

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

Kol haneshamah tehalle! Yah! (All that has breath shall praise God!)

This is the final verse of Psalm 150—the culmination of the book of Psalms. Every day our set liturgy includes the final six psalms (145 through 150), and, to my personal sorrow, the pacing of the so-called “preliminary service” generally allows a couple of minutes (at most) for a rushed recitation of these classic and profound poetic texts. Fortunately, in many communities—at least on Shabbat, and even on weekdays—a little more time is allowed for Psalm 150. We find a glorious array of musical interpretations of the text that exemplify the diverse approaches to religious music of contemporary Jewish life. Some examples will be found at the end of this essay in the electronic version (please visit learn.jtsa.edu/?torah-commentary).

The text of the psalm is deceptively simple; it can be seen purely as a list of the musical instruments engaged in ancient ritual celebrations: harp, cymbals, shofar, lute, drums, etc. But it offers and invites far more. Its beginning calls for God to be praised “In God’s holy place, [and] in the highest heavens.” The “holy place” is the Temple in Jerusalem, an entirely corporeal locale, while the “highest heavens” are transcendent, far beyond our world. The musical instruments represent corporeal praise, but the psalm goes further, seeking praise not only originating in fabricated instruments, but from *kol haneshamah*, the very breath of life itself. The word *neshamah* has evolved to mean “soul,” but in biblical Hebrew it means “breath,” as in “the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7).

Psalm 150 offers parallel and paradoxical understandings of God and the way that we praise God. We have corporeal, tangible places where we seek (or even locate) the divine, our synagogues no less than the ancient Temple; but the “real” location of the divine transcends our structures. We look to praise God with our instruments, our words, our voices—but the truest praise transcends these—looking to the universal, the breath, the soul. In the words of Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Magonet¹,

“It is not the Jewish People alone who are called upon to praise God, but every soul, every living creature that knows God as the source of its existence.”

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.

¹Commentary to Psalm 150 in *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship* (vol. 2), a siddur published by the Reform Movement in the UK, 2008, 150.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Beshallah
Exodus 13:17–17:16
January 26, 2013
15 Shevat 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Robert Harris, Associate Professor of Bible, JTS.

“He Taught Him a Tree” (?!)

This week's parashah contains some of the most memorable narratives in the entire Torah: the splitting of the Reed Sea, the miracle of the manna, the battle with Amalek. In the midst of all these narratives comes a pithily told “little tale”:

Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. 24 And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” 25 So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test. 26 He said, “If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer.” Exod. 15:22–26

This translation is according to the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS). Although this is the “industry standard,” as we shall see, the translation is problematic.

In a sense, this story should evoke serious consternation among its readers: here the Israelites have only just experienced what is possibly the greatest of God's miracles—cleaving the sea and enabling the Israelites to finally and completely escape the clutches of Pharaoh—and immediately they begin to complain. Moreover, they have just been saved *from* water, and now they are grumbling *about* water.

But this, alas, is nothing new. “Tell us what You've done for us lately,” the Israelites seem to be saying to God. “Splitting the Sea of Reeds?! That was *so yesterday!*” In fact, readers of the Torah know that the Israelites will continue to grumble for the next 40 years. And that old saw about the 40 years of wandering, that “the old generation needs to go, and a new generation needs to arise that did not know the Egyptian slavery,” does not really fit the context of Scripture. (If you don't believe me, just read the narratives from the 40th year of wandering, the book of Numbers, chapters 20 to 36; these include such sins as the Israelites' complaints about water [Num. 20] and food [21] and, worst of all, the apostasy at Baal Peor [25]. The “generation born in the wilderness” complains

and rebels as much as the first generation had.)

Let's return to our parashah. What is remarkable is not the behavior of the Israelites; rather, God's response is what ought to capture our attention. Let us look again, a bit more closely than we did before: "the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' 25 So he cried out to the LORD, and *the LORD showed him a piece of wood*; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet." First, we must dispense with the word *piece*—it is nowhere to be found in the Hebrew text (though the translators justified including it in their 1969 publication *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, 171). However, the verb in "God *showed*" is much more problematic: the translation resolves a difficulty found in the Hebrew text, without (in my humble opinion) being quite loyal enough to the original.

The underlined word *va-yorehu* actually means "The LORD *taught* him a tree" (or "taught him wood," if you prefer). It is easy to understand why the NJPS translators preferred to render "he showed him" for "he taught him": their reading is more "reasonable," and they accomplished this change deftly by emending a single vowel in the Masoretic text. However, in resolving a difficult Hebrew text through these means, the translators have unfortunately prevented their readers from the challenge of interpretation. What might the Torah have meant through the strange locution of God "teaching a tree" to the Israelites at this particular juncture?

The great 13th century Spanish commentator R. Moshe ben Nahman (Ramban, or Nahmanides) addresses our particular question on several levels. In one of his interpretations, he also faces the problematic verb *va-yorehu* (head on), and claims that the *peshat* (plain meaning) interpretation is that God taught Moses "about the tree" to help the Israelites get along in the wilderness, where finding potable water is often problematic. The particular tree that God "showed" or "taught" Moses contained properties that would sweeten the water, analogous to the way Elisha sweetened water with salt (see 2 Kings 2:19–22).

But we may prefer a *sweeter* interpretation found originally in a midrash, the Mekhilta:

R. Eliezer taught . . . What does the Torah mean by *they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water*? . . . The "expounders of traces" [an elusive rabbinic term for "expositors"] say: they did not find words of Torah, which are metaphorized as water, as in: *Ho, all who are thirsty, Come for water* (Isaiah 55:1). It was because they were without words of Torah for three days that they rebelled. Therefore, the Elders and the Prophets decreed that Israel should read from the Torah on Shabbat, Monday and Thursday.

Thus, the midrash accounts for our continued liturgical practice of publicly conducting a Torah service frequently enough so that we should never go three days without words of Torah.

So much for the water; what about teaching the tree? Note the troublesome verb yet again: *va-yorehu*. As you pronounce this word, hear the connection between *va-yorehu* and Torah: the two words share the same trilateral Hebrew root. So how does God teach Moses a tree? Again, the Mekhilta employs the same figurative approach it had used with regard to the water:

The Torah doesn't say that God "showed him a tree"; rather it states, "God taught him a tree." The "expounders of traces" say . . . words of Torah are metaphorized as a tree, as it says, *She is a tree of life to those who hold her*. (Prov. 3:18)

Now, *that* should strike a familiar chord. We have long come to associate trees and Torah, and, in fact, we employ this verse to close every Torah service: *etz hayyim hee la-mahaziqim bah*. One may sense through this connection that the Mekhilta's midrash

is not as outlandish as it might have seemed at first. Reread the narrative with which we began this commentary: just after Moses "sweetened the waters" by throwing in the tree, the Torah relates, "There [God] made for them a fixed rule" (v. 25). Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) explains this to mean that at this point in the narrative, Moses begins teaching Torah to the Israelites and, correspondingly, God begins to "heal" the people by giving them sweet water in the desert. Thus, the Israelites begin to associate the process of learning Torah with the healing power of God's words and deeds. And so may it be with us: may we merit that our Torah study become for us a sign of God's loving care, and may we be both joyful and grateful for this study as thirsty people in the desert are when they quench their thirst with sweet water. *Amen ve-amen!*

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

A Taste of Torah

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

Fear to Fortitude

As the Israelites march toward the Reed Sea, Pharaoh has a notorious change of heart. The Egyptians pursue the newly freed nation. Torah narrates, "Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord. And they said to Moses, 'Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to the wilderness? . . . Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness!'" (Exod. 14:10–12). How could it be that a nation that witnessed the powers of God through the Ten Plagues and a miraculous deliverance tremble at their finest moment? And how could they deign to choose the enslavement of Egypt over the freedom of Israel?

Abraham Ibn Ezra, the prolific 12th-century Spanish exegete, comments,

It is surprising that a camp of six hundred thousand armed men were afraid of their pursuers and would not fight for their lives and those of their children. The answer, of course, is that the Egyptians had been the masters over the Israelites. The generation of the Exodus had learned from their youth to bear the yoke of the Egyptians, and they were submissive by nature. How could they suddenly fight their masters? For the Israelites were not trained in war . . . for this whole generation was destined to die in the wilderness—for they would not have had the strength to fight the Canaanites. They had to be replaced by a new generation that had not known exile and whose character was exalted. (*Commentary on Torah*, Exod. 14:13)

Our surprise is prefigured by the astonishment of Ibn Ezra. Given the large number of supposedly armed Israelites facing their Egyptian pursuers, how could they be afraid? Ibn Ezra's response is thoughtful and heartening. While numbers and weapons matter, morale and attitude play an even greater role at a time of existential threat. For over 400 years, the Israelites had known only the reality of servitude. And so switching gears in the immediate aftermath of their release was difficult, if not impossible. One can take the Israelites out of Egypt; it is much more difficult to take the Egypt out of the Israelites. Having grown in an atmosphere of oppression, weakness, and abuse, this tragic generation must relent, making the space for a new generation of Israelites that can inhale the freedom of Israel and serve God with all their heart and soul. Only then will they be able to transition from fear to fortitude.

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