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.

"In God's Hand I Place My Soul" (Part 1)

There are moments when our prayers and spiritual poetry (*piyyutim*) make profound declarations about life and death, about humanity and God. Often these moments are recognized as awesome and important, and there is a sense within the synagogue community of this significance; for example, in asserting the unity of God (the Shema'), God's holiness (the *kedushah*), and the role of destiny ("*Unetaneh tokef"* on Rosh Hashanah).

Sadly, one of our great spiritual poems is too often seen as a vehicle for young children to sing a cute song and for the adults to fold up their talliyot and anticipate kiddush. *Adon Olam* deserves better than this, for it is a sublime piece of poetry, bridging elegantly the gap between theology and spirituality.

The reference to the time of sleep suggests that it was written originally for nighttime, and the poem remains part of the often neglected set of prayers to be recited immediately before sleep (see *Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, 169). *Adon Olam* is found as part of the preliminary morning service in traditional siddurim, but is most widely recognized as the hymn that brings Shabbat and festival morning services to a close.

In the middle hours of the day, we relate easily to the majestic aspect of God as Eternal Lord of the Universe, wielding power in past, present, and future. The assertion of Divine Unity echoes the Shema'. The second stanza makes a slightly more radical assertion about the nature of Divine Infinity—that even "after all is ended" (*acharei kichlot hakol*), God will continue to reign, alone and awesome. There is no way in which God is contingent upon humanity.

And then the poem becomes personal, linking human existence and emotional security to the relationship with God. Not only is God infinite and transcendent, but then we read "*Hu Eli*" (this is my God), the source of my strength. Then the language becomes softer and even tender: "In God's hand I place my soul at the time of going to sleep" (*Beyado afkid ruchi be'eyt iyshan*). This responds to the universal primeval fear of sleep as analogous to death (the Talmud notes that "sleep is like one sixtieth of death").

The poem continues commending the body together with the soul into God's care, and concludes with affirming spiritual connection with God (from Psalm 118:6): "*Adonai li velo iyra"* (Adonai is with me so I need not fear).

This is a deep thought with which to end our Shabbat services, and also each waking day.

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 Ki Tissa 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold Eisen, Chancellor, JTS. The accompanying artwork is by Jill Nathanson.

When God Said "No" to Moses

From *Seeing Sinai: Meditations on Exodus 33–34* (Jill Nathanson and Arnold Eisen, 2005)

It must have been a great comfort to Moses—and not only a disappointment—that God turned down his request to see God's glory. The wind was presence enough, on top of the mountain, much of the time—the wind, and the voice in the wind. Every visit of divine speech exhausted him now. Even the words that did not demand that he do battle, climb higher, challenge Pharaoh, rebuke the Israelites yet again, or simply—on some days the hardest—endure.

He had long expected that his people would not satisfy their God. They needed to see what no one could see. They could barely hear what he listened to daily, quiet or pounding, in his head. The shofar blasted loud, and they shrank back at the sound. God thundered from the top of the mountain—and they retreated, sensibly, for cover. It could not be any other way. Only he heard the words through the noise. They saw the sounds, he knew they did. They strained hard to get more, but only he came away with the sense of it.

And now, with only his life to lose, just himself and God alone up there—the two of them alone again—he had asked to see more. To know the end. To hear past the thunder.

His request for the people had already been granted. God's face would go with Israel. The countenance would accompany them. He could have rest from worry over the people's fate in the absence of the countenance.

But from his own hardest travail he had not been promised rest. The work was not the hard part. What he needed was respite from the mystery. From not knowing God's ways, God's intentions, where God was facing, where time was taking them. He of all men alive had the best chance to know this. God had not actually said that he couldn't, at least not yet. Maybe there was a chance to find out.

So he had burst out with it directly. No more circling round the point of what he most desired. He had asked for what God had never granted anyone. "Oh please let me behold your glory!"

There. He had voiced it. Not a plea to have the ways of God made known to him, as before, but a prayer to have the glory of God shown to him. The request took his very breath away. God's assent might well mean that he would never breathe again. But what was breath for, God's breath, loaned him for a time, if not to fill it with this longing? With all his being he wanted to touch the glory of God's presence. To hear, from inside and out, the light of the divine countenance. The longing he bore for God at the peak of the mountaintop on which God had descended was well-nigh unbearable. He craved an end to it.

And God answered him depth to depth. "No." What Moses wanted he could not have. "You cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." No. Relief and disappointment joined. The answer itself would have to be enough. He would have to go on, as human beings do, without knowing how things were. This interview was at an end.

And then Moses suddenly heard the rest of what God had said. God had not turned down his request, but rather answered it in a way that he—that any human being—could never have imagined.

"I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name *yod-hey-vav-hey*, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show."

Moses would not see God's face while the voice sounded, and all God's goodness passed. He could not watch the scene from a distance, take it in, grasp hold of it. He could not see the glory. No human being could be the subject of such a sentence, command that verb, have God as an object. Not the Israelites down below, with their calf, nor he up here with all of his entreaties. The kind of knowing he wanted would never be his.

But God, he now realized, had promised more than he had asked, not less. As God's goodness passed before his face, he would hear the speech of God filled by the will of God with the sound of God's own name. And as if that were not enough—more than enough—this would happen as he clung to a rock, a place prepared by God—clung to it with God, held in place by God. God's hand, pressed against him, would shield Moses from what he could not see and live, as he was grasped whole by God's glory. God would not stand revealed before him. But God would hold him tight, shelter him, touch him from head to toe.

The glory would pass on, and Moses would see again, whether his eyes were open or closed. He would see inside and out. He could look then all he wanted—when he would no longer need to look. The face of his seeing would be proof enough of God's presence. The tingling of his flesh would bear witness from that day forward. Every pore of his skin would remember the divine palm that had held him.

The wind rushed by Moses as the blood rushed to his head. Events hurtled faster but still not fast enough. His head ached with the anticipation. It would ache far more, he knew, when the weight of all that light pressed in on him from God's side as the cool of God's mountain squeezed him from the other. All this God had promised. It would soon come to pass. God's love was overwhelming. He was, for a moment, content.

The artwork and commentary, adapted from the 2005 installation Seeing Sinai: Meditations on Exodus 33–34*, are part of the landmark art exhibition* Reading the Visual / Visualizing the Text*, which will be on view at The Jewish Theological Seminary through May 29, 2013.* Seeing Sinai *was a collaboration between artist and thinker, the fruit of a yearlong process of reading, talking, and painting.*

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A Taste of Torah

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

Too often, the arts are underappreciated in the Jewish community. A common misperception exists that equates the visual arts with idolatrous practice. Yet, here at the heart of Torah in Parashat Ki Tissa, we learn of the individual central to the building of the Tabernacle, Bezalel.

> God spoke to Moses saying, "See, I have singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit of wisdom, understanding and knowledge in every kind of craft; to make designs for work in gold, silver and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of craft." (Exod. 31:1–5)

Notably, this artisan is singled out from among the Israelites as a result of his special qualities. How may the reader differentiate among these three attributes of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge?

Rashi, our prolific medieval exegete, sheds light on the nuanced and substantive shades of difference among these terms. First, wisdom is described by Rashi as knowledge that one learns from others. In other words, one must be in the midst of and connected to a community to be imbued with *hokhmah*, wisdom. One may not be an island unto one's self. Wisdom comes from shared experience and symbiotic interaction. Second, Rashi explains understanding as a sense born of one's own heart and soul. Understanding (*tevunah*) flows from the heart of a human being. Once a lesson is learned and internalized, understanding and insight follow. Third, we are presented with knowledge. The gift of knowledge, Rashi asserts, is the result of God's inspiration. Knowledge (*da'at*) reflects the sacred spirit at the heart of God. Horizontal experience then leads to vertical inspiration. That is to say, the wisdom of community leads to a deeper understanding of self and ultimately to knowledge of God's Presence.

Taken collectively, these three attributes (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge) also make up the spirit of the artist. Once these qualities meld, a tabernacle or, more literally, a dwelling place of God comes to fruition. In his timeless commentary, Rashi teaches us far more than solely about the building of the biblical Tabernacle. He teaches us about the unique soul of the artist and the endless potential to experience the divine through the handiwork of a human creator. May Parashat Ki Tissa truly open the door to embracing the artist and the arts in Jewish life.

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