

Service of the Heart (בלה תדובע): Exploring Prayer

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

Selichot: Body, Soul . . . "Will You Hear My Voice?"

This coming Saturday night in (Ashkenazi) synagogues around the world, congregations gather for the beginning of *Selichot*, the prayers and poems that inspire and guide us to seek forgiveness. Many of us will spend hours in the coming weeks turning through pages of ancient (and modern) words, hearing melodies and chants that have served so well as the pathway for the journey of the soul.

For many, the ancient words and traditional melodies still speak and sing to us, and in turning to them time and again, we discover new layers of meaning. For others, the traditional pathways of Jewish liturgy are a challenge at best and tedium at worst. In this short essay, I would like to explore one traditional text of *Selichot*, and one contemporary innovation. For each of these texts, the electronic version will offer several musical settings drawn from a variety of sources and traditions.

Close to the beginning of every *Selichot* service is a short poem (author unknown) beginning with the words, "*Haneshamah lach*":

The soul is Yours, and the body is Your workmanship
Have compassion upon Your labor
The soul is Yours and the body is Yours
Adonai do this for the sake of Your Name!

These ancient words confront the challenge faced by Descartes and so many philosophers. How to chart the connection between the body and the soul? If the soul is eternal and the body is ephemeral, how are they joined? How do they form one entity, a human being created in the divine image? Our poet suggests that the body, no less than the soul, is divinely formed; if at source each person is entirely a creature of God, then we can, with hope, turn to God for help and forgiveness.

Often we wonder if our voices in prayer are heard by God. My teacher in England, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Magonet, presented a radical (mis)reading of the poem *Hatishma Koli* by the great Israeli poet "Rahel" (Rachel Bluwstein, 1890–1931). This is a love poem born out of some of the sorrows (romantic and health related) of her life, yet Rabbi Magonet reinterprets the text as a plaintive cry to God:

Will You hear my voice, You who are far from me
Will You hear my voice, wherever You are
A voice calling aloud, a voice silently weeping . . .

Perhaps my last day is already drawing near
Drawing close perhaps the tears of parting
I will wait for You till my days flicker out
Like Rahel waiting for the one she loved

Each year at *Selichot*, I am heartened to recall that my body and soul are living connections with God, and I am haunted by the whispered cry of Rahel: "Will You hear my voice"?

As always, I am interested in hearing 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

Nitzavim–Va-yeilekh 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Lisa B. Gelber, associate dean of The Rabbinical School and adjunct lecturer, Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS.

To What Shall We Return?

Several weeks ago, I ran the four-mile loop in New York City's Central Park for the first time since last fall. I had been sidelined by an injury connected to my roles as mother of a small child and head of household: the schlepping and carrying had taken its toll on my back, and a playful lifting of my child in shul on one particular Shabbat served as the straw that broke the camel's (or rabbi's) back. Finally, well enough (and not too fearful) to lace up my running shoes, I relished the opportunity to join the many runners enjoying the park; see former coaches, friends, and team members; and notice how it felt to exercise once more. I craved the chance for my feet to hit the pavement one after the other after the other. Even more than putting my body to the test, this run was a gift to my soul that yearned for the spiritual practice to which it had become accustomed as I ran regularly, training for full and half marathons and raising money for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

Throughout this run of reentry, I revisited conversations with my health professionals. One doctor's reminder that my full recovery would take nine months reverberated in my mind. Nine months? It was not nearly nine months from the epidural that had helped quiet nerve pain in my leg; how could I ever have that much patience? The time frame of the gestation of a baby was not lost on me. And that space of waiting, imagining, planning, and ultimately entering space anew remains with me during this month of Elul, the time in which we attend to the call from within, returning to the one we are meant to be.

As we engage in *teshuvah*, (re)turning to the deep, soulful place hidden beneath the barriers we erect for others and ourselves, we must ask ourselves to what we are returning and how that relocation will manifest itself in our lives. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (19th-century Hasidic master from Poland, aka the Kotzker) provides some insight in his comments on the first of this week's double parashah, Nitzavim-Va-yeilekh. Citing a midrash about a fisherman who claims that knowledge was not given to him from Heaven to study Torah or Mishnah, he remarks on the verse from our parashah, "*Ki karov eilecha hadavar m'od beficha uvilvavcha laasoto*" (No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.) [Deut. 30:14], saying,

The fisherman gave an excuse for himself before Elijah, explaining that he had failed to find an opening that would lead inward, toward God. Elijah replied to him: you were not born a fisherman, so where did the insight and understanding

come to you to know the process of fishing? It was the pressure you experienced to make a living that led you to it. If then you felt the same pressure in your soul because you lack knowledge of Torah and are far from God, you would strive to perfect your soul with all your might, just as you do in attaining your livelihood. (Ohel Torah)

The Kotzker asserts that the intelligence necessary to acquire Torah is accessible in the same way we gain practical skills: through attention and desire. Just as significant as ability and motivation is the invitation to take seriously the commitment to maintain a livelihood (*beficha*, in your mouth) AND draw close to God (*uvilvavcha*, and in your heart). We cannot feed our body at the expense of our soul, nor can we focus exclusively on spirituality without attention to the way in which we are to function in the world.

Torah functions as a means of drawing God close. Whether we study text, immerse ourselves in prayer, invite someone for Shabbat dinner, hold the door for another, or cast our vote in an election, our commitment to living a life of mitzvot, exploring what brings meaning into our lives, and opening our hearts often and enough to experience surprise at what we learn via our intellect and spirit may awaken us to God's Presence.

Our parashah reminds us that we all stand before God to receive the Covenant: "*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnai Adonai Eloheichem.*" The type of commitment that invites organic growth through introduction and investigation requires patience, curiosity, gentle determination, courage, and love. While our instinct may be to cover as much ground as quickly as possible, loving God and uncovering the depths of our soul takes time and practice and a willingness to sort through the chaff and discover the smallest most beautiful grain hidden within.

Elul, the Hebrew month in which we find ourselves and a time of searching heart and soul, provides an acronym for *Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li* (Song of Songs 6:3), I Am My Beloved's and My Beloved Is Mine. This sense of mutuality, of reciprocal love and commitment demands engagement. We cannot draw close to God through Torah from a distance. We need to stand, ready for God to circumcise our heart, to pull it apart and allow us to feel that we may love God with all our heart and soul so that we may live (Deut. 30:6). Mary Oliver writes in "Walking to Oak-Head Pond, and Thinking of the Ponds I Will Visit in the Next Days and Weeks":

I don't know where such certainty comes from-
the brave flesh or the theater of the mind-

but if I had to guess
I would say that only
what the soul is supposed to be
could send us forth

with such cheer

As we approach these High Holy Days, may we stand as souls filled with potential for rejuvenation and reentry into a new year of learning in body, mind, and spirit.

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

A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Moving Forward Meaningfully

The parashiyot of Nitzavim–Va-yeilekh are intimately woven into the rhythm of the liturgical year as they are typically read either immediately preceding Rosh Hashanah or during the intervening Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Indeed, the very opening of this section, with its devotion to the Covenant and returning to God, are rooted deeply in the essence of the High Holidays:

Surely, this commandment which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deut. 30:11–14)

Having drifted from the path of God and the mitzvot, we are encouraged to rediscover and rebuild relationships—with God and with our fellow humans. Yet, how does one begin a process of *teshuvah*, returning—especially when such an endeavor seems counter to human nature?

Parashat Nitzavim anticipates our sense of trepidation with regard to this sacred act. Deuteronomy 30:11 declares that "this commandment . . . is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach." Though many commentators understand this verse and section to refer to the entirety of Torah, Nahmanides reads it differently. He argues that this excerpt refers very specifically to the mitzvah of repentance: "The expression used here refers not to the entirety of Torah but specifically to the mitzvah of repentance which immediately precedes this verse. It is stated in a future tense to suggest, in the form of a pledge, that it is destined that Israel will repent." Even though one may think that it is far beyond one's ability, *teshuvah* is within reach.

Ramban's commentary is sharp, encouraging each and every one of us to reconsider the possibility of change in our lives. Too often, we crave rootedness and stability in our lives. A. J. Heschel laments that such a tendency leads to a spiritual death; we refuse to acknowledge that *hayyei olam nata betokheinu*, "eternal life has been planted in each of us." Our Torah readings this week bind together the opposites: *nitzavim* means "rootedness," while *va-yeilekh* denotes "moving." Ironically, in order to move forward with integrity, we must be rooted. May this coming season of the High Holidays be a time for, at once, rooting ourselves more deeply in Judaism, and moving forward toward more intimate and meaningful relationships with God and our fellow humans.

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