

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

"Fill Our Eyes With Light . . . Cause Our Hearts to Cling" (Part 1)

Phrases in the siddur are filled with echoes of earlier texts and give birth to newer metaphors and meanings. The blessing immediately before the Shema' in every morning service contains the phrase "*ha'er eyneinu beToratekha vedabek libeinu bemitzvotekha*" (Fill our eyes with the light of Your Torah, and make our hearts cleave to Your mitzvot.) [*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 32.]

Light is a recurring metaphor in our sources; we recall Proverbs 6:23: "The mitzvah is a lamp and Torah is light," and an even more compelling image in Proverbs 20:27 that "the human soul is the candle of God." The previous blessing ends with a plea for a new (and perhaps supernal) light to shine upon Zion, and this paragraph picks up the metaphor, asking that our eyes be filled with the light of the Torah. Some translations use the phrase "enlighten our eyes," which has an echo of the quite different eastern religious concept of "*samsara/nirvana*" (often rendered with the English word *enlightenment*). It seems to me that this proverb is not asking for this profound, ultimate enlightenment, but that we see the world through the insights and wisdom of Torah. In Western society, we are the heirs of the "Enlightenment," which gave rise not to profound spiritual revelation but to the "Light of Reason."

This phrase asks that we grow in our capacity to see the world and its challenges through the perspectives of Torah: the clear imperatives of the Written Torah, coupled with the wisdom and subtle insights of our Sages in the unfolding Oral Torah. The colleagues of R' Ami, as they departed from his home, offered him these words of blessing (Berakhot 17a) now included in many contemporary Jewish rituals: "*Olamkha tir'eh bechayekha*." (May you see your world fulfilled in your lifetime); "*Eynekha ya'iru be'or haTorah*." (May your eyes shine with the light of the Torah").

We all aspire to receive this ancient blessing offered to R' Ami—to see our world fulfilled in our own days. The daily recitation of the Shema' is bedrock to Jewish liturgy. We say these words morning and evening, just before going to sleep each night, and traditionally as the last utterance before each person's soul departs this life. The rabbinic composition that surrounds the Shema' guides our thoughts and images, asking understanding, light, and ultimately love.

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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Torah from JTS

Parashat Mishpatim
Shabbat Shekalim
Exodus 21:1–24:18
February 9, 2013
29 Shevat 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Lisa Gelber, Associate Dean, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

On Rosh Hodesh Adar, my daughter will give up her pacifier. The date is not completely arbitrary. Wanting to prevent sadness on her birthday, I chose another date with deep meaning, the anniversary of her immersion in the *mikveh*. On her 33rd day of life (equivalent to the new month of Adar), I dropped my daughter in a "pool" of water, letting go of her completely, and scooped her back up into my arms as she emerged (as her conversion certificate reads) "a true and full member of the Jewish faith and Jewish People." Having guided countless families through conversion, one might assume the process would have been pro forma. I understood all the logistics. Even so, the thought of letting go of the child for whom I had searched for years, even for a millisecond, was almost unbearable.

New York State requires a 30-day waiting period for irrevocable consent of the birth mother for extrajudicial surrender to an agency. Every day that I fed, changed, and bathed my daughter, took her for walks, sang her songs, and prayed with her during the opening month of her life marked another step toward our life together. Immersing myself in her needs, I focused on the miraculous gift of her presence. Each day brought new surprises and a little less anxiety about our future. When I received an email from our social worker stating, "Yes, the Birthmother's legally allowable revocation period is over," I immediately sent an email to friends and family announcing our trip to the *mikveh* (I'd already made the arrangements) with the subject line, "We're Free." As much as I hated the wait (and weight) of those 30 days, they offered the framework to notice, cherish, and plan, even within the uncertainty. The faith cultivated in those days gave me the courage to let go of my child so that she could become the fullest self I imagined for her.

Moses faces a similar task in this week's parashah, Mishpatim. Having received a multiplicity of rules and regulations designed to guide societal relationships and interactions with God, Moses conveys that information to the People and receives affirmation, "*Kol ha'd'varim asher diber Adonai, na'aseh*" (All the things that Adonai has commanded, we will do! Exod. 24:3). Then, Moses is told, "*Aleh*

aylai ha'harah, ve'h'yeh sham" (Come up to me on the mountain, and be there. Exod. 24:12). God invites Moses to stay there, in God's presence. Rashi understands this portion of the verse to read, "and be there *for 40 days*." Moses needs time to immerse himself in the law and his relationship with God. He needs to experience what it meant to climb this mountain, literally and figuratively. If he didn't yet know that, God did.

What was it like for Moses to experience God's glory, to enter into that cloud? I imagine he wondered how it was that he got there, and questioned how he might convey the power of his experience to the people; after all, despite his role as God's messenger and transmitter of guidelines and information, he remains an individual in relationship with humans and with the divine.

Psalms 24:3 offers, "Who may ascend Adonai's mountain? Who may stand in God's holy place?" First we climb and then we establish ourselves, planting our feet as securely on the ground (or mountaintop) as possible. Lest we think that God's availability depends on an ascent to the highest and seemingly most inaccessible of mountains, the Talmud reminds us that one should always learn from the mind of his Creator. The Holy One of Blessing ignored all the mountains and heights and caused the Shekhinah to rest on Mount Sinai (not the highest of mountains), and ignored all the beautiful trees and caused the Shekhinah to rest in a bush (Sotah 5a).

Once we "arrive," the task remains to remain, engaged, noticing without holding on for dear life. The Kotzker Rebbe suggests that's why the Torah adds "and be there": "Even though someone may stand on the very peak (of the mountain), his head may be somewhere else." The invitation to "be there" instructs Moses in the ways of mindful living. We can get to the high peaks of our lives, we can reach in to God only with patience and the willingness to step into the unknown and embrace the fear of what might be. Taking the journey designed for us, with all of its twists and turns, bumps and bruises can make us free.

Last week, at the opening of *Reading the Visual / Visualizing the Text*, the inaugural exhibition of the JTS Arts Advisory Board, Chancellor Arnold Eisen commented, "Inside restrictions, creativity flowers." While rules, regulations, and boundaries confine the edges of our lives, they need not dampen the potential of our experiences. Before running to greet people in their seats, before starting to play, before enjoying any snacks at shul on Shabbat, my daughter and I wrap ourselves in my tallit and recite the *berakhah*, thanking God for honoring us with the commitment to wrap ourselves in the tzitzit. Not long ago—the colorful silk peaked over our heads and flowing over our bodies, the potential for synagogue fun just inches away—my daughter leaned in close to me and said, "It's like a mountain, mama."

Perhaps it's that sense of strength and wonder, the ability to appreciate the potential of an interaction that informed my daughter's plan for her pacifier. On Rosh Hodesh Adar, when we are instructed to increase joy, we will place the pacifier in a box and, according to my daughter's instructions, either give it to Baby L, a sweet child at her day care, or put it aside for when my daughter is a mother and can share it with her baby. Wherever it ends up, whatever ritual I design to commemorate this release, my daughter's deep understanding of *ve'h'yeh sham* (what it means to be in the moment) will enrich our experience.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Coming on the heels of the Revelation at Sinai, Parashat Mishpatim opens with laws concerning slaves. Most strikingly, the Torah reading addresses the release of Hebrew slaves in the seventh year of their service. But what about a curious case in which a slave refuses to leave? Torah describes the scenario: "But if the slave declares, 'I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to go free,' his master will take him before God. He will be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master will pierce his ear with an awl; and he will then remain his slave for life" (Exod. 21:5–6). Why does Exodus legislate a ritual regarding the piercing of an ear? The Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 22b) explains, "God said: The ear that heard on Sinai: 'the children of Israel are My slaves' (Lev. 25:55), and not slaves of slaves—and here this person went and acquired a human master for himself—let that ear be pierced!" How else may we understand this striking act?

Dr. Avivah Zornberg, author and teacher of Torah in Jerusalem, quotes the Sfat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter), writing,

Why should the ear be mutilated, since the sin is basically one of action, not of hearing? His answer places the faculty of hearing at the center of the Jewish spiritual enterprise. When the Israelites committed themselves to the Covenant, saying "We shall do and we shall hear!" they expressed a desire to go beyond the doing mode, beyond the basic requirements of the Commandments. "We shall hear!" means that they hold themselves alert to further and finer intimations of God's will. This attitude of alertness . . . signifies an aspiration to respond at any moment to God's will. In the case of the slave, quite possibly he feels comfortable with his master; he has achieved an equilibrium that allows him to maintain his religious life in slavery. But, insists Sfat Emet, it was not for this that Israel was created: their destiny is not a slavish, robot-like performance of prescribed acts, but a life of continuous passionate "listening" to God. (Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 308)

Simply stated, a slave who desires to remain in servitude has lost the ability to hear and thus to imagine a better world for himself. Perpetual servitude to masters in the material realm numbs us, making us insensitive, robotic, and simply incapable of hearing murmurings of redemption. That is the problematic essence of the Hebrew slave's decision to remain enslaved. The essence of who we are as Hebrews is about the journey to freedom. One need look no further than the Hebrew root of the word *Hebrew*, *ayin-vet-reish: ivri*, the word for "crossing over." Abraham is the first Hebrew, *ivri*. Notably, that same Hebrew root is also used in the quintessential expression for freedom, *v'he'evarta shofar teruah*: that "you will sound the call of the shofar" (Lev. 25:9)—a sound that symbolizes release and freedom. Jews, and indeed all of humanity, are meant to be free. Our special mission, as the Sfat Emet and Avivah Zornberg point out, is to go far beyond the routine of ritual: it is to hear, understand, and delve deeper so that we become engaged and proactive Jews. In so doing, we eschew human servitude and we come to sanctify our lives through serving our Heavenly Master, who created the world and endowed each of us with a divine image.

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