

movement. For example, the Reform movement tends to avoid the phrase that affirms God as *mechayei hameitim* (reviving the dead), replacing those words with an expression that God gives life to all.

Contemporary prayers are subject to far greater scrutiny and demand great care. In these challenging weeks, the dangers facing our brothers and sisters in Israel weigh deeply upon hearts, minds, and souls, and there have been many prayers written that engage us directly with the dangers faced by Israelis, and in some cases also the dangers faced by Palestinians. The import of the words and ideas chosen for these prayers is substantial, and I am sadly aware that communal distress and even anger has arisen over the words, and associated values, that are set out in these prayers.

For example, our Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel has published a prayer by Rabbi Simcha Roth (z"l), recited in many congregation in Israel in times of danger. What is especially moving is the way Rabbi Roth's words speak not only of finding success for the endeavors of those serving in Tsahal (Israel Defense Forces), but also of their returning safely to their homes and loved ones.

On July 17, my colleague Rabbi Menachem Creditor posted "A Prayer for Right Now" on his blog while visiting Israel.

Many among the leaders of the Jewish community have been challenged to find a way to recognize the suffering of Palestinians in their prayers, even though that suffering is attributable to the callous decisions of their leaders. The Reform Movement has included a powerful poem by Yehuda Amichai among its resources. Many others have looked to find the words that will embrace our care for the well-being of all people simultaneously with our special concern for Medinat Yisrael (the State of Israel) and those who dwell within her borders.

*For links to the prayers and poem referenced in Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer, please visit [www.learn.jtsa.edu](http://www.learn.jtsa.edu).*



### PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Irving Lehrman Research Associate Professor of American Jewish History and Walter and Sarah Schlesinger Dean of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies, JTS

#### Life's Journeys

In a few weeks, thousands of US high school students will leave home to begin college or a gap year of study and/or service before entering college. This journey has become a sacrosanct rite of passage for middle- and upper-class American families, many Jews among them. Though our parents and grandparents probably went to college close to home—if they were privileged to go at all—we have, by and large, internalized the view that physical separation from home and family during late adolescence, in an educational setting with peers, serves as an essential catalyst for growth and maturation.

As dean of JTS's Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies for more than 20 years, I have been privileged to witness and assist hundreds of students through their college journey. From that perch, I have been struck by how profoundly technology has shortened the space separating people, allowing college students to move across the country for school but still retain close connections. Distance and closeness have taken on new meaning thanks to texting, Twitter, Facebook, and FaceTime. And yet the value of journeying remains the same, providing opportunities for transformative growth—physical, psychological, spiritual, and intellectual—opportunities that remain essential to realizing our full potential as adults.

In this week's parashah, Masei, we see just how essential journeying is, not only for individuals but also for the Jewish people as a whole. Despite the 40-year detour and the likely monotony of the task, Moses preserves in writing the starting point and destination of each of the 40 Israelite marches undertaken. In verse 2, the text states that Moses records "*motza'eyhem lemas'eihem*" (the starting points of their marches), as directed by God; but then the verse notes that it will list "*mas'eihem lemotza'eyhem*" (their marches, by starting points), repeating the thought but reversing the words. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that this midsentence word reversal teaches us that, in contrast to travel prompted by human dissatisfaction with current circumstances, the ideal journey is one that is undertaken according to God's plan. But by including both phrases in the same verse, the Torah is also highlighting the value of both kinds of journeys—those that originate from an inner human longing to leave one's current circumstances, and those that are prompted by an external sense of calling, be it divine or the earthly call of a new career or educational opportunity.

More importantly, the phrase and its reverse highlight the interconnectedness between traveling and staying put. Sometimes, we need to physically uproot ourselves to take that leap forward in our lives, for the traveling and change in venue in and of themselves precipitate transformative growth. But at times we need to stay rooted in one place, allowing us to talk through and resolve family conflicts or work dilemmas. Apparently this was the case for the Israelites as well, for as Rashi (citing Mosheh Hadarshan) notes, most of the Israelites' traveling occurred during the first and final years. For the remaining 38 years, the Israelites relocated much less often, encamping at only 20 stations, presumably for long periods of time. The phraseology reminds us that we need both experiences to ensure successful growth: though the Israelites needed to travel physically to reach Israel, they needed the full 40 years of journeying to complete the psychological growth necessary to form a new, empowered identity as a free people.

For most students, beginning college involves a physical journey. But once arriving, students spend four years in a community of peers, advisors, professors, and mentors who facilitate experimentation with and adaptation to new ideas, friendships, communal norms and expectations, and religious beliefs and practices. Students stretch their minds exponentially by interacting with challenging professors and diverse peers. They benefit from exposure to disciplinary skills and varied theoretical approaches. At List College, our students' minds race, their hearts leap, and their emotions fly as they continue these internal journeys within a supportive community. They struggle to understand the value of their education and how they might be inspired by it to cultivate Jewish lives of purpose and meaning.

In this way, the journeys take place while the students remain physically encamped on campus. And as with the Israelites and their physical journey, the classes and academic work make up only a portion of the four-year college experience. The rest of the time, students are participating in activities and holding internships and jobs while they are also doing the hard work of growing psychologically and emotionally, transitioning to adulthood, solidifying their adult identities, and finding their passions.

Sometimes, students are impatient; they are eager to declare their major and clarify their career path. Students are often anxious to have it all figured out, sitting with the uncertainty of their futures. The Israelites experienced similar impatience. But, as we see, the long journey allowed the Israelites to undergo a collective internal transformation in their self image and behavior, their vision for their future, and their emerging religious sensibility. My experience has shown me that college students undergo much the same transformation: clarity about professional aspirations, religious values, and future goals comes with time; and many students stumble upon their true passion unexpectedly. As college students near graduation, they emerge changed, armed with new knowledge, competencies, friendships, mentors, and direction that prepare them to tackle the challenges that lie ahead.

Masei ends the book of Numbers, and though the book ends, we are reminded that life's journeys are never complete. After all, the travels of the Israelites continue through the book of Deuteronomy. The constancy of life's jour-

neys can feel exhausting and daunting, but we end the book chanting the familiar phrase that we use to mark the end of the reading of each of the five books of Moses: "*Hazak hazak venitzhazek*" (Be strong! Be strong! And we shall be strengthened). While the Israelites may have been weary of their long journey, yearning for a homeland they would never see, the phrase comes to remind them—as us—to be strong when confronted with journeys that sap our strength and dampen our enthusiasm. And in this phrase, as in the verse that opened the parashah, we encounter repetition: "Be strong! Be strong!" Not only does this highlight the enormity of the strength that some journeys require, but it also reminds us once more that we need more than one kind of strength to overcome life's challenges. We need physical strength to relocate from one place to another, but we also need emotional strength to persevere in the face of internal journeys that tax our minds, hearts, and spirits. Only when we have both kinds of strength, and we succeed in harnessing them, will we truly be strengthened.

So as we help our students pack up their belongings, trying to ensure the smoothest, most comfortable transition to college for our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews and friends in the class of 2018, may we stop long enough to feel grateful for all the new opportunities for growth that journeys can initiate. May we also gain renewed appreciation for the rest stops that enable us to internally consolidate what we've experienced, and forge the community necessary to sustain us and fortify us for what lies ahead.

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## **SERVICE OF THE HEART: EXPLORING PRAYER**

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### **Our Prayers for Israel—For Whom Is the Message?**

A serious challenge confronting the all-too-human venture of praying to God is in working out what we can say to the "One Who knows all." A prayer for a congregation to recite in the face of destructive storms might open with the words, "God, we stand before you in time of peril"—but if God truly knows all, might we not assume that God is well aware of the peril facing the community? So the words are not, so to speak, necessary for the message directed to God, but they *are* certainly important for the community: in saying the words together, their hearts and souls join together, recognizing and acknowledging their shared weakness in time of danger.

Within the arena of Jewish liturgy, one of the great advantages of the *matbea tefillah* (the traditional fixed texts of prayer) is their antiquity. We see them as a received body of text, and even in most liberal circles there is a sense of "innocent until proven guilty": the traditional words will remain untouched unless they are seen as presenting an acute theological challenge. Most denominations share at least 90 percent of the words of the *'Amidah*, with only a few changes driven by the theological or philosophical foundations of that