

## Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer of Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

### Subversive Prayer . . . Necessary Trouble

"Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision."<sup>1</sup>

These are the words with which Abraham Joshua Heschel (ז"ל) challenges us to see prayer as a force within the world rather than a mere spiritual exercise removed from it. A complementary and no less disturbing challenge was given to the recent graduates of The Jewish Theological Seminary by Congressman John R. Lewis (US Representative of Georgia's Fifth Congressional District) in his stirring Commencement speech in which, recalling the Civil Rights struggle of which he was a part, he urged them to "find a way to get in trouble . . . good trouble, necessary trouble."

These two powerful messages invite us to look at the ways in which prayer and liturgy are indeed a powerful force in the world. We know that the texts and rituals of the seder speak of freedom and liberation. When Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote the first "Freedom Seder," shared by 800 participants in the basement of an African American church in Washington DC on April 4, 1969, the ancient text became subversive—and exactly the kind of "trouble" that Congressman Lewis encourages our graduates to seek out.

In the dawning of the period of glasnost, on the eve of a summit meeting between US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, there was a gathering of more than 250,000 people on the National Mall in Washington DC in support of the captive Jews of the USSR. The famed entertainer Pearl Bailey sang, speeches were made, and the shofar was sounded. The wordless—but far from powerless—teaching of the shofar was that *precisely* because of the transcendent ritual power of hearing the tekiah (long, deep call) on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the presence of the shofar among our People on the Mall supported the quest for freedom and justice.

The Sefer Torah (Torah scroll) is the most treasured possession of any synagogue community, of any family fortunate enough to own their own scroll. A Sefer Torah is treated with the greatest awe and reverence, even during the revelry of dancing on Simhat Torah. Amichai Lau-Lavie, a JTS rabbinical student (and founder of Storahelling) fully [unrolled a Torah at Occupy Wall Street](#), reading and celebrating with the Jewish participants.

Are there questions and challenges that might be raised about the propriety and message? Almost certainly there are . . . but would Rabbi Heschel be pleased? Would Congressman Lewis feel that his charge was heard? I would like to think so.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, a graduate of JTS and executive director of T'ruah, writes of the connection she finds between her visionary work for justice in the world and the inner world of the traditional liturgy:

Lest we start to believe that we can fix the world ourselves, the liturgy reminds us that we cannot. And lest that realization makes us throw up our hands and go back to inward-focused spirituality, the prayers step up to comfort us by offering a relationship with God. In the words and rhythms of the liturgy, we find both the inspiration to act, and the support to continue our work.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 263.

<sup>2</sup>Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "The Power of Prayer and Action." Website of Jewish Lights: [http://www.jewishlights.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=OP&Category\\_Code=3-23-11](http://www.jewishlights.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=OP&Category_Code=3-23-11)

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# Torah from JTS

## Korah 5773

### Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Benjamin D. Sommer, professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS.  
**Where Does Holiness Come From?**

Parashat Korah can be challenging for a modern Jew. There is a good guy in this parashah—it's Moses—and there is a bad guy—Korah. Modern readers, however, often find themselves sympathizing with the bad guy. In the opening verses of the parashah (Num. 16:1–3), Korah stands up against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, saying, "You've got too much! The whole congregation, all of them, are holy, and Hashem is in their very midst. So why do you act like princes, raising yourselves over Hashem's congregation?" Korah's speech appeals to a modern reader: he's the democrat who takes the aristocrat to task for acting so much better than everyone else. It can seem disturbing that Moses enjoys a monopoly on holiness, doling out a healthy serving of the sacred to his brother, the high priest Aaron (nepotism), while leaving everyone else outside the priesthood. Aren't we all holy? Doesn't God belong to all of us equally?

Korah seems to have scripture on his side. According to the Torah, God doesn't dwell in Moses's tent, or in Aaron's; the deity dwells at the center of the camp that belongs to the whole nation. The books of Exodus and Numbers take pains to provide us with a detailed map of the Israelite camp, and the Tabernacle (Mishkan) is at its midpoint. Within that Tabernacle, these books make clear, is the very presence of God. Further, what Korah says about the nation Israel is quite reminiscent of verses throughout the Torah. God sanctifies the nation Israel in Exodus 31:13, not just Moses. We learn in Exodus 19:5 that the whole nation—not just Moses's family—will be God's special treasure, a holy kingdom. Verses that speak of the Israelite nation's holiness occur throughout the Torah: Exodus 22:30; Leviticus 11:44–45, 19:2, 20:7–8; Numbers 15:39–40; and Deuteronomy 7:5–10, 14:2, and 28:9. Korah seems to have not only Thomas Jefferson and Woodie Guthrie on his side in his proposal for letting the common man share some power; he seems to have the Torah on his side, too. No wonder he garnered significant support, His program was popular, *and* it seemed kosher.

But the Torah is quite clear about who did not side with Korah: God. After hearing Korah's complaint, Moses proposes a test: Korah and his followers should come to the Tabernacle with an incense-filled fire pan of the sort used in sacrificial worship; Aaron will do the same. God's reaction, Moses implies, will show who's right. When, on the following day, the test takes place, a fire bursts forth from the Holy of Holies where God dwells, and kills Korah and his followers. Some of Korah's followers avoid being killed by the fire—but only because the earth opens up and swallows them, an event that tends to reinforce the basic message God is sending about Korah's proposal.

The Torah makes Korah into a symbol of exactly the wrong sort of belief, even though his proposals seem to hew fairly closely to a large number of verses from elsewhere in the Torah. What is so wrong with what he says?

The answer becomes clear when we read more closely the verses about Israel's holiness elsewhere in the Torah. These verses never simply tell us, as Korah does, that all Israelites are inherently holy. Rather, they command Israelites to become holy by observing the mitzvot that the Torah commands. Compare Korah's statement quoted above with the words God speaks just before God gives the Torah at Sinai (Exod. 19:5–6):

So now--  
if you all truly obey Me  
and adhere to My covenant,  
you will be My personal treasure from among all nations.  
Indeed, all the world is Mine,  
but you will become My kingdom of priests,  
My holy people.

Korah's statement, "The whole congregation, all of them, are holy," seems on the surface to resemble these verses, but it leaves out the crucial word that appears at the very beginning of God's statement: *if*. They Israelites become holy only when they truly obey God and adhere to the Covenant. The same is true of the other verses about Israel's holiness I cited earlier. To take just a few examples:

In Leviticus 19:2, God says, "You should be holy, for I, Hashem your God, am holy. Every person should respect his mother and father. Observe My Sabbaths—I am Hashem your God. Never turn to any false gods, and make yourselves no idols."

In Numbers 15:40, God commands the Israelites to wear tzitziyot, fringes on their garments, so that, when they see the tzitziyot, they will remember God's commands. "Then," God says, "you will carry out all My commands, and you will be holy to your God."

In Deuteronomy 13:9 to 14:2, Moses tells the Israelites, "if you obey Hashem your God by carrying out all His commandments that I command you today and by doing what is right in the sight of the Hashem your God, you will be children of Hashem your God. Do not gash yourselves or make a bald spot above your forehead because of the dead [as a sign of mourning]! For you are a holy people belonging to Hashem your God! Hashem your God chose you from among all the nations on earth to be His personal treasure. Do not eat anything that is improper!" (The laws of kashrut follow.)

All these passages mention Israel's holiness alongside demands for Israel's observance of the mitzvot. The consistent message is not that the nation Israel is automatically holy, as if holiness were in some special Jewish gene each of us received when we were conceived. Rather, holiness is something the Torah requires us to foster in our communities and in ourselves. There is nothing special about being Jewish; there is something sacred in observing the Torah. Without the commandments, it means nothing to be a Jew. (And if there were some Jewish gene that made us special, should we conclude that converts to Judaism lack it? Such a conclusion is ridiculous—and offensive from the point of view of Jewish law, according to which all Jews are equally Jewish, regardless of whether one becomes Jewish by choice or by birth.)

Here the danger of Korah's words becomes clear. Korah is less a liberal democrat than a certain kind of nationalist. He regards holiness not as an achievement but as a right. He remembers the verses that speak of Israel's status without paying attention to what all those verses say we have to do to earn that status. By recalling the Torah selectively, he converts an ethical demand into a sense of entitlement.

Korah's revolt, in the short term, achieved nothing. And yet Korahite thinking never fully disappeared. It endures to the present day. There are some Jews who want to take pride in being Jewish without doing anything to deserve that pride. These Jews have a racial or genetic idea of our specialness. Elements of Korahite thinking appear even among Jewish texts and thinkers that have managed to be within the mainstream. Yehudah Halevi was one of the greatest Hebrew poets; in fact some of his poems appear in our liturgy. But at times he expressed the view that there is something automatically special about Jews simply by virtue of their being born as Jews (and for this reason his acceptance of converts as fully Jews was less than complete, in contradiction to Jewish law). The Tanya, a work of popular mysticism by the founder of the Lubavitch movement, holds a similar view of Jewish specialness via birth. Occasional thinking along these lines appears also in the Zohar (e.g., 3:81a). Thinking of this sort can easily devolve into nationalistic, chauvinistic, and even bigoted attitudes. God's response to Korah provides a definitive rejection of the idea that Jews are automatically special—and a reminder that it is accepting the Torah's commands that allows us to strive for holiness.

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**A Taste of Torah was written by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.**

### **Thoughtfulness and Lovingkindness in the Face of Violence**

The Torah reading of Shelah Lekha is literally and figuratively an "eye opening" parashah. Quite strikingly, our narrative this week is bookended by sight. At the very beginning of the parashah, Moses speaks to those selected for the reconnaissance mission into the Land of Israel. He instructs them, among other things, to "Go up there into the Negev and on to the hill country, and see what kind of land it is" (Num. 13:17–18). Similarly, sight closes the parashah: the Israelites are commanded to make tzitziyot, fringes on their garments. God declares, "Look at it and recall all of the commandments of the Lord and observe them" (Num. 16:39). In the first instance, sight becomes a stumbling block for the spies as this all important sense triggers fear and panic; while, in the second instance, sight is meant to spark memory and to encourage observance. How may we understand the depth of sight—especially in relation to tzitzit, a commandment the Jewish People continue to observe faithfully in the modern day?

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, also known as the *Sfas Emes* writes,

The word *tzitzit* (fringe) is interpreted by Rashi as coming from the verse, "He peers between the cracks" (Song of Songs 2:9). The purpose of this *mitzvah* is to open a Jew's eyes. That is why the Talmud teaches that "one who is careful about the commandment of the fringes merits greeting the Divine Presence," since it says, "and you will see Him." Tzitziyot are mentioned three times in this passage, parallel to the three times in the year when Israel were to "be seen" (the Three Pilgrimage Festivals) . . . We are God's witnesses, and of a witness it is said, "If he sees or knows" (Leviticus 5:1). Knowing is higher than seeing; knowing is the rung of Moses himself. Perhaps that is why they were given the commandment of fringes. When they fell from their rung by no longer fully accepting Moses' leadership, they would have need of this "seeing," a step lower than knowing. (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, *The Language of Truth*, 241–242).

Seeing is multivalent: for it is not only a physical sense to which the Torah refers, but also a spiritual and interpretive dimension. Unlike the experience of the spies at the beginning of the parashah, Israelite "seeing" should open both the eyes and the heart. It is a seeing that should lead us to embrace a deep, rich, and resonant truth; and it should bring us a step closer to becoming "God's witnesses." The negativity engendered by seeing at the opening of our parashah becomes redeemed and "repaired" through the blessing of tzitzit. The knotty texture of the fringes combined with the stark contrast between the blue and white should remind us all of the nature of our spiritual and worldly treks—the challenges that one encounters along the journey to "acquire" observance, as well as the eternal challenge of "acquiring" the Land of Israel.

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