

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

“Liturgy–Prayer” “Keva–Kavanah”

My teacher in London, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Magonet, wrote a fascinating and inspiring poem-meditation exploring the concepts of prayer and liturgy, which I would associate with the traditional rabbinic terms *keva* and *kavanah* (the connection is not 100 percent perfect). Our synagogues are often in fact places of liturgy, where prescribed rites and rituals are carried out, with the gathered congregation participating and/or witnessing. Many among us yearn and dream for synagogues to be places of something else, something more transcendent. Let us turn to selections from Rabbi Magonet's words:

Liturgy defines the Community that prays / Prayer is the offering of each individual

Liturgy affirms the values of that Community / Prayer sets those values on our lips and in our hearts

Liturgy unites those who share a tradition / Prayer connects us to all who pray

Liturgy describes the boundaries of a community / Prayer locates us within creation as a whole

Liturgy offers a language for our prayer / Prayer reaches out beyond language

Liturgy invites our emotions / Prayer refines our emotions

Liturgy begins with the world we know / Prayer suggests worlds to be explored

Liturgy seeks to bring God into the world / Prayer helps make room for God in our lives

Liturgy provides security, continuity and certainty / Prayer disturbs, challenges and confronts

Liturgy is an event. Prayer is a risk.

Rabbis and cantors are carefully trained to understand the manifold aspects of liturgy, and to render the liturgy correctly, and with beauty. We often respond to that beauty, and we find ourselves connected to the forms and structures that are provided by the fixed liturgy. And yet we know that our hearts and souls often seek something more, something more private and intimate, transcendent and personal. Our sages of old, and the rabbis and cantors of modernity, are deeply aware of the limitations of structured liturgy; among the students of JTS, too, the quest for personal prayer, for personal meaning, goes very deep.

We affirm that for some this meaning or experience can be found by probing deeply the meaning of prayer texts (*iyyun tefillah*), but that for others the experience of prayer is born of silence, or inspiring music, or insightful teaching and poetry. Rabbi Magonet invites us to embrace both horns of the dilemma: let us attend the fixed services as an event, but let us know, as well, that there is an inevitable risk of being challenged or even disturbed. We yearn for *kavanah*, for personal connection to the Divine; we read in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 106b) that this yearning is reciprocated:

“Rachaman liba ba’ei—The All-Merciful desires the (human) heart!”

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarath@jtsa.edu.

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Parashat Shemot
Exodus 1:1–6:1
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Walter Herzberg, Assistant Professor of Bible and Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS

Good for the Midwives

Pharaoh instructs the midwives to kill the male children of the Hebrew women they deliver. Amazingly, the midwives do not obey Pharaoh's orders. As a result, we read the following in Exodus 1:20–21:

God did good to the midwives
And the people increased and became very vast
And it was since the midwives feared God
That He/he made them houses/households

Question: What exactly was the good that God did for the midwives? This question has engaged the commentators throughout the generations.

By simply examining a few interpretations of various commentators, we shall attempt to consider the implied or sometimes explicit theology that ensues from their comments—all based on their consideration of the same textual/literary question(s).

Two other textual questions related to verses 20 and 21 above must be kept in mind before we proceed. Who is the antecedent of the pronoun *he* in the phrase “he made them houses”? (Most commentators suggest God, though more than a few suggest Pharaoh). And finally, are the houses he made literal houses, or are they meant to be understood metaphorically?

Rashi (1040–1140, France), asks our question: “What was the good” and answers that the reward is stated in the following verse (Exod. 1:21): that God made them [metaphorical] houses of the priesthood, levites and royalty. In other words, God established households or families for them. The implied theology of Rashi's comment is articulated by U. Cassuto (1883–1951, Italy, Israel): that God rewarded the midwives measure for measure (“*middah keneged middah*”), as is his custom. The midwives save the Hebrew children and families, so God provides them with their own distinguished families as a reward.

Many commentators find fault with Rashi's skipping to verse 21 in order to find the

good, insisting instead that the good must be found in verse 20 itself: “the people increased and became very vast.” Yitzhaq Caro (*Toledot Yitzhaq*, 1458–1535, Spain) states that the fact that the people increased so greatly was the midwives’ reward. It was good for business! In other words, the more children being born, the busier the midwives would be. The implied theology of his comment may be that God will reward us with a decent livelihood if we are deserving (Jews have been praying for *parnasah*, a respectable livelihood, for centuries).

Zalman Sorotzkin (*Oznayim LaTorah*, 1881–1966, Lithuania, Jerusalem) like Caro, also suggests that the reward is to be found in verse 20: “the people increased and became very vast.” For him, the reward is absolutely not a material reward, but rather the intrinsic reward of the selfless act. He explicitly articulates the theology by quoting the rabbis who say *sekhar mitzvah*, *mitzvah*: the reward of performing God’s mitzvah or will is the mitzvah or the act itself. “What greater reward for the midwives who endangered their lives to save the children than to see the children flourishing—what more do they need?!”

Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508, Lisbon) also looks for the good in verse 20, but he suggests, along with his other interpretations, that the good that God did for the midwives is found in the statement itself; that “God did good to the midwives,” meaning God made the midwives good. According to Abarbanel, the midwives were Egyptian and not Hebrews (as Rashi interprets). The reason that Egyptian midwives disobeyed their own king and saved the Hebrew children was a result of God’s intervention, His causing the midwives to be “righteous in their hearts.” The implied theology of Abarbanel’s comment is, perhaps, that there is hope that God can influence our enemies to change their attitude—and that there is hope for all of us, both Gentile and Jew, that God can move our hearts to act righteously.

Yakov Zvi Meklenburg (*Haketav Vehaqabbalah*, 1785–1865, Germany, Eastern Europe), like Rashi, notes that the reward of the midwives is to be found in the following verse, in the phrase “He made them houses.” Meklenburg also understands *houses* metaphorically, but suggests that *houses* in the Bible can be emblematic of honor and greatness, not families. But he makes note of the ambiguous nature of the pronoun *he* in the phrase “He made them houses,” aware that other commentators insist that *he* is Pharaoh. Meklenburg therefore opines that because of God’s goodness not only did Pharaoh refrain from punishing the midwives who disobeyed his orders, but “he made them houses,” meaning that he set them free and accorded them honor. Meklenburg continues that the pronoun *he* is ambiguous because it refers to both God and Pharaoh simultaneously—on the surface Pharaoh set them free, but the one who really set them free was God. The implied theology of his comments may be that we ought to sensitize ourselves to God’s hand and Providence working behind the scenes, through people.

Finally, Mordekhai Yosef Lainer (*Mei Hashiloakh*, 1801–1854, Ishitza, Poland) also understands the reward as “he made them houses,” but surprises us with an unexpected metaphorical interpretation of *houses*. He links the reward of houses at the end of the verse 21 to the beginning of the verse “since the midwives feared God, He made them houses.” Lainer notes that when people fear man there is no peace of mind (*yishuv hadaat*). Fearing God, on the other hand, does provide one with a sense of equanimity, and peace of mind. Since the midwives feared God, they therefore did not fear disobeying Pharaoh’s command: a house, a home, says Lainer, is emblematic of a sense of security and peace of mind. The implied theology may be that true fear of God can eliminate or significantly diminish our fear of man.

The comments above were intended to demonstrate a three-stage methodology whereby one identifies a textual problem in the Torah text, then examines the

responses of various commentators to the textual question, and finally attempts to derive meaning from the comments. The methodology encourages readers to seriously engage with the Torah text through a close reading, to become aware of the multivalent nature of the text by examining many different interpretations of the textual question at hand, and to have the opportunity to consider the possibility of many personally relevant issues that may ensue from this intimate engagement with the Torah text.

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A Taste of Torah

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

As we welcome this coming Shabbat, we turn to the second of the Five Books of Moses, Exodus.

Most significantly, this text gives birth to the Israelite people and their sacred mission in the world and throughout history. Parashat Shemot opens by narrating the descent of Jacob’s line into enslavement. Pharaoh pursues a ruthless policy of discrimination, enslavement, and extermination. Still, what is most striking about this first chapter of Exodus is not the brutality of Pharaoh, but the humanity of two heroines, Shifra and Puah. Pharaoh commands these two midwives to kill male Israelite children. In the first biblically recorded act of civil disobedience, Shifra and Puah respond by affirming God’s Image: “The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live” (Exod. 1:17). What are we to make of the biblical story of the midwives—especially in contrast to the behavior and wishes of Pharaoh?

Nahum Sarna writes,

What is remarkable is that the names of these lowly women are recorded whereas, by contrast, the all powerful reigning monarch is consistently veiled in anonymity. In this way the biblical narrator expresses his scale of values. All the power of the mighty pharaoh, the outward magnificence of his realm, the dazzling splendor of his court, his colossal monuments—all are illusory, ephemeral, and in the ultimate reckoning, insignificant, and they must crumble into dust because they rest on foundations empty of moral content. Seven times in this brief episode the term “midwife” is repeated, an index of the importance that Scripture places upon the actions of the women in their defiance of tyranny and in their upholding of moral principles. (Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 25)

What is just as telling as what Sarna points out in his sensitive reflection, is the way in which Torah deals with the identity of these midwives. They are referred to as *miyaldot ha-ivriot*. This Hebrew term is ambiguous: it could mean “the Hebrew midwives” or it may just as well be translated as “the midwives of the Hebrews.” In other words, the women could be Hebrew or Egyptian. This ambiguity is powerful, conveying the message that no one people holds a monopoly on compassion and morality. While these remarkable women may have been the homegrown heroines of the Jewish people, they may also have been the first “righteous gentiles” in history. Ultimately, our anonymous pharaoh disintegrates into the dustbin of history, and our caring midwives, Shifra and Puah, become an inspiration to the Jewish people and all of humanity. May such overflowing compassion and good always triumph over hatred and evil.

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