

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

“These lights themselves are holy.”

Soon we light the candles of Hanukkah, which symbolize so many things. In this reflection, let us turn aside for a moment from the complex history and theology, and allow ourselves to enter the realm of *kodesh*—that which is holy. *Hanerot Halalu* (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 193) is a curious text that we read, or sing, after lighting the *hanukkiyah*. It is not a blessing or a prayer, for it is not addressed to God; rather, it is a reminder to all who are gathered around the Hanukkah lights that we should not make use of them for any worldly purpose, for they are holy (*kodesh hem*).

There is a curious comparison with Shabbat candles: we might imagine that Shabbat is even holier than Hanukkah, for all normal work is prohibited—and during Hanukkah, life goes on as normal, with the addition perhaps of doughnuts and gifts. But concerning the candles of Shabbat, not only is it permitted, it is even praiseworthy to make use of them to read or to see the faces of our family and guests at the Shabbat meal. Our use of Shabbat candles affirms that on the most holy of days we do not need to sit in the dark.

The lights of Hanukkah create for us a small island of holiness on these days in which we remain engaged in work and all the myriad things that make up our lives. The blessings before lighting the candles affirm our connection with the past, with the struggles of political independence and spiritual identity upon which Hanukkah is based. The recitation of *Hanerot Halalu* reminds us to seek holiness and purity—once bound up with the Beit Hamikdash (Holy Temple) but now embedded in the texts and rituals of Jewish life. These small and flickering flames perhaps embody only too well the way in which we discern true holiness. On one hand, the moment of holiness may be fleeting, small and flickering; on the other hand, “small and flickering” is still real and present.

There are philosophers of prayer who suggest that we create our spiritual reality through the words that we say and the affirmations of our mind and heart. As we say these words, we are reminded of holiness, and perhaps we create it too.

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.

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Parashat Va-yeishev
Genesis 37:1–40:23
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Rabbinic Fellow and Director of Planned Giving.

When my grandmother first starting losing her memory several years ago, the impulse to correct her facts was overwhelming. *No, Grandma, we weren't together last weekend. No, you didn't just eat dinner. No, Grandma, I'm Abigail, your granddaughter.*

Over time, as her memory has disintegrated and she lives entirely from moment to moment or fantasy to fantasy, the impulse has softened. When she announces that she is living with her mother in her childhood home, we no longer bother to explain that she actually resides in an assisted-living facility with her husband of 42 years. If she is surprised that my children are her great-grandchildren, we let it go. The facts don't seem to matter so much anymore, and we have come to appreciate a beauty in her ability to live each moment as it comes, and to place herself psychically where she needs to be.

Remember the Sabbath day. Remember what Amalek did to you in the wilderness. Remember what God did to Miriam. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Memory is integral to our identities as Jews and as individuals. What happens when we lose our memories, or our ability to remember altogether?

The question arises for me this week because the themes of losing (memories and much more) and forgetting run strong in this week's parashah, and indeed throughout the entire Joseph story. Jacob and then Joseph lose track of the brothers when they go out to pasture. Reuven leaves Joseph in the pit, and when he returns, “the boy is gone!” (Gen. 37:30). The brothers lose Joseph altogether as they sell him into slavery. Judah loses the prostitute (really Tamar) and his staff, cord, and seal. Even Joseph loses his clothes in the grip of Potiphar's wife. The theme continues in coming weeks as objects disappear into Benjamin's sack, and as Joseph remembers the forgotten dreams of his youth (42:9) and names his firstborn son Menassah, “because God has caused me to forget all my trouble” (41:51).

Most explicit is the closing cliff-hanger line of the parashah: “Yet the chief

cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” (40:21). The commentators wonder about the chief cupbearer’s forgetting. What might the difference between *not remembering* and *forgetting* be? Rashi and others suggest that the difference is temporal: the *not remembering* describes what happened the day of the cupbearer’s release from prison, and the *forgetting* is what happened after that. Ibn Ezra suggests that *not remembering* is that the cupbearer did not mention Joseph to Pharaoh; and that *forgetting* is *ba-lev*—what happens in one’s heart. Radak says just the opposite. None of this satisfies, but their close read is helpful: there is, the language of the verse suggests, an important difference between not remembering and forgetting.

This distinction between forgetting and not remembering is crucial, whether we are struggling with loved ones losing their memories or our national quest to never forget our heritage as Jews for whom “Never forget!” has become a mantra. The verse, in using those two verbs (*not remembering* and *forgetting*) is suggesting something deeply meaningful: that, in fact, in order to remember something, we need to forget it in the first place. In order to find memories, lost objects, or an identity, we need to be in a state of searching for something lost.

Professor Regina Schwartz of Northwestern University suggests, “There must be a break to enable something to be repeated, just as something must be lost to be recovered, forgotten to be remembered; and continuity, because the fact of repetition, recovery, memory, ensures a living-on” (*The Resurrection of the Text*, 54). Joseph loses his brothers at pasture, but then finds them in Dothan. Judah cannot find his staff, cord, and seal, or the woman he left them with, but Tamar returns them all to teach him a great lesson. Joseph’s shirt lost into the hands of Potiphar’s wife is crucial to the plot, landing him in jail but then ultimately bringing him to his greatest heights. At the ultimate climax to the story several parashiyot from now, Joseph—thought to be lost forever—is returned to his father. Were it not for each of these losses, return and recovery would not be possible.

This seems a nice, albeit abstract, literary point to make as we read the parashah. But what does it have to do with our ongoing quest to retain Jewish identity, or with our loved ones whose identities seem to be slipping away through the sieve of memory loss?

Because it is in forgetting, and then remembering, that interpretation takes place.

Professor Schwartz writes,

Remembering is persistently linked to survival. The future Walter Benjamin depicts must be nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren . . . But when we say that remembering is the condition of survival in the Bible, we cannot mean it in any naïve sense. With no such thing as accurate memory possible, dependence on such memory would enable no future at all. Rather, it is interpretation that becomes the ground of continuity, enabling a future interpretation that is, in turn, enabled by repression. (53)

In other words, we retell the Joseph story with our own interpretations, and it is in the power of those retellings that the stories live on. My grandmother can no longer tell her own stories, but we can. And in our retelling them, we reinterpret, or put them in new contexts, and in so doing ensure her continued identity. Memory is what defines us as individuals and as a nation. But what we learn from the parashah is that there is a difference between forgetting and not remembering. As

long as someone, somewhere, remembers our stories for us, our identities remain intact. There is indeed great wisdom in the age-old expression “May one’s memory live on, for a blessing.”

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Parashat Va-yeishev represents the ceremonial and tragic opening of the Joseph narrative that will carry us to the end of the book of Genesis. We learn of Jacob’s gift of a brilliant robe to Joseph, the enmity between Joseph and his brothers, Joseph’s grandiose dreams, and the simmering scheme to punish the young, egocentric sibling that would rule over the family. All of these events lead toward a curious episode in our parashah when the brothers seemingly head to Shechem. A concerned and anxious Jacob turns to his favored son, Joseph, to check on the well-being of the other sons—declaring, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word” (Gen. 37:14). Assuming that Jacob senses the tension between Joseph and his siblings, why would he send him on such a mission? Could he not foresee the dangers lurking around the corner? And more than that, why is Jacob so preoccupied about the sons pasturing their flocks in Shechem?

Nahum Sarna writes,

In view of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, Jacob’s action is surprising and Joseph’s ready response no less so. Clearly, the brothers had hitherto successfully disguised their true feelings and indeed, there is no record of their having uttered any threats against Joseph. Shechem had been the site of a bloody massacre carried out by the brothers, who had apparently captured the city. This incident must have occurred very recently since Dinah was about the same age as Joseph and could hardly have been younger than about fifteen at the time. Joseph is now seventeen. The danger inherent in the brothers’ presence in the vicinity of Shechem may have been the source of Jacob’s anxiety. (Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 258)

Sarna is extremely sensitive in identifying the source of Jacob’s concern. Having just come through the very traumatic episode of the rape of Dinah and the aftermath of this devastating act (the slaughter of the town perpetrated by his sons), Jacob is rightfully fearful of some other mischief his sons may be plotting. Perhaps it is this fear and worry that overrides what he may perceive to be normal sibling rivalry. It is, ironically, the safety of and concern for the other sons that overrides care for the “favored” son. Moreover, I would also place the onus of responsibility on the shoulders of Joseph as well. Joseph should have been self-aware enough to understand the unpredictability of his mission. And he could have expressed his anxiety to his father. Though maybe it was a desire to honor his father’s request that took precedence over a real concern for his safety. Ultimately, the episode remains shrouded in mystery—forcing the modern reader to wrestle with a cryptic episode and its consequences.

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