

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

Words of Prayer: New and Old

"What Page Are We on in the Prayer Book Blues" is a lighthearted song made famous by a pair of Orthodox artists in the 1980s called the Megama Duo (start at 3 minutes and 22 seconds in the linked video). The song would never have become as (in)famous as it was if the experience of "not being able to find the place" was unfamiliar. But, on the contrary, we have all been there, and it's good to laugh at, and with, ourselves. When we do find the place in our prayer books, we see lines and paragraphs and pages of text, and it is often hard to find ourselves in the words.

Once in a while we find a resonant phrase or metaphor, and the joy and exhilaration of such moments can carry us forward for a time. Much of my own work is devoted to close study of the texts in the siddur, seeking to trace their history and to explore the layers of meaning found within them. Much of the siddur is open to reinterpretation for each generation. Within the Conservative Movement, we are indebted to Rabbi Dr. Reuven Hammer for his sagacious Or Hadash, a commentary to *Siddur Sim Shalom*.

There are times when new prayers are needed, and so we encounter the world of newly written prayers. Some of these prayers are formal, like the Prayer for our Country (*Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 148), or more personal, as for example the Meditations upon Lighting Shabbat Candles (302). Those who compose such prayers seek to find the courage and inspiration to say something new and fitting, and to avoid the pitfalls of kitsch and cliché. Catherine Madsen, a contemporary scholar, warns of this danger in her devastatingly honest essay "Liturgy and Kitsch."

I have ventured with some trepidation into this field, and one of my original compositions, "Prayer in Time of Doubt," was included in *Jewish Men Pray* (Jewish Lights, 2013; 86). It is built around an image from Psalm 63, in which the psalmist seeks God in the holy places, but to no avail. My composition ends with a plea to be enveloped by the piety of the medieval poet who wrote "*Elohim—Eli ata!*" (O God You are my God!). My hope is that these words support, and perhaps inspire, the spiritual quest of those who have indeed visited the holy places and yet seek on.

Rahamana—Merciful One

I turn to seek You in moments of doubt
I yearn to find Your trace revealed in the world
I seek to find You in the Holy Place—and in the outside world.
I have prayed, and studied; I have lived and loved
I have grown and built . . . and I have sought for You.
I have said the words, Attended the holy gatherings
Found a place among my People, found community and friends
But I seek an answer to my question
A still small voice that my own ear can hear
A touch of the Other upon my soul
I yearn to say with truth and joy
Elohim Eli Ata O God—You are My God!

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.

Torah from JTS

Lekh Lekha 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS.

What's in a Name?

What's in a name? Quite a lot, but you need to know the story. My family name, Nevins, is now five generations old, chosen by my paternal great-grandfather Haskell Neviadomsky at the time of his naturalization. He came to this country in 1896, fleeing the czar's draft, and apparently decided that he would never make it in America with such a long and foreign-sounding name. I imagine him visiting Brooklyn's Nevins Street, and deciding on the spot to become Hyman Nevins.

Changes of name, whether within a generation or between generations, signal the conflicted agendas of continuity and change experienced by all families, and particularly by immigrants. They attempt to remember the old country while fitting into the new. They make gestures of self-invention that affect not only their own lives, but also those of their descendants. The ancestor's original rationale may soon be forgotten, but the reverberations of their decision continue through the generations.

This week we read in Parashat Lekh Lekha about two name changes, as Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. They have already experienced many upheavals, travels, and travails, and they have achieved old age when God suddenly announces in Genesis chapter 17 the establishment of a covenant (*brit*) that will make Abram into an ancestor for many peoples, secure the land of Canaan for his descendants, and be symbolized by the covenant of flesh, *brit milah*, in him and his sons.

But first, the names must change: Abram and Sarai each gain the letter *heh*, and she loses the letter *yod*. For millennia, our sages have parsed the meaning of these new names and their significance for the changing fortunes of our first family. Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Luntshitz, known as the *K'li Y'kar*, offers several explanations in his commentary, to which I will add some of my own twists.

There is a numerical conservation at work in these name changes, since the lost *yod* subtracts 10 from the sum, but is replaced by two letters *heh*, worth five points each according to the system of gematria. On the symbolic level, *heh* is a letter that recalls the Creation, based on the famous Midrash that God created the heaven and earth with the letter *heh* (*b'heh bara'am*). In Abram and Sarai's name changes, one letter of the divine name *YHVH* is replaced by two others, perhaps signifying an intensification

of their devotion to God. On a kabbalistic level, the two new letters *heh* of Abraham and Sarah may point to the second and fourth letters of the Name, which are in turn associated with the upper and lower mothers in the sefirotic system of *binah* and *malkhut*. All of these layers of meaning imply that our first family will together draw the divine presence into the world. Indeed, the prediction that Abraham will become a father to many nations has been realized through the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Rabbi Luntshitz notes that the letter *heh* is associated with femininity and fertility; perhaps Sarai has to gain in feminine qualities in order to give birth to a child and heir. *Yod* is associated with masculinity; Sarai needs to diminish that quality by losing her *yod*. Abram too will become symbolically emasculated through the rite of circumcision (the *yod* is associated with the foreskin) in order to be renamed *Abraham*. In fact, both Abram and Sarai have until this point been pretty tough characters, constantly moving, getting into conflicts with many regional authorities, and even driving out vulnerable members of their own household. Perhaps a change of character is indicated by these name changes, as they become kinder, gentler leaders, accentuating their feminine qualities and finally succeeding in becoming parents.

In Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 46:8, the Sage Bar Kappara states that anyone who continues to call Abraham by his original name of Abram violates a negative command and fails to fulfill a positive one. The Torah is emphatic about these changes, whereas it continues to refer to Jacob and Israel alternatively. The old characters of Abram and Sarai have been set aside for good. Only the more complete, and frankly kind, figures of Abraham and Sarah will be identified as the spiritual and biological ancestors of Israel.

The transformation of Abram and Sarai into Abraham and Sarah has reverberated throughout our history. When trying to define the Jewish character, the Rabbis said (BT Yevamot 79a) that this nation is merciful (*rahmanim*), modest (*bayshanim*), and kind (*gomlei hasadim*). These qualities, especially the final one, are associated with Abraham and Sarah, who will demonstrate hospitality and compassion in the next chapters. We certainly cannot claim that the Jewish People has consistently lived up to these standards, but these remain our ideals.

New studies indicate that many Jews are becoming less and less certain of what being Jewish means to them. As a rabbi, I advocate that Torah study and mitzvah practice become integrated into every Jew's life. But first a person must decide that she or he wants to be part of this story. One needs to add a letter *heh* to one's name, adding a spiritual side to one's narrative of self-invention, and becoming a follower of Abraham and Sarah. Compassionate practice should be the lead quality, which is followed then by reflection and devotion.

What's in a name? History. What's in a name change? Aspiration, self-invention, and transformation. The crown of a good name is said to be greater than the crowns worn by a king, high priest, or the Torah itself. What kind of name shall we make for ourselves?

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A Taste of Torah

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

God as an Ally

A journey of four thousand years begins with God's command to Abraham. "Go forth," God urges Abraham, "from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Psychically, one senses the sacrifice inherent in God's desire. And clearly God does not make it easy for his prophet. The three expressions employed by the divine voice make it increasingly more difficult for Abraham to leave—his land, his birthplace, and his father's house. Indeed, the rabbinic mind imagines that leaving one's land is not so difficult. But to abandon one's birthplace and family requires pain and sacrifice. As Everett Fox writes, here Abraham is being asked to give up his past, while in the narrative of the *Akeidah* (the binding of Isaac), he is requested to give up his future. How sensitive is God in asking Abraham to sacrifice his past? What clues are we given in Parashat Lekh Lekha?

In explaining the third verse of our Torah reading, Joseph ben Isaac B'khor Shor showcases God's sensitivity to Abraham. He writes,

"I will love those who love you and I will hate those who hate you" means, "do not let your heart say that I do not have a colleague or redeemer in the land, and if someone hates me, and seeks to do me harm, no one will stand up against him. Or if someone loves me, then who will give him recompense for such love?" For a person who has close friends—everyone (those friends) supports those who honor and benefit him. I will be for you a lover and a redeemer.

And so, when God declares that "I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you," there is a profound sense that God recognizes Abraham's existential loneliness in this sacred endeavor. God singles out Abraham. No doubt insecurity and alienation plague the nascent prophet. Rather than avoiding the issue, God addresses the topic head on—saying to Abraham, "you will not be alone." I will be the ally and friend that you crave as you move forward.

God's assurance provides a lesson in leadership for the Jewish People. Too often, standing up for what is ethical and moral in this world leads one to isolation. The Jewish People and the State of Israel prove to be case studies in such a phenomenon. We find ourselves, at times, without partners and without friends. God's promise to Abraham, in the words of B'khor Shor, is one that that is eternal: "I will be for you a lover and a redeemer." May we always see God as an ally in our sacred work and may it be true that the "families of the earth" be blessed by the loyal descendants of Abraham.

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