

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.

Of Words and Hearts

"Take with you words and return to Adonai." (*K'chu imachem devarim.*) —Hosea 14:3

These famous words of Hosea are always read on the Shabbat morning preceding Yom Kippur. The liturgy and rituals of Yom Kippur are deeply rooted in recalling, even reenacting, the sacrifices carried out in the Temple. Hosea's words compel us to engage with the inevitable tension between fixed ritual and spontaneity.

Hosea invites us to approach God with words, an idea radical in its time. The book does not include any fixed texts that we might use in approaching the Divine, but Jewish liturgical history has more than made up for this.

Last week in this column, I began to explore the concept of *ha'avodah shebalev*, the "service of the heart/mind." Following the destruction of the Temple, *avodah* was existentially transformed and relocated from Temple sacrifice to become *ha'avodah shebalev*—the service of the heart (prayer). *Lev* is often translated as *heart*, and we tend to think of the heart as the seat of the emotions, as the center of romantic love and inner emotional longings.

In the Shema', we also encounter *lev* in the phrase usually translated as "love Adonai your God with all your heart." It would be better translated as "love Adonai your God with all your self." The word *lev* really represents the core of individual identity. It is with this sense of *lev* that we must understand *ha'avodah shebalev*: we are invited, commanded, to serve God with our whole selves, our entire being—nothing less.

It is important to be aware of aspects of or approaches to service of God that we might explore in addition to the fixed words of our liturgy. There is the way of silence, of meditation/contemplation; the pathway of music, both the melodies to which many of our sacred texts have been set and the wordless melodies or *niggunim* of the Hasidic tradition. And if we are challenged, troubled, or inspired by the words printed in the siddur, we can also find our own words—which will, perhaps, express more faithfully our unique message.

The struggle for each person to find their way in service of God is not a simple one. At the end of the formal blessings of the *'Amidah*, we find inserted the final verse of Psalm 19: "May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart/mind be acceptable to You Adonai, my Rock and Redeemer." These words recognize so clearly the enormous gulf that might lie between the words we have just said and the inner expression of our heart/mind. The psalmist asks that both be acceptable—and even, perhaps, that both be brought closer to each other and reconciled.

A fuller version of Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer, including media links, can be found in the online version at www.jtsa.edu/x16744..xml.

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Parashat Eikev
Deuteronomy 7:12–11:25
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Stephen Garfinkel, Associate Provost and Assistant Professor of Bible, JTS.

How will the Torah reading for this week, Parashat Eikev, stack up against last week's reading (Va-ethannan), which included no less than the Ten Commandments and the Shema'? Obviously, that will be a hard act to follow! Be assured, though, that Eikev has plenty to offer us as well.

Most of Deuteronomy comprises several major speeches that Moses delivers to the Israelites as they are poised to enter their new homeland, especially because (as he has known, and as they recently found out) he will not be with them there. It is, therefore, reasonable to understand Moses's discourses as his final attempts to educate the people, to exhort them to behave according to God's commands in the future, and to explain what will be the consequences of their actions. As such, last week's reading and this week's—which together form most of Moses's second major valedictory speech to the people—provide two aspects of one integral message.

In last week's reading, Moses offered the grand announcement, the front-page headlines supplemented by some amplification. This week, he follows up by emphasizing and clarifying even further the consequences of the people's actions, in language and imagery designed to put more teeth into the grand ideals of the Ten Commandments. Eikev further grounds the theory in realities. It is designed to emphasize how the principles will function in practice, when the exhilaration of the Sinai memory has begun to fade, and the Children of Israel must face the daily responsibilities of communal life as God's people in their new surroundings. Eikev, like so much of Deuteronomy, conveys a highly utilitarian—one might be tempted to say *crass*—theology. If the nation observes God's laws and remains faithful to God's Covenant, God will favor the people in very specific ways: with human, animal, and agricultural fertility; with health; and with protection against disease and enemies. Conversely, if the nation is unfaithful to God or the Covenant, the rains will not fall at the times they are needed, the produce will wither, and the people will "perish from the land."

Really? Is that a theological stance most readers of this column, enlightened and thoughtful as they are, can believe in 2012? If we violate Shabbat or don't observe

kashrut or don't recite the daily liturgy, will it really not rain? Perhaps many of us see that thinking as simply an old-fashioned belief that was fine for our ancestors "way back then," but which no longer holds water (so to speak). After all, that kind of theology sounds more like bribery, extortion, or even magic: by our enacting certain behaviors, we determine God's actions in return.

However, an essential component of Conservative Jewish interpretation and understanding of the Torah is the assiduous avoidance of the easy—but dangerous—trap of literalism. We need to appreciate the widespread and conscious use of metaphor and poetry in the Torah, and then try to understand what issue, value, or concept may underlie specific biblical terminology in the text before us. Once we reach that step, the next challenge for us is to retranslate that essential core into new metaphors that can become meaningful today.

Fortunately, we can take as our starting point a comment made by Rashi (11th-century, France) and other classical commentators, who see an interesting relationship between Deuteronomy 6 (the first paragraph of the Shema', from last week's parashah) and Deuteronomy 11 (the second paragraph of the Shema', from this week's parashah). They notice what appears to be a repetition between the two passages, but with an important difference. The earlier chapter is written in the singular, while the second passage is in the plural. Perhaps the point is that when *the group*, the community, obeys the Covenant, the rains will come in their due time and the ground will be fertile. If so, what might be the command whose fulfillment leads to that outcome? We can only speculate, of course, but it seems reasonable to hypothesize that our responsibility (mentioned all the way back in the early chapters of Genesis) to "have dominion over the earth" is relevant. To the degree that we take our role of ecological stewardship seriously, for instance, we might help nature run its "normal" course.

The Torah, of course, didn't understand ozone-layer depletion, ultraviolet radiation, or the greenhouse effect. More than that, the Torah isn't a science textbook, and it wasn't intended to be one. However, the narrative of the Torah does recognize that human actions have effects, even global effects. Violating our responsibility to protect the earth seems to lead to increased drought, famine, and disease. To the degree that we can minimize destruction of the ozone layer by cutting back our use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), we help enable the rains to fall at their proper times, we help enable the proper growth of vegetation and animals, and we help reduce diseases such as skin cancers. Television news almost every evening reminds us that these are, indeed, very real concerns for us.

Finally we turn to the insight of one additional commentator, Nahmanides, also known as Ramban (13th-century, Spain), who explains that the miracle of God's providing timely rain doesn't always happen. In other words, this isn't automatic; it isn't guaranteed. However, Ramban—a philosopher, commentator, and physician—probably understood that we give ourselves the best chance of being blessed by God by doing the right thing and fulfilling our communal responsibility to the earth.

Following last week's charge, *each of us* must make our individual contribution to helping repair the world, by actions such as reducing our carbon footprint, driving vehicles with excellent gas mileage, and supporting legislation designed to strengthen and protect the ozone layer. This week, Parashat Eikev tells us that if we all work together in these efforts, we will help God protect the planet. Good ecology makes good theology.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Parashat Eikev is centered on the Land of Israel. As the Israelites stand on the verge of entering the Land, they are promised prosperity in return for their loyalty to God's commandments. Torah, however, anticipates the downside of the success, affluence, and prosperity that await the young nation. As Deuteronomy 8:11–14 declares, "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His commandments . . . which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill and build fine houses to live in . . . beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God." Affluence breeds the dangerous perception of self-sufficiency. Indeed, the Israelite relationship with God is paramount. This message is underscored in the moving description offered of the Land of Israel in Deuteronomy 11:10: "For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come." Why does Torah seek to juxtapose Egypt and Israel? What may we learn about ourselves and about the Land of Israel?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch elaborates,

Egypt's fertility is independent of the rain. It is watered by the Nile irrigation canals cut right through the country, made and worked by human efforts . . . But Palestine is a land dependent for its supply of water on the mountain springs fed by the rainfall. Moreover, the country was built not only in the valleys or plains but also on the mountains and hilly districts where means for artificial watering are impossible. So ultimately fertility is entirely dependent on rainfall. (Hirsch, *Commentary on Numbers*, 182)

Clearly, according to Torah as well as Hirsch's commentary, "earthly Jerusalem" (*Yerushalayim shel matah*) is intimately connected to and dependent on Jerusalem of the heavens (*Yerushalayim shel ma'alah*). Water, especially in Israel, cannot be taken for granted. Not only is it a literal sign of divine favor and nourishment, but it is also a figurative symbol of the vital relationship between God and the People. Even when the People are blessed by abundance, they must not lose sight of the true source of their blessing: the partnership between God and man. Torah anticipates and cautions that there will come a prosperous day when the Israelites will say, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me," and it goes on to direct us, "Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth . . ." (Deuteronomy 8:17–18). The Land of Israel teaches us the vital lesson of humility. Only by diminishing our egos may we truly enrich ourselves, our communities, and our connection to God.

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