

## Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Cantor Jack Chomsky, president of the Cantors Assembly and cantor of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Columbus, Ohio, and representative of the Cantors Assembly to the JTS Board of Trustees.

### The Blessing of Monotony?

Many people struggle with the fact that traditional Jewish prayer is a fixed entity. The words that we say, the times that we say them, are prescribed according to traditions and Jewish law. The culture in which we live, by contrast, values spontaneity and novelty. Why not pray when one feels like it, and not be forced to shoehorn one's intellect and emotions according to the seemingly arbitrary ideas of our ancient rabbis?

I didn't grow up in an environment governed by halakhah and the rhythm of Jewish life. My experience with reciting required prayers at required times is one that I adopted in adulthood. One thing that I feared in doing so is that I would get to the point that I had had quite enough—that I would no longer feel benefit from prayer, but would instead come to resent it.

I have found the opposite to be true. I can't guarantee similar results for all, but I have found that there can be great reward for self-discipline and mindful attention to tasks that could be performed mindlessly. At first, the contents of the prayers and overall structure of services may seem opaque. But like the individual who goes through a daily physical regimen of exercise, running, etc., one comes to recognize both small and big things with growing familiarity and experience.

I find delight *every day* and some benefit *every time* I recite even the shortest service. The deeper the familiarity, the more likely that something new will emerge—or that one will find a familiar satisfaction.

For example, during *Shaharit* (the daily morning service), we recite Psalms 145 through 150 as part of *Pesukei Dezimra* (passages of song, a preliminary part of the service). During Psalm 147, we read: "*moneh mispar lakochavim, l'chulam shemot yikra*" (God knows the number of the stars and calls each one of them by name).

This little piece of prose-poetry often makes me smile: it reminds me that the universe is vast, that there is a sense of divine design. To the author of the psalm (traditionally thought to be King David), there was no question that it was God who designed the world, named the stars, remembered each one's identity. For me in the 21st century, I *might* or might not believe in this sense of design. But I can still take pleasure in the idea of it—that my ancestors saw it so clearly—that I am heir to this beautiful way of expressing it. That I appreciate that each star, though it appears tiny to me, is a world in itself. That, for my part, I can use this phrase to consider the uniqueness of each individual I meet in the course of my daily life. I may have trouble remembering names, but can try harder. Which might make me think of the famous Zelda poem *L'khol Ish Yesh Shem* ("Each Person Has a Name").

All of these associations can be experienced in the fleeting moment that I encounter the words of Psalm 147, enjoying the texture of their sound *in addition to* the many elements of meaning.

Each one of us has the capacity to get to know these beloved prayer texts well, and to find our own beautiful and inspiring path through them. If you haven't yet begun this intellectual and spiritual journey, I hope that you will. It starts with a phrase, and can expand to embrace a psalm, a prayer, even an entire service.

I'd love to hear your thoughts and some of the stopping points that enhance your day, and I look forward to sharing more in future columns. You can reach me at [CantorJC@aol.com](mailto:CantorJC@aol.com). Please do.

*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/x16765.xml](http://www.jtsa.edu/x16765.xml)*

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Ki Tetzei  
Deuteronomy 21:10–25:19  
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## Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS.

This week's Torah portion is directed at Israelites about to "go out" of the wilderness; next week's portion offers guidance to those about to "come in" to the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is anxious for the Israelites to build a society distinct from the one that had enslaved them and no less distinct from the other societies and cultures that will surround them in the Land of Canaan. It wants a people united in their new nation-state—and, to that end, propounds a series of wide-ranging laws designed to bring and keep them together. The "going out" from all existing precedents must be substantial. The "coming in" must make them worthy of having God's presence in their midst.

This, I think, is the logic behind many of the regulations in Ki Tetzei, a set of dos and don'ts that in some cases are immediately comprehensible, but in others seem at first glance (or even second) to be of dubious importance. Let's start with the mitzvot that clearly promote the collective unity. Sheep or oxen that belong to "your fellow" and have wandered off must be returned to their owner or, if that is not possible, must be held and sustained until claimed. Israelites must do the same with lost garments or "anything that your fellow loses and you find" (22:1–3). The word translated as *fellow* by JPS literally means *brother*: a member of the national-religious family of Israel. "You must not remain indifferent" or look away. If your brother's ass or oxen have fallen in the road, help him to raise them up (22:4). Interest cannot be collected on loans of money or food to Israelites, but is permitted on loans to foreigners (23:20–21). Do not enter your neighbor's house to seize a pledge that is the basis of a loan, or hold the pledge overnight if he needs it for warmth (24:10–13). You may eat grapes from your neighbor's vineyard and pluck ears from the standing grain in your neighbor's field (23:25–26). Olives left on the tree or grapes left on the vine after initial harvesting are to remain there for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. "Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing" (24:20–22).

The main point of that final sentence—explaining the reason for all the rest—is its pronoun: second-person singular. *You* were a slave in Egypt—not *you* as an individual, since with few exceptions the generation of adults who had been enslaved

have died out in the wilderness, but *you* the community of Israel—addressed as one here and elsewhere in the Torah, *made into one people* by collective observance of laws that bind them to each other and separate them from non-Israelites.

This same process seems to be at work in many regulations where it is not immediately obvious. There is, for example (22:13–21), the case of the man who comes to hate his wife, and defames her with the charge that she was not a virgin when they married. Such defamation of character is fatal not only to marriages, but to the community as a whole. Think of children whose parentage and standing is suddenly rendered uncertain. Distrust would quickly spread from the marriage bed—and marriage contracts—to every other sort of union. The very next statutes concern adultery, an “evil in Israel” or any other society. Another law: if a man has two wives, one loved by him and the other not, his inheritance must go to the firstborn even if he is the son of the unloved wife. Affection is fickle and unpredictable. The social system requires order and transparency. Neighbors cannot always tell which wife is more beloved by her husband, but they will know which child came first, and plan accordingly. Even the awful law pertaining to the “wayward and defiant son,” which the rabbis couched in so many conditions as to make it virtually impossible to apply (21:18–21), seems designed in part to demonstrate that family rebellion threatens the community as a whole, and must be dealt with collectively. The parents declare the son’s crimes to the elders, and he is killed by the entire town. “Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst; all Israel will hear [or: obey] and be afraid.”

The point, once again, is what *all* of Israel will do as one. Earlier sections of the Torah stressed the need for the Children of Israel to maintain ritual purity in their wilderness encampment, because God dwelt among them. Deuteronomy is concerned with purity in the Israelite army as it goes into battle, the Ark of the Covenant in the lead, and it is concerned with purity, ritual and moral, in the Land of Israel. Over and over (see, for example, 23:2–8), the Torah talks about who may be a part of the “congregation of the Lord.” It is one thing to maintain ritual purity in the wilderness, where the children of Israel are pictured as surrounded by no one and nothing. A man who is impure simply goes out of the camp until sunset, washes, and reenters. There is nothing out there to worry about—because there is nothing out there.

The Land of Canaan is another matter entirely. It is full of Canaanites, meaning customs, cultures, gods, altars, temptations. Deuteronomy is all too aware of how fragile Israelite religion is—a new thing under the sun, the only religion of its kind, devoted to a God who cannot be seen or even imaged. It wants to make sure that the things Israelites see and do every day are utterly distinctive, whether ritual or commercial, private or public. No cult prostitutes in its community. No dishonest weights or measures in its marketplace. Protection of the rights of the stranger and the fatherless. And all the rest.

The Torah tries at times to soften the brutal rules of warfare that are a feature of the ancient world (and of the contemporary world). One senses a certain desperation in Deuteronomy’s unceasing warnings against adopting the customs of other nations and its comprehensive effort to render Israelite society distinct from that of its neighbors. We who are familiar with the phenomenon and price of assimilation cannot avoid reflecting on how, why, and in what ways it is important for Jews to be different, and what price we are prepared to pay for that difference. We who have witnessed and taken part in the reentry of Jews into the Promised Land and the reestablishment of a Jewish nation-state there know what is at stake in Jewish observance, Jewish faith, economic justice, fair treatment of the poor and the stranger, and all the other policies to which Ki Tetzei insists we pay attention.

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## **A Taste of Torah**

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

One of the most troubling and chilling excerpts of familial legislation appears in this week’s parashah—the law concerning the disobedient child. Parashat Ki Tetzei teaches, “If a man has a wayward and defiant son, one who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them even after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders of the town . . . Thereupon the men of his town will stone him to death” (Deut. 21:18-21). Undoubtedly, the modern reader of Torah responds viscerally to these few verses. What do we mean by “wayward and defiant” behavior? How may we understand this harsh punishment? To what extent was this law enforced, and how may we learn from it today?

Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

“One who does not heed his father and mother”—it is only if the boy has a father and a mother, and only if both father and mother exercise their educative influence on him, and only if, as it says in verse 20, that he doesn’t listen to their collective voice. The father and mother need to have one voice. Both must treat him with the same seriousness, both stand over him in equal authority, in equal dignity and above all, in the same agreed ideas and wishes. Only then can they say to themselves that it is not their fault if their son is a failure. If any one of these factors is missing, where above all, there is not complete agreement between the parents in bringing up their children, then the failure of the child is no proof of the moral baldness of his nature. Under a truly better system of education on the part of the father and mother, the child might perhaps have been different, and where the parents failed, life and experience may succeed in improving the situation. (Hirsch, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 418)

Rabbinic tradition, like modern readers today, has had great difficulty in coming to terms with this harsh Toraitic legislation. While Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 71a makes the argument that Torah speaks only of a theoretical situation which has no grounding in reality (namely, that such a punishment was never exacted and only exists on paper to underscore the importance of honoring of one’s parents), Hirsch takes his explanation in a unique and avant-garde direction. Rather than placing the blame on the shoulders of the child, Hirsch transfers responsibility to the parents. He masterfully latches on to the word *kolenu*—that the child does not listen to “our voice.” Out of this, Hirsch understands that the parents are speaking with one consistent, rational, and value-driven voice. In the absence of responsible parenting (i.e., if the parents are sending mixed messages to the child and they themselves are acting irresponsibly), one cannot blame the child. And so in the majority of cases, one can argue that defective parenting is the problem. Through his sharp and sensitive commentary, Hirsch forces us to rethink the complexity of the case presented before us. Just as a child has a responsibility to respect his parents, so too do parents have the obligation of parenting in a sensitive, meaningful, and consistent way.

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