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.

"Who Are We?" A "Prayer" That Asks Questions (Part 1)

Many of us are accustomed to the idea that the "prayers" we find in the siddur will be filled with praises for God or with requests. In the first paragraph of our core prayer, the *'Amidah*, we praise God as "*ha'el hagadom hagibbor vehanora"* (the great, mighty and awesome God), and then continue a little further with requests for wisdom, health, good harvest, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, peace—and that our prayer be heard.

There are texts within the liturgy that have the capacity to surprise and intrigue us, and since I was a child I have been captivated by a single paragraph in the section of the service known as *Birkhot Hashahar* (the morning blessings). In a traditional synagogue this section might last for the first 15 minutes of a three-hour service—so many of those who arrive a little late will miss it. A consideration of whether synagogue services *should* last for three hours will be presented in a future column.

Our paragraph begins innocently with the words *"Ribbon ha'olamim . . . "* (Sovereign of all worlds), and can be found on page 66 of *Siddur Sim Shalom*. The sentence reads in full, "Sovereign of all worlds, not upon our merit do we rely in our supplication but upon Your limitless love." We might imagine that after a self-deprecating introduction, we would find a request or petition for divine love, support, compassion, or mercy. But our expectation is confounded; instead we find an uncomfortable series of questions that are *not* addressed to God, but to ourselves:

> *Mah anachnu*: Who/what are we? What is our life? What is our compassion? What is our righteousness? What is our salvation? What is our strength? What is our power?
>
> *Mah nomar lifanekha*: What can we say in Your presence?

These are not easy questions, and if we were to take them seriously, it would add no small amount of time (and spiritual effort) to the Shabbat and daily services. We even find in a commentary to the siddur written by Baruch Halevi Epstein (1880–1941, Pinsk) an expression of concern that "this prayer might come to the worshipper like a bitter vegetable following delightful appetizers, . . . and that it might even (God forbid) lead a person to distress or depression." Others see the questions as offering an opportunity for self-examination each day. How does our liturgy deal with these troubling questions, which conclude with an even more troubling quote from the opening of Ecclesiastes: " . . . *ki hakol havel"* (. . . for all is in vain)?

The answer is with the powerful word *but*. The Ashkenazic text continues with the phrase, "But we are your People, the children of Your Covenant, the descendants of Abraham . . . ," offering the consoling thought that even if we have no good answer to the question in our own right, we can appeal to *yichus*—to our ancestry.

Maybe, even if we come late to services, we might quickly glance at page 66 and see if we have an answer to just one of the questions: "Who are we? . . . What is our life?"

There will be further exploration of this text next week.

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Rabbi Marc Wolf
Vice Chancellor
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu

JTS The Jewish Theological Seminary

Torah from JTS

Parashat Hayyei Sarah
Genesis 23:1–25:18
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Parashah Commentary

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

The Torah does not prepare us for Sarah's death. We come face-to-face with it shortly after recounting the length of her life in the first verse of the parashah: "Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to 127 years. Sarah died in Kiriath Arbah . . . " (Gen. 23:1–2a). Abraham and Ishmael also die in this week's parashah, prefaced by a similar recounting of the length of their lives. All three scenes are relatively formulaic; however, it is Abraham's last days that fill the balance of the parashah. Where Sarah and Ishmael seem to fade from the scene, Abraham actively prepares for his death. The details of the burial of Sarah and finding a wife for Isaac that occupy the parashah rest in stark contrast to the death narratives of both Abraham's wife and firstborn son.

Nahum Sarna, in his *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, recognizes that these two stories play an important role in Abraham's life. After the climax of the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah, Sarna notes:

> For all intents and purposes, [Abraham's] biography is complete. But two important issues remain: the concern with mortality and the preoccupation with posterity. The former finds expression in the acquisition of a hereditary burial site, the latter through the selection of a wife for Isaac so that the succession of the line may be secured. (156)

In Abraham's life, we recognize the importance of these moments; however, there is a larger context within which we must read the narrative of Abraham. Beyond the action on the page, our collective narrative is unfolding as well—and textual keys are our clue to take note.

Words are important to the Torah. Not only is meaning the fodder for every commentary from the pre-rabbinic period through today, but the actual currency of words spent by telling a story in the Torah is key. The Torah has roughly 80,000 words (Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* has 137,000; let's be

happy we don't have to read it in shul); Parashat Hayyei Sarah has two episodes that are particularly word heavy. After Sarah's death, we read of the purchase of the Cave of Machpelah (23:1–20) and then the betrothal of Isaac (24:1–67). Each has elements that force us to pay attention: with the Machpelah story, it is the deeply legal nature of the narrative; with the betrothal of Isaac, it is the sheer length (there is no story in the Abraham narratives that exceeds it). We find ourselves asking, what position do these seemingly ordinary tasks (burying a loved one and finding a mate for one's progeny) have in the overall plot? What are we—the inheritors of the Torah—to learn from the emphasis the Torah places on these stories?

I believe the extended narratives of Abraham in Parashat Hayyei Sarah establish an archetype whereby the death scenes of the patriarchs signal moments of historical presence—moments when our patriarchs take decisive actions that intentionally move the story forward, passing the baton of history to the next generation. With Isaac it is the elevation of Jacob over Esau, the firstborn son and natural heir (here, our patriarch, blinded by his role in the chain of succession, does not have the ability to act autonomously, so Rebecca serves as his agent). In the story of Jacob, we read the extended account of the blessings bestowed on each of his heirs.

There can be no doubt that in the foundational narrative of the Jewish people, the transition between generations would be important; these are not casual moments. These are moments when Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are keenly aware of what has come before them, and what can potentially transpire in the future. These are moments when our patriarchs proactively set events in motion—and to highlight that importance to us, the readers, the Torah offers a generous helping of words.

In his work *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, a professor of Jewish History at Columbia University, recognizes the innovation of Judaism in the form of the Torah. He writes that when we left the Garden we abandoned paradise and began to understand the world from the point of view of history. Innate to that worldview is that we mine history for its meaning—a revolutionary concept in the ancient world: "It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new worldview whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam" (8).

This is the force of the Abraham narratives in Parashat Hayyei Sarah. What we read is not simply a recording of historical events—not merely a moment in the life of Abraham—it is a moment in the life of a people. There is a grander import.

I can think of no better lesson for a time when every editorial writer, news reporter, and political wonk advises us that we are living through a moment of historical significance. Attuning ourselves to the larger impact is what we learn from the narratives of Hayyei Sarah. It is through mining this moment for its deeper meaning that we will unearth its true historical message.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Immediately after the drama of the binding of Isaac, we read Parashat Hayyei Sarah. Why the juxtaposition of these two parashiyot? Notably, at the end of the trial of Genesis 22, Isaac is absent. We read that "Abraham returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beersheba" (Gen. 22:19). What may account for Isaac's absence at the close of the story?

Midrash Va-yikra Rabbah 20:2 suggests that Isaac returned to his mother: "She asked him, 'Where have you been my son?' Isaac answered, 'My father took me and led me on a terrible journey . . . ' At this, she said, 'Woe upon the son of the inebriated woman! Were it not for the angel you would have been slaughtered?' Isaac replied, 'Yes.' At that, she screamed six times . . . she had not finished doing this when she died." And so, one may argue that these Torah readings are placed perfectly together: Sarah dies as a consequence of hearing the news of her son's near sacrifice. Yet, how else may we understand the placement of these narratives?

Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen writes,

> This *parashah* [Hayyei Sarah] comes, as it were, to complete the previous *parashah* [of Va-yera]. For one may allege that Abraham is a brutal person; he took his only son to be bound on the altar. Perhaps, they will claim, that Abraham is a hard, uncaring soul; he is a man that lives in splendid isolation with his God and knows nothing of familial love and warmth. Along comes this *parashah* describing the death of Sarah and the "matching" of Isaac with his mate and all of this completes the portrait of the "binding." The deed of the "binding of Isaac" receives greater texture and appreciation as the depth of Abraham's humanity and sensitivity is revealed. In the story of the *akeidah*, we know nothing of Abraham's heart, nothing of the pangs and suffering of his soul—under which Abraham was tested as he escorted his only child "to one of the mountains [that God would show him]." Only now, when Abraham the husband and father are truly revealed to us, can we understand to what extent Abraham was a lover full of mercy and emotional depth. It is this person that journeyed to do the bidding and command of his God and Creator. (Avidor HaCohen, *Likrat Shabbat* [trans. from the Hebrew], 26)

Reading through the "binding of Isaac," it is all too easy to come away with the impression of Abraham as an uncaring father wholly disconnected from family. As Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen sensitively explains, Parashat Hayyei Sarah rounds out the picture of Abraham. Far from being one blinded by faith and insensitivity, he is one who cares deeply. While it is regrettable that this gentle, loving portrait comes in the context of Sarah's death, we cannot discount this caring image of the patriarch. He is a tortured and loving soul—caught between his ties to family and his commitment to God and the future of a nation. May Avidor HaCohen's wisdom lead us to judge our ancestor in a gentler, fuller light.

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