

## 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

### The Soul Is Pure

The “preliminary prayers” recited at synagogue each morning are rarely encountered; even if you arrive 15 minutes after the published starting time for a service that might last more than three hours, you will miss those first important words. This fills me with real sorrow, for within this section of *Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays* (4–13) are remarkable, beautiful affirmations and reflections. In previous weeks, we looked at [Adon Olam](#), focusing especially on the way the poet entrusts body and soul to God each night. So, in the morning, it is natural to give thanks for one more day of life, and to reflect on who we are as human beings, composed of body and soul.

The prayer *Elohai Neshamah* (4) affirms that the soul (*neshamah*) is breathed into us by God, and that it is pure. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for breath is *neshiyamah*, so close to the word for soul that the two are intimately connected. The soul is the very breath of life, and as we are aware of our breath, perhaps we approach a point of connection. Careful pronunciation of the Hebrew (using the *mappik* dot [·] at the end of a succession of words) demands equally careful and emphasized breathing. The prayer accepts that, one day, the soul will be taken from the body, affirming that our spiritual life does not end when the body dies—and that the soul as a focal point of our identity will live in eternity.

The early morning may not be the best time for analytic philosophical reflection, but I suggest that it is the best time to affirm deep beliefs and dreams. It is not enough to study theology and philosophy, from Descartes and Maimonides onward, to arrive at an understanding of the relationship between body and soul. We must act, celebrate, and breathe based upon our understanding. The siddur invites and “inspires” us to do just that.

The end of the prayer is a blessing that praises God, “who restores the soul to the lifeless, exhausted body.” This is well understood in relationship to the last line of *Adon Olam*; we have given ourselves to God through the night (sleep is as one-sixtieth of death), and we find joy in the morning as we feel ourselves renewed, spiritual beings. Our bodies may be infirm, disabled, or challenged in other ways, but our divine likeness is not beheld in the optics of a mirror, rather it is in the *neshamah*, the breath of life.

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](mailto:sabarth@jtsa.edu).



# Torah from JTS

## Parashat Shemini 5773

### Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Deborah Miller, associate director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, JTS.

#### Creativity in Holy Service

The Torah begins with the theme of creating order out of chaos. God imposes order on the world by acts of separating, naming, and placing—in other words, by creating distinctions. Put another way, distinctions create order. Although the Torah never explains why chaos is undesirable, it resonates as redolent of anarchy, violence, and threat.

The idea of distinctions persists throughout the Torah and in Jewish life. The word *lehavdil* (to separate/distinguish) occurs in the first act of Creation—“God separated/distinguished between light and darkness.” The theme continues into this week's parashah, Shemini. Beyond the Bible, the theme of distinctions has a prominent place in the first of the *berakhot* in the central section of the daily *'Amidah*, in which we thank God for granting humans *binah* (understanding—the ability to differentiate). It finds expression in *havdalah*, in which we thank God for differentiating between light and darkness, Shabbat and the rest of the week, and so on.

This theme of distinctions is presented in two ways in Parashat Shemini: in a story, and in the laws regarding which animals may be eaten. I will concentrate on the story, which is short and tragic:

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan; they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before God an alien fire that had not been commanded of them. A fire came forth from before God and consumed them, and they died before God. Moses said to Aaron: “This is what God meant when God said: ‘Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.’” And Aaron was silent. (Lev. 10:1–3)

The phrase “that had not been commanded of them” seems to be key. It is a contrast with the many chapters that precede this story, in which Moses and all the Israelites concerned with building, furnishing, and dedicating the movable Tabernacle, the Mishkan, created each item “as God commanded them.” Nadab and Abihu went out of bounds, and died as a result.

---

For more information about JTS programs and events, or to learn more about JTS, please visit [www.jtsa.edu](http://www.jtsa.edu) or [learn.jtsa.edu](http://learn.jtsa.edu).

The story is troubling to me for a few reasons. It seems to undermine any sense that there is room for innovation or creativity in holy service to the community of Israel. In addition, in the story, God's response to Nadab and Abihu seems extreme—one action, and the men are killed. Where is the warning, such as the many warnings at Sinai, about boundaries? The distinction between “commanded” and “not commanded” does not seem a sufficient distinction.

Traditional commentators were also troubled by the story, and searched for explanations that would point to some unnamed and greater wrong, something that we, as readers, could find acceptable as a capital offense. For instance, some said that Nadab and Abihu were drunk when they were serving in the Mishkan. Others said that they were trying to undermine the authority of Moses and Aaron, chafing at the bit to take over the religious leadership of Israel. In other words, the commentators looked for a justification for the punishment in the actions and motivations of Nadab and Abihu. They could not tolerate, any more than we can, the idea that God acted in a capricious, unintelligible way. To them, the proposition of God's justice was foundational.

The idea that God is just is first articulated in Parashat Va-yera (Gen. 18:23–25), when Avraham challenges God's decision to destroy Sodom:

Avraham approached God, and said, “Will You really sweep away the tzaddik [the righteous] with the evil? Perhaps there are 50 tzaddikim in the city—will you really sweep them away, and not forgive, on account of the 50 within the city? Far be it from You to do this thing, to kill the tzaddik with the evil—and it will be same for the tzaddik, and for the evil—far be it from You! Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?”

No one ever told Avraham that God is just—but that was the only way he could understand God, and so it is with us.

Once God's justice becomes an axiom in Torah, then Nadab and Abihu become culpable. We can look more closely at the traditional explanations, and understand that each explanation represents the sons as disdaining necessary boundaries. If the explanation is that they were trying to undermine the authority of Moses and Aaron, then they were guilty of insubordination that could cause fracture and chaos in the Israelite religious community in its infancy. If they were drunk, their lack of sobriety regarding their roles as religious leaders destroyed their *raison d'être* as Kohanim. And if the cause of their demise was their perspective that what God commanded was not sufficient, and that they had to improvise their own ritual, then it was a breach of the essential role of Kohanim—to be the ritual bridge between God and the People, but not the engineers of that bridge.

In our own times, we struggle with the tension between innovation and conservation of tradition. We need Jewish distinctions that keep us meaningfully identifiable and that enhance our commitment to justice in the world, as part of our imitation of God. Often, these commitments invite, or even require, innovation. Our challenge is to make sure that our innovations preserve the foundational values of our tradition, even while they keep them fresh and accessible.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Torah 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**

### **Finding Atonement After Sin**

Parashat Shemini opens with the initiation of the Tabernacle altar. After a seven-day period of ordination, sacrifices are commanded for the first time. Moses convenes Aaron and his sons, and tells them very specifically the nature of the sacrifices that God has commanded. More than simply reflecting a sacrificial rite, the parashah explicitly directs our attention to the ends: “this is what the Lord has commanded that you do, so that the Presence of the Lord may appear to you” (Lev. 9:6). Only through the ordering of these particular sacrifices will God's Presence ultimately come to rest among the People. It is for this reason that both the biblical Israelite and modern reader of the text must pay close attention. First, Aaron comes forward to present a sin offering of a *calf* (Lev. 9:8); then, the People's offering of a *goat* is presented (Lev. 9:16). What is the significance of these two animals? And how does their midrashic meaning guide us toward God's Presence?

Rashi and Ramban, two prolific commentators of Torah, offer a rich interpretation. Basing his thoughts on the midrash (Sifra and Tanhuma), Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) explains, “this calf was selected as a sin offering to announce that the Holy One, blessed be God, granted atonement by means of this calf for the incident of the golden calf which Aaron had made.” Just as Aaron had sinned through the making of a calf, now he must atone for that same transgression through a calf. Nahmanides (Ramban) takes this symbolism a step deeper in quoting *Torat Kohanim*, “You sinned at the beginning and at the end. You sinned in the beginning, as it states, ‘and they killed a goat and dipped the coat in the blood;’ and you sinned at the end, as it states, ‘they made a golden calf which I did not command them.’ Let him bring a goat to atone for the event of the goat, and let them bring a calf to atone for the event of the calf.”

According to this rich midrash, the symbolism behind these respective offerings becomes clear. While the calf atones for the idolatrous sin of the Golden Calf, the second offering of a goat atones for the transgression of selling our brother Joseph into enslavement. Woven together, the liminality of this event becomes all the more powerful. As the people offer sacrifices for the first time at the altar of the Tabernacle, they are compelled to atone for two blemishes on the national soul of Israel. Only after such atonement will God's Presence then dwell among the people.

The message is clear and relevant in our time. While Aaron first makes atonement for a sin against God (the Golden Calf), he then makes atonement for a tragic sin rooted in humanity (the selling of Joseph into slavery). By being attentive to both the vertical (divine) and horizontal (human) vectors of relationship, we nurture and embrace God's Presence in our midst. Far from being a lesson bound by the biblical Tabernacle, our parashah offers us a deep teaching about the nature of ourselves and the power of bringing the divine into our daily lives.

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