

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

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

Israel: Memory and Dreams (Part 2)

Following the transition from the pain-filled memories of Yom Hazikkaron (State of Israel Memorial Day) to Yom Ha'atzma'ut (State of Israel Independence Day), it is fitting to look closely at the prayer recited in so many synagogues (of all denominations) around the world: *Tefillah l'Shalom HaMedinah* (the Prayer for the State of Israel). There is a "legend" that the text was composed by Israeli Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon, but in fact the text was composed by Israel's Chief Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog (1936–1949), and a critically important phrase was added by Agnon in a handwritten note.

The prayer begins with the phrase, "*Avinu shebashamayim . . . barekh et medinat Yisrael*" (Our Father in Heaven bless the State of Israel) [*Siddur Sim Shalom Shabbat and Festivals*, 149]. It is worth noting that the text does not ask for blessing upon Eretz Yisra'el (the Land of Israel), a concept well founded in biblical and rabbinic sources, but upon a concept born out of modernity, *Medinat Yisra'el* (the State of Israel). A state is not a phenomenon of nature, it has no specific location; it is a human construct, rooted in the idea of law—the word *medinah* is derived from the Hebrew *din* (law). Later, the prayer asks the blessing of peace for the Land and all its inhabitants. The phrase added by Agnon now makes its appearance, describing the State of Israel as "*reishit tsemihat ge'ulateinu*" (the beginning of the flowering of our Redemption). This is an extraordinary and, ultimately, messianic claim that lifts the establishment of Israel from the arena of politics into ultimate spiritual Redemption. The phrase "flowering of our Redemption" is based upon the metaphor of Isaiah (11:1) that speaks of a "flowering of the shoot of Jesse," and that heralds the dawning of the Messianic Era.

The claim is made and affirmed each week that the very establishment and existence of the State of Israel is a step toward the perfection of humanity and the world. As the history of Israel and the world unfolds, we see (with perhaps some sadness) that the hour of Redemption remains further away than might have been hoped for in 1948, and some congregations have inserted an additional word so that prayer reads "Bless the State of Israel, *shet'hei* (that it might become) the beginning of the flowering of our Redemption" (*Mahzor Lev Shalem: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, 117).

So may it be that the People, Land, and State of Israel come to embody and bring to reality the vision of the Prophets and the founders of the State, and that, in the future, it will be manifest to all that in Israel is the seed of peace and Redemption for all the world, *tikkun 'olam*.

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarath@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Aharei Mot—Kedoshim 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Director of Planned Giving and Rabbinic Fellow, JTS.

Getting out of Your Own Way

My friend Jen could never have known when she accepted her colleagues' invitation to join them for an after-work party that she was the only one in the office who did not share their recreational drug habit. She could never have foretold that trying something just once to be social would turn out to be a thrill beyond her wildest imagination, or that the feeling of belonging it would engender would push her to regular use with her new friends. It was not until a few parties turned into a few months and then a few years that she realized she had become addicted, and that this addiction was ruining her life.

In the months that followed her detox and recovery, she began to wonder: To what had she been the most blind? Her growing addiction? The loneliness and need for acceptance that allowed it to flourish? The passage of time as she formed the habit? And, how many times had she ignored—totally unable to hear it—the pleading of family and friends to stop?

I found myself thinking of Jen—and of my own struggles and habits—when I read Leviticus 19:14: "You shall not . . . place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God. I am the Lord." Taken literally, this is a verse about respecting the disabled. Taken figuratively—as the Rabbis give us ample precedent and license to do—it is about all of us.

Who is blind? Well, we all are. Rashi says it straight out, on his gloss to *before the blind*: "*hasuma badavar*," he writes; you shall not place a stumbling block before one who is *blind about something*. Addiction is a hard example; but don't we come up against this regularly, whether the topic at hand is about taking the car keys away from parents who do not recognize they are no longer safe drivers, or encouraging someone to end a relationship that is harmful to them? We have all lived through the excruciating experience of seeing something someone else does not. What this verse invites us to consider is how we help one another through that blind spot, to see what is so difficult for us to see.

Of course, we are in a bind. Rashi notes what Jen experienced when he writes about not giving advice to someone that is not appropriate for him or her. We might think we know best, but the other person cannot hear it; moreover, we might not really know, for we too are blinded by self-interest, love, our own habits and weaknesses and personalities. The Yom Kippur liturgy, with its invocation of

sins we committed knowingly and unknowingly, is a reference to this, too. We are all blind, and we all trip, and we have to work hard not to cause one another and ourselves too much damage or pain. By the time the Rabbis of the Talmud are done with this verse, they have applied it to offering wine to a *nazir* (who has taken a vow of abstention from alcohol), selling *shatnetz* (the mixture of linen and wool forbidden in this week's parashah) to an unsuspecting customer, and handing a weapon to one who is prone to violence. Each of these seems pertinent to the problems of our society, in which we worry about "rights versus responsibilities" when it comes to things like drugs, credit lending, and gun violence.

Read that broadly, the verse becomes a charge of social obligation. Nechama Leibowitz defines *blind* as one who is greedy, selfish, or morally callous to the extent that he or she is *blinded* from doing what is just. She writes from Israel in 1974:

The arms merchant cannot extenuate his act by claiming that he had not sold his death-dealing instruments for illicit uses, and that he left the decision on when to use them to the discretion of the purchasers . . . the Torah teaches us that even by sitting at home doing nothing, by complete passivity and divorce from society, one cannot shake off responsibility for what is transpiring in the world at large . . . By not protesting . . . you have become responsible for any harm arising therefrom, and have violated the prohibition, "You shall not put a stumbling block before the blind." (*Studies in Vayikra/Leviticus*, 1974)

By now we have been offered two definitions of *blind*: Rashi's *hasuma badavar*, one who is blind about a particular matter, and Leibowitz's moral blindness of a lazy social conscience. Nachmanides offers a third, based on his reading of the final part of the verse, "You shall fear your God. I am the Lord."

What is that last part of the verse doing here? In this double parashah, and indeed throughout the *humash*, we see it over and over again, and so it is tempting to read right through it. But if we slow down, we wonder: what is it teaching us *here*? Nachmanides writes that only God is the One who sees that which is hidden. In fact, he points out, unobserved crimes are more likely to be committed; it is human nature to try to get away with something when we think we will not be caught. And so, in a know-before-Whom-you-stand vein, he admonishes: fear the God who sees all. It will keep you from stepping into your own blind spot, or tripping up someone else who cannot see what they are doing.

Years ago, walking down an overcrowded Broadway sidewalk during rush hour, I witnessed the crowd jostle a blind man who was guiding himself with a red-tipped walking stick. "Excuse me," he announced to all around him quite theatrically. "I didn't see you." It strikes me that, in fact, we are all that man, and we are all the crowd bumping into him, too. Walking down the crowded path of life we bump into one another with no malicious intent, but with plenty of ability to do harm. So, too, we guide ourselves with what means we have in order to navigate our own life's path despite our own blind spots—be they physical, psychological, or moral. While our haftarah this week is Amos, who warns us against sin but also holds out hope for redemption, my own thoughts turn to Isaiah, who offers a different use of that same verb, *fear*. "Fear not, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God: I will strengthen you, indeed, I will help you; moreover I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness." (41:10). Somewhere between fearing God and

trusting in God's guidance, somewhere between the self-awareness that each of us is blind to in our way and the commitment that we will not place a stumbling block in another's path, we gather the strength to overcome life's challenges.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Embracing Life in the Face of Death

This past week, we commemorated State of Israel Memorial Day (Yom Hazikkaron) and State of Israel Independence Day (Yom Ha'atzma'ut). The juxtaposition of these two observances is jarring. Living in Israel, one feels how mourning permeates every moment of Yom Hazikkaron: from the piercing siren that sounds around the entire country at 8:00 p.m. to the mournful songs played on Israeli radio; from the *Yizkor* (memorial service) stickers with the Israeli plant known as *dam hamakabim* (the blood of the Maccabees) to the throngs of Israeli citizens flooding Mount Herzl Cemetery. At the close of this sobering day, *transition* ceremonies give way to the festivities of Yom Ha'atzma'ut: fireworks decorate the night sky and festive barbeques fill the landscape of every square meter of Israeli parks. Mourning gives way to joy and unbridled celebration. Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hacohen, one of the best known and beloved rabbis of the modern State of Israel, points out how this week's parashah, Aharei Mot, is almost always read in the same week as these commemorations. To what extent does the parashah reflect the dramatic opposites witnessed in the calendar?

We know well, the parashah opens, "after the death of the two sons of Aaron." The deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, remain inexplicable to this very day. Avidor Hacohen writes,

This week's *parashah* has become an allusion to that which we experience in the calendar: such is the fate of this nation of Israel—every new accomplishment of the nation, every joy experienced seems to be inextricably connected to the fall of its children. It is also striking that the Torah reading is not solely occupied with death. Specifically, we read of life in this *parashah*: "you will observe all of my ordinances and my laws so that you will live through them, I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:5). This verse has become a cornerstone of Judaism; and out of this text we learn that the saving of a life takes precedence over the entire Torah. (Avidor Hacohen, *Likrat Shabbat* [translated from the Hebrew], 119)

Death and tears have too often been the painful refrain of Jewish history. But as Rav Shmuel Avidor Hacohen reminds us, the opposite side of the pain is life—choosing and embracing life with fervor, zest, and appreciation. The calendar reminds us that we must pause to reflect on these two aspects of the Jewish journey. And more than that, Torah powerfully echoes such a message in this week's parashah.

Happy 65th birthday to the State of Israel!

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