joseph's. Joseph is not only the dreamer, he is a believer in the divine plan. Throughout the narrative, time and again, Joseph views what is happening to him not as an unanticipated consequence but rather as the fulfillment of God's will. As Sarna's *JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis* indicates, in Joseph's passionate, revelatory speech to his brothers, he states three separate times that what happened was not an unanticipated consequence, but God's will: "He no longer accuses the brothers of having sold him but says they 'sent' him, thereby substituting the beneficial result for their evil purpose" (309). The switch in his language is remarkable. He moves quickly from accusing them—"I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt" (Gen. 45:4)—to "God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance" (45:7).

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, defines this as the worldview of the prophet. The prophet is one who sees neither chance, nor free will, nor the results of purposeful action, but rather the will of God at work in all action. Maimonides furthermore writes (2:48) that textual clues for this in the Bible are anything that is stated, spoken, commanded, written, or achieved by sending—as in our case here.

Reading the Torah passage this way, we see a stark contrast between Joseph's worldview and that of his brothers, and can gain a greater understanding of why his role is so essential to the survival of Jacob's family and our People. Joseph understood the divine plan. He believed in the path that was set from the moment of "*lekh lekha*," when God started Abraham on a journey that continues through today. He knew, and sincerely believed, that whatever happened to him along the way—good or bad—was part of that plan.

The brothers, on the other hand, were myopic; they could only focus on their jealousy and their current position. They could not imagine living another moment eclipsed by this fanatical, delusional dreamer. For them, there was no other recourse. There was no other way to act—and because they did not believe in the divine plan, they acted. In their nonbelieving eyes, what resulted was an unanticipated consequence that happened to be very lucky for them.

This lesson rings true for us today: We can choose how we see the world. Do we look through the eyes of the brothers and view what happens to us—either good or bad—as being made up of unanticipated consequences, or through the eyes of Joseph and see God's will in the world?

This is not a proclamation of predeterminism, or believing that God dictates what steps we take in our lives, but rather about what I believe to be the benefits of a religious

worldview. How do we contextualize our lives? Do we see the things that happen to us as unanticipated consequences, or do we see them through the lens of our rich tradition, our history, our texts, our beliefs, and Jewish thought?

The holiday of Hanukkah that ended at the beginning of this week is one with many narratives. We can tell the story as one of military victory or of miracle. We can relate the tale of the Maccabees, or see that victory as connected to the miracle of the pure oil that brightened the darkness of those days and these. The choice is ours.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Over the past few weeks, we have been immersed in the story of Joseph, from the fateful gift of the striped robe, to his sale to the Ishmaelites and Midianites, to his imprisonment in Egypt, his meteoric rise, and finally the family reunion. Now we are witness to the emotional crescendo of the narrative with Joseph's revelation to his brothers. He urges his brothers to come forward, and declares,

"I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you . . . God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45:4–8)

In addition, Joseph urges his brothers to gather the family from Canaan and to come down to Egypt, where they will partake of the bounty of the land. What may we learn from Joseph's moving revelation and his words to the brothers?

Everett Fox writes,

In revealing his true identity at last, Joseph makes two points: first, that it was all part of God's plan; and second, that the family must immediately prepare for migration to Egypt. Thus the personal story is intertwined with the national one, and the text therefore gives limited time and space to psychological details. The motif of God's plan is stressed by the repetition of "God sent me" (verses 5, 7 and 8), while the anticipated bounties of settling in Egypt are brought out by the threefold "good things of Egypt" (verses 18, 20 and 23) and by the repeated exhortation to "come" (verses 18 and 19). (*The Five Books of Moses*, 212)

Fox is sensitive and masterful in interpreting the personal and national narratives. Joseph's mature and deep reading of his life's drama stands at the essence of our story: for it was God, not any human actor, who orchestrated the events that brought him down to Egypt. And more than that, it was not simply the descent of an individual. Now our eyes are opened to the real drama—the descent of a family and ultimately a nation. Egyptian bounty, we know well, will prove quite ephemeral. Those blessings will turn into bitterness as the Israelites become enslaved. Knowing the end that will result in freedom and a return to Israel is *hatzi nechama*, half comfort. Still, Joseph's mature reading of his own life, combined with Everett Fox's insight, allows the reader to stand back and see the big picture—with deeper understanding of its piercing emotion and powerful context.

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