Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer

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

First Word: "Thanks—*Modeh*"

I recall learning Hebrew at the breakfast table from my polyglot father, who spoke 10 languages, saying *"todah"* (thanks) or *"todah rabbah"* (thank you very much) as occasion demanded—which in England it did a lot. The formality of prayerful English kept hidden from me the extent to which giving thanks (thanksgiving) fills our liturgy, literally from the very first word.

In almost every siddur (*Sim Shalom for Weekdays*,1) we find the words "*Modeh ani lefanekha*" presented as the first words to be said upon awakening. Too often this is translated as "I gratefully acknowledge before You," or something similar. The problem is that I'm not sure what it really means "to acknowledge"—and certainly not at 6:15 a.m.—or whatever moment I first wake up. In fact, the participle verb *modeh (modah* in feminine form) has the same Hebrew root as *todah.* Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers the simple translation, "I thank You" (*The Koren Sacks Siddur, 2*), which is clear and immediate. Our tradition invites us to open each day with a thank-you—not a bad reflection for this week in which giving thanks is celebrated and ritualized throughout the United States.

The two most basic elements of the liturgy have thanks-giving embedded in the core text. The *'Amidah* always ends with a prayer for peace (*shalom*), preceded by *"Modim anachnu lakh*" (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, 41), which should, I suggest, simply be translated as "We give thanks to You." In *birkat hamazon* (Blessing after Meals), we find "*Ve'al hakol . . . anachnu modim lakh"* (For all of this . . . we give thanks to You" (232).

How might a Jewish perspective be brought to bear upon Thanksgiving? Certainly by being conscious of the pervasive presence of "thanks" in our sacred texts and liturgy; by focusing on the texts I have noted here. We should be conscious of an increasing body of scientific research confirming the connection between gratitude and a happy or fulfilled life. Schachter-Shalomi.

Psalm 100, *Mizmor Le-Todah* (A Psalm of Thanks), has been connected with Thanksgiving by many faith communities, and in Jewish liturgy is traditionally recited almost every day. Reflections on gratitude might be shared among those gathered, along with any of the texts mentioned above.

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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Mi-ketz 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies, JTS.

Mi-ketz—Hanukkah—Thanksgiving

Hanukkah is the original Thanksgiving. While it is true that our ancestors did not eat turkey (a North American bird), they certainly were cooking with oil. I am not at all certain whether the Maccabees ate latkes or jelly doughnuts, but the Babylonian Talmud teaches us that oil was a big deal to our heroes when they rededicated (in Hebrew, *hanukkah*) the Temple after it was trashed by the Syrian oppressors.

So how did the rededication of the Temple start out as Thanksgiving? Well, the Jews were grateful for the military victories that enabled them to restore the sanctity of the Jerusalem Temple and gave thanks to have, once again, freedom of religion in their land.

One of the earliest sources about the original Hanukkah rededication, the extra-biblical Second Book of the Maccabees (10:6–7), tells us that,

> They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of *Sukkot*, recalling how not long before, during *Sukkot* itself, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. Therefore, carrying their *lulav*s (myrtles, willows, and palm fronds), *they offered hymns of thanksgiving* [my italics] and praise to God who had given success to purifying of His own holy place. (2 Maccabees 10:6–7)

Apparently, if we can have Hanukkah at Thanksgiving time, the Maccabees had Sukkot on the 25th of the month of Kislev (at the winter solstice), and celebrated it by giving thanks for eight days and nights.

I wish I could tell you that in this week's Torah portion, Mi-ketz, our ancestor Joseph also had an early Thanksgiving. Joseph might have been able to interpret dreams that foretold the future, but even he did not foresee what today they're calling "Thanksgivukkah." What our Torah portion does teach us is that through his canny readings of Pharaoh's dreams, a gift of insight given to him by God, Joseph rose to power in Pharaoh's court, second only to Pharaoh himself, "in charge of all the land of

Egypt" (Gen. 41:41). When Joseph rode in his chariot the people cried, "*Abrek*!" (Gen. 41:43). The exact meaning of that word is still unclear—most interpreters suggest it has to do with bending the knee in homage. I like to think it could mean, "Give thanks!"

How amazing that Joseph, a Hebrew from Canaan, could hold such power in the Egyptian court. His rise to power was nothing short of a miracle (on the order of Hanukkah). Imagine a country where a person of minority status could rise to high office; where a Jew, for instance, could become a viceroy or a vice-presidential candidate or presidential chief-of-staff or secretary of state. Where a Jew could be a leader of his party in Congress or her political party at large. Where a Jew could sit on the Supreme Court. Where a Jew could be mayor of one of the nation's largest cities. This is not Egypt of Joseph's time, nor the Land of Israel in the time of the Maccabees—miraculous as those times were—it is our own beloved United States of America, here and now.

We should never fail to see the miracle of the country where we live. The United States is not perfect, far from it. But it is a place where we Jews, as a minority religion, must give thanks for our successes here. Our freedom of religious practice, enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, has allowed us possibilities unparalleled in history. Our achievements are not only in political office, but in academics, medicine, law, business, and virtually every other area one might enumerate.

This coming week, The Jewish Theological Seminary's Chancellor Arnold Eisen and I will be attending the annual White House Hanukkah party. It is a White House tradition that has been going on for many years now, across both Republican and Democratic administrations. Give thanks that we live in a country where the White House, the house of all Americans, makes its kitchen strictly kosher for the event. There will be latkes and jelly doughnuts satisfying both sides of the aisle.

When we are surrounded by family this weekend celebrating Hanukkah and Thanksgiving, rejoice in your family, rejoice at the food we have to eat and share, rejoice in the miracle of oil (whether it culinary or menorah-based), and rejoice in the country that has given us Jews so much to be grateful about.

I wrote above about our country, where a person of minority status can rise to high office. Of course, what is true of Jews in America is also true for African Americans. So I close these words of Torah with words of Thanksgiving from, of all people, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina. He once commented on the election of President Barack Obama with the observation, "In Allah's eyes, all people are equal, of course. But we are not naïve. The fact that you Americans could elect a black man as your President proves to us around the world that you really are the democracy you always claim to be."

Abrek! Give thanks!

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A Taste of Torah

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

The Wisdom of Joseph: Saving Self and Country

Parashat Mi-ketz opens with Pharaoh plagued by two disturbing dreams pregnant with meaning. One involves sickly cattle consuming healthy cattle; the other showcases parched grain consuming abundant grain. Pharaoh seeks a competent interpreter to make sense of his visions and, thankfully, the redeemed cupbearer remembers the talented Hebrew prisoner (a.k.a., Joseph) who successfully interpreted his dream two years earlier. Joseph is summoned by Pharaoh, and offers a compelling explanation—understanding that Egypt and its surroundings will first be blessed by seven years of plenty and then seven years of devastating famine. In response, Joseph proposes an economic plan to save the country from what would have been certain destruction. So impressed is Pharaoh by his Hebrew servant that he describes Joseph as "a man in whom is the spirit of God . . . a man who is discerning and wise" (Gen. 41:38–39), and places him in second in command over Egypt. How does Pharaoh's generous complement give us a window into the person of Joseph?

Professor Ze'ev Falk writes,

> One should compare this description to that of Bezalal [the artist and architect of the Tabernacle] and to the "redeemer" from the House of David. Concerning Bezalel it is written: "I filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, and with insight" (Exodus 31:3). The building of the Tabernacle is similar to the details of the Egyptian economic plan [to save the country from famine] and in both of the them, the spirit of God is expressed through wisdom and insight . . . It is also similar to the Messiah: "a shoot will grow out of the stump of Jesse . . . the spirit of the Lord will alight upon him: a spirit of wisdom and insight . . . " (Isaiah 11:1–2)—for redemption requires these same qualities. (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 90)

Having matured from his younger years through injustices committed against him, Joseph now emerges with a sense of clarity and humility. Far from taking his dreams for granted and using them as a source of pridefulness, his visions now become life-giving. The interpretation of Pharaoh's dream will now be put to constructive ends, saving the land of Egypt and its environs. The power of Joseph is that he brings God into the midst of the looming crisis. To be sure, he attributes his insightful interpretation to God (Gen. 41:25). Moreover, by comparing the description of Joseph to both Bezalel and the Messiah, Falk sharpens our understanding of Joseph (and indeed of all of these characters). Bezalel's goal is to nurture and build a place of God's Presence—and so too the offshoot of Jesse (the Messiah). Joseph creates his own Tabernacle for God in his life and in the life of Egypt, thereby redeeming a land on the brink of devastation. In so doing, he becomes a shining light in a dark world. May we learn from his example, especially as we kindle the lights of Hannukah and celebrate Thanksgiving over the coming week.

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