

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

Shavu'ot—Hide and Seek with Torah

In the kiddush we recite this evening, and in all the traditional services of Shavu'ot, we speak of “*chag haShavuot hazeh, z'man mattan Torateinu*” (This Festival of Shavu'ot, season of the giving of our Torah. [*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, 42]). There is a subtle yet subversive element to this description of the day: the parallels for Pesah and Sukkot speak of the “season of our liberation” and “season of our rejoicing,” each of which can reasonably be derived from biblical sources; however, there is no biblical source that associates Shavu'ot with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Shavu'ot is called *chag haKatsir* in association with the harvest (Exod. 23:16), and the name *Shavu'ot* derives from the 49 days of counting the Omer after Pesah; the Talmud (*BT Pesachim* 68b) even uses the term *Atzeret* (conclusion), seeing the day as “concluding” Pesah much as Shemini Atzeret serves as conclusion to Sukkot.

We are not able to establish the precise origin of the phrase “*z'man mattan Torateinu*,” but it is certainly to be located within the early rabbinic period. There are substantial midrashic efforts to fix the date of the Revelation at Sinai at 49 days after the Exodus—that is, on Shavu'ot.

Following the destruction of the Temple, Shavu'ot presented the greatest challenge of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals (*regalim*). Pesah would retain a universal significance, with the seder growing to become one of the most beloved and universally observed of Jewish rituals. The sukkah similarly can be built anywhere in the world, but the harvest offerings associated with Shavu'ot could not be perpetuated without the Temple. So the “reconstruction” or reinvention of Shavu'ot as a celebration of Revelation must be seen as an act of inspired genius by our Rabbis many centuries ago. Our tradition has guided the focus of the day away from the harvest, and over a period of centuries, has built Shavu'ot into a celebration of Torah.

An interesting “musical midrash” connects the theme of Torah between Shavu'ot and Simhat Torah (also a “late” invention). The musical leitmotif for Shavu'ot is the melody used for chanting a complex Aramaic poem, *Akdmut*; this same melody is used widely for the special formula used for calling the Hatan/Kallat Torah for the special aliyah that concludes the reading of the Torah. Shavu'ot and Simhat Torah invite us to celebrate Torah in Revelation and recitation, our acceptance and perpetual engagement.

For “even if the sky were parchment and the oceans filled with ink . . . the story of God's glory would not be complete . . . and yet we rejoice that God blessed us and Revealed to us the Torah” (paraphrase of *Akdmut*, which precedes the Torah reading on Shavu'ot).

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.

For more information about JTS programs and events, or to learn more about JTS, please visit www.jtsa.edu.

Torah from JTS

Parashat Naso

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Joel Alter, Director of Admissions, The Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music, JTS.

Sharp elbows at shul extend beyond the kiddush table line and back into the sanctuary. Prayer—or giving honor to God—can be a competitive business. There are lots of reasons why this is so, and some of them even have to do with loving God. But *showing off* how we love God can get us into trouble. Against this background, let's consider Numbers, chapter 7, the concluding chapter of Parashat Naso.

At 89 verses, chapter 7 is a wall of words, built mostly from 12 near-identical blocks. Each block records the same gift brought by each of the 12 *nesi'im*—chieftains of the 12 Tribes of Israel—on 12 successive days to join in dedicating the Mishkan (Tabernacle) upon the inauguration of its service. On the first day, Nahshon ben Aminadav, *nasi* chieftain of the Tribe of Judah, brings a bowl, a basin, and a ladle, and a specific array of 21 animals for the Levites' sheepfold and pens. On the second day, Netan'el ben Tzu'ar, *nasi* of the Tribe of Issachar, brings the same, as does Eliav ben Helon of Zevulun on the third day. While my increasingly terse telling about each day's gift is efficient and still clear, the Torah chooses to recount each gift with elaborate, repetitive precision.

The dignified procession of *nesi'im*, each stepping forward in turn to present their dedicatory offerings on their appointed days, seems the very model of serene, noncompetitive equality. Robert Alter (no relation) writes,

This passage is . . . a kind of epic inventory. Each of the tribes, here accorded absolutely equal status before the sanctuary without political hierarchy, brings exactly the same offering. One can readily imagine that the members of each tribe in the ancient audience of this text would be expected to relish the sumptuousness of its own tribal offering exactly equal to all the others, as it hears the passage read. (*The Five Books of Moses*, 716–717)

No sharp elbows here. Why else would the Torah tell of it thus, rather than in shorthand? The Torah does not quite answer this question, but it gives us clues. The Rabbis, characteristically, leap upon them.

First, while the *nesi'im* assemble their gifts on their own initiative (Num. 7:10), it is God who instructs Moshe to have them offered on 12 successive days. If God wants the presentation so evenly arranged, then the Torah rightly records it in discrete portions. But there are other hints. Of the 12 *nesi'im* involved, Nahshon, the giver on the first day, is the only one not recognized as a *nasi* in our passage. We know he is a *nasi* from last week's Parashat Bemidbar (1:16, 2:3), yet here he is named without his title (7:12). The commentator Hezekiah ben Manoah, known as the Hizkuni, points out: “Nahshon is not called *nasi* here so that his being first to offer the sacred gift would not go to his head, while all the others are called *nesi'im* because they humbled themselves in offering their gifts after his.” Hizkuni recognizes that the *nesi'im* are dignified men deserving of (and

possibly accustomed to) tribute, and that the opportunity to publicly honor God might play on their pride. So the Torah manages the chieftains' prestige with careful application of their honorifics.

While Netan'el ben Tzu'ar's gift on the second day is the same as Nahshon's on the first, the Rabbis pick up on a variation in the telling. Everett Fox's distinct translation best conveys the redundancy in the Hebrew: "On the second day, Netan'el son of Tzu'ar, leader [*nasi*] of Yissakhar, *brought-(it)-near, he brought-near* [my italics] his near-offering." Fox is indicating that the Torah employs the verb *hikriv* ("offered" or "brought near") twice with Netan'el, when for all the other *nesi'im*, it uses it but once. Remember, this passage is all about what Alter calls "verbatim repetition." Midrash Rabbah 13:15 asks,

Why is *hikriv* used in connection with Netan'el? Because Reuven lodged a complaint when he saw that the tribe of Issachar was to make the second offering and not him: "It's enough that Judah [Nahshon's tribe] already precedes me in the marching order. But I should be able to make my offering according to birth order!"

A little explanatory context: in last week's parashah, we learned how the tribes were encamped around the Mishkan, and that the Tribe of Judah was placed by God in the vanguard. In our midrash, we see that Reuven has no choice but to accept Judah's priority position in that context, but he expects that his status as firstborn among Jacob's sons/tribes will be recognized in the dedication ceremony for the Mishkan. Note that, while we might expect the *nasi* of Reuven to advocate for his own honor, the midrash places the complaint in the mouth of Reuven himself. This cannot mean what it says, though, as Reuven, the man, is long dead. Reuven, here, must be the personification of the tribe, probably in the person of its *nasi*, Elitzur ben Shedei'ur. The pride of the entire tribe is carried by its *nasi*.

But the appeal fails. In the midrash, Moshe rebukes "Reuven," explaining that the order of the offerings is dictated by God, no less than the arrangement of the camp. The offerings are made by Judah, then Issachar, then Zevulun, and only then firstborn Reuven. So much for pride of place. It goes further, taking a different tack. It's not an unassailable divine decree that puts Issachar before Reuven. Rather, Issachar demonstrates a piety that Reuven did not. He earns his place near the front of the line. How? We learn in the midrash that it is Issachar's *nasi* who has the idea to organize all of the *nesi'im* to offer a group gift in the first place. He prompts them to give. (In the first verses of our chapter, the *nesi'im* give gifts collectively before they bring the offerings on behalf of their respective tribes.)

The "absolutely equal status" of the respective tribes and their *nesi'im* in this inauguration ceremony, then, barely contains the resentments and rivalries among them behind the scenes. Over what do the *nesi'im* contend? Is it their honor? God's honor? The honor of honoring God? Yes.

Our passage calls to mind the disaster of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. No one told Cain to make an offering to God. He did so spontaneously out of love and gratitude. Abel was inspired by Cain. Did he intend to one-up his brother with a more lavish offering? Cain thought so. (Troublingly,) God favored Abel's offering over Cain's. For Cain, the demotion and rejection were intolerable.

Honoring God—in the Torah, often through material gifts, in our experience, often in prayer—is a high-stakes matter. Earlier in Midrash Rabbah (13:6), we learn in a gorgeous passage that God's existential loneliness spurred God to create the world, and that, since Creation, God craved intimacy with humanity—a craving fully answered only with the establishment of the Mishkan. The procession of gifts from the *nesi'im* is like the procession of the bridal party at a wedding, weighted with love and longing. Those who perceive God's yearning love, of course, want to reciprocate and proclaim

their love for the world to see. That urge to proclaim can sometimes yield preening displays and, other times, motivate ugliness, even violence. Rising above the quibbling heard in the midrash, Numbers 7 portrays a community of individuals united in their love for God, generously claiming no monopoly on it, and humble in disregarding human hierarchies as they stand equally before God.

Without diminishing the vitality and beauty of spontaneous prayer, the dedication of the Mishkan points to a benefit and a challenge in the imposed uniformity inherent in communal worship. When we observe another recite the same words in prayer we've said countless times before, may we strive to say appreciatively, "I hope to offer something just as lovely when my turn comes."

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

At the heart of Parashat Naso is a repetitive description of the offerings brought by the leaders of each of the tribes in honor of the anointing of the altar. Each prince, beginning with Nahshon ben Amminadav of the Tribe of Judah, brings the same exact offering:

[O]ne silver bowl weighing one hundred and thirty shekels and one silver basin of seventy shekels by the sanctuary weight . . . one gold ladle of ten shekels filled with incense; one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year for a burnt offering; one goat for a sin offering; and for his sacrifice of well being: two oxen, five rams, five goats, and five yearling lambs. (Num. 7: 13–17)

Given Torah's propensity for and gift of terse language, why would it repeat the same description for each leader? Clearly, the names of the presenters could have been listed, followed by a single description of the "gift" each of them brought. What would lead Torah to choose the more arduous route of redundancy?

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor HaCohen writes,

There is no question that the offerings brought by each of the princes of the tribes are identical. Each of them brings the same sacrifices, the same bowl of silver, the same silver basin, and the same gold ladle filled with incense. However, even though the offerings and sacrifices were the same, the intentions and experiences of each prince were not identical. The thoughts of human beings are not the same and their particular experiences vary from person to person—even if the mechanical act is the same. Perhaps this is what Torah is coming to teach us in Parashat Naso. Yes, the technical details of each offering [are] the same. But the feeling and experience behind each offering is particular to each prince. For this reason, each prince merited a full description of their offering. (*Likrat Shabbat*, 147)

Rabbi HaCohen's exegesis is moving and insightful. Even though the material dimension of each offering is precisely the same, the spiritual and emotional dimension involved in its presentation is a unique experience for each of the leaders. What we may initially perceive as redundancy is, in fact, an effort to give honor to each of the leaders of the various tribes. We, as readers of the text, are compelled to use our imaginations and hearts—and even to imagine ourselves in the role of "givers." The essence is not simply *what* is given; rather, it is *how* it is given.

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