Service of the Heart: Exploring Prayer

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

The Anomaly of the Night: Fear, Power, Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*), Part 2

To the human heart and soul, night and morning are profoundly different, even though an astronomer would see them as equivalent observed consequences of the orbit of the earth around the sun. The first blessing of the evening service (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 28) praises God for establishing the natural cycles: "You roll away light as darkness sets in, and darkness as the light dawns." The morning service offers a tight structure of two blessings before, and one after, the Shema' on the themes of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption (to be explored here in a future essay). Although the texts are a little different in the morning and the evening, the themes are identical.

In the morning service, the blessing on Redemption is followed immediately by the *'Amidah*, consistent with a curious edict of the Sages: "Who is praiseworthy? One who connects (the blessing of) Redemption and the *'Amidah*." The evening service inserts a new blessing, *Hashkiveinu*(*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat*, 33), that is born out of the human experience of the onset of the night. The halakhic commentaries note the intrusion into the Redemption-*'Amidah* nexus, and offer a variety of explanations, some casuistic in the extreme.

Rabbi Reuven Hammer, notes in his masterful *Or Hadash* commentary to *Siddur Sim Shalom* (33) that "since night is a time that causes concern and even fear . . . it was appropriate to conclude the [evening] recitation of the Shema with a prayer for protection." For adults and children alike, there are two concerns as we approach sleep: first, that our sleep be peaceful, untroubled by nightmares; and second, that we do indeed live through the night to enter a new day of life. The opening phrase of the text reflects these two concerns: "*Hashkiveinu Adonai Eloheinu leshalom*" (Let us lie down Adonai our God to [a night of] Shalom/Peace . . . "*veha'amideinu malkeinu lechayim*" (and let us rise again our Sovereign Lechaim / to life).

The text then turns to ask divine protection in two ways: first, from dangers originating in the natural world, or from other humans ("shield us from enemies, pestilence, the sword, starvation and sorrow"); second, from a different source of dread that is identified as the text continues (*"haseir satan mi-lefaneinu ume'ahareinu*"; Turn Satan away from us—in front and behind).

Recall that in the book of Job, Satan is identified as a member of God's "court," and—although the entity "Satan" has evolved greatly through later Jewish (and Christian) sources—in the rabbinic mind, Satan is a source of enticement or seduction from the pathways of honesty. Our translations omit explicit reference to Satan, but the original Hebrew remains, reminding us that the nighttime and our fears about it are not always rational, and that our liturgy engages with all our humanity, rational and irrational.

The text concludes asking God's protection "when we go out and when we come in, for life and for peace." May that protection, tangible and intangible, be with us in all times of darkness, when we face the demons of human aggression or, each of us, our own inner demons.

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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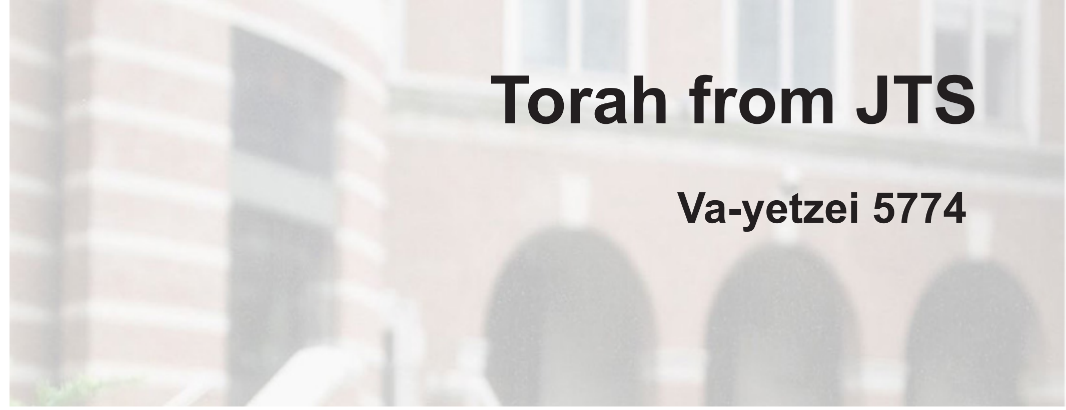

Torah from JTS

Va-yetzei 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Michal Raucher, adjunct assistant professor of Jewish Thought and program director of the MA program in Jewish Ethics, JTS.

Rachel Leans In

Recent conversations in popular feminism revolve around trying to capture what it means to "have it all," and, if that's even possible, how to achieve it. Sheryl Sandberg believes it is possible if women "lean in" to pursue their full career potential, specifically. But Debora Spar says that aiming toward an "all" that includes an uninterrupted successful career and a full family life is an unrealistic expectation that is actually more damaging than inspiring. This conversation is occurring in a particular time and place when many second- and third-wave feminists are reflecting on what the feminist movement of the 1970s helped us achieve and evaluating whether there is more work to be done.

A friend of mine—a similarly minded third-wave feminist who works outside of the home while raising a family—told me that she couldn't help but feel that when she was leaning into her career (and she could pinpoint specific moments), she was leaning *out* of her family. She didn't want to feel bad about that choice—in fact, she was appreciative of the ability to shape her life narrative—but she couldn't escape the negative connotation of leaning out. What kind of mother, she worried, would choose her career over her family? And what would be the ramifications to her family? The problem with this debate, after all, is that it frames these choices in a rigid dichotomy. You are either leaning in or you are missing out. You either have it all, or your life is lacking in some significant way. In academic feminist discourse, by contrast, the conversation has turned toward agency and whether it is possible to say that women with limited choices—such as those in patriarchal religions—can be said to have agency. In other words, can they *lean* at all, with any sort of intention? And when they do, what does it look like?

In this week's parashah, Va-yetzei, we see an example of a woman in the Bible *leaning in* to shape the biblical narrative in a way that actually disrupts her primarily relational role as wife, mother, and daughter. Rachel steals her father's idols as she and her husband, Jacob, gather their belongings to escape from Laban's household. Laban, realizing they have escaped and that his idols are missing, chases after his daughters, his son in law, and his grandchildren and performs an almost complete search of everyone's possessions. Slyly, Rachel places the idols in the cushion of the camel on which she is riding and tells her father that she cannot rise to greet him because "the period of woman is upon me" (Gen. 31:35).

Despite the Torah's silence on the issue, commentators focus on the fact that Rachel stole the idols. Why would she need the idols? Was she an idol-worshipper like her father? Was she trying to make the idols impure by sitting on them while menstruating? Others look at the fact that this is another example of trickery in a chapter replete with unethical behavior. What interests me, however, is Rachel's cunning reason for why her father could not search the camel's cushion.

Struggling with infertility for most of her life, Rachel's period had always been a source of shame. Presumably menstruating regularly, Rachel continued to have her period month after month as her sister and maidservants' bellies swelled with new life. Although some may interpret menstrual blood a sign of fertility, many Jewish women who are trying to get pregnant will tell you that monthly visits to the *mikveh* may at first seem like a new chance at conception, but after a prolonged period of infertility, the *mikveh* becomes a reminder of their inability to get pregnant. For Rachel, getting her period is a sign of her inability to contribute to the new nation; Rachel's period keeps her from *leaning in* to motherhood. When Rachel draws upon her menstruation to deceive her father, however, she reinterprets her menstruation. By saying she is menstruating to prevent her father from seeing the idols, Rachel uses her period as a source of strength and power. Rachel *leans in,* just not in the way everyone expects her to; because of her actions here, we see that her period does not limit her, but rather creates space for her to act in opposition to societal expectations of women (a revolutionary move!). Rachel refuses to be defined by her inability to get pregnant, thereby refusing to be defined as a mother. She also tricks her father in a major blow to his identity, thus refusing to be defined as his daughter. Finally, because Jacob threatens to kill whoever stole the idols, her lie is also directed toward Jacob; therefore, Rachel also rejects her identity as Jacob's loyal wife. In this stunning example of subversive action, Rachel leans in and finds agency—a space for her to act on her own.

A parallel story of subversive female agency might also help us see agency in Rachel's actions. In I Samuel 19, Michal, daughter of Saul and wife to King David, deceives the king's messengers when they come to look for David by telling them that he is sick in bed. After helping him escape out the window, Michal hides an idol in their bed and covers its head with goat hair. King Saul, unconvinced by Michal's claim, discovers her lie. She responds with yet another lie, "He said to me: 'Help me get away or I'll kill you'" (19:17). The story works as a parallel in a number of ways. First, Michal is also a second daughter in love with the man intended for her sister. Saul first wanted his older daughter, Merab, to marry David, but she was intended to someone else. Michal's story is also accompanied by a narrative of infertility. In II Samuel 6, Michal rebukes David for dancing with the Torah, and David responds by yelling at her. The text is quick to comment, "So to her dying day Michal daughter of Saul had no children" (6:23). The fact that she uses their marriage bed—which perhaps they never shared—as a tool to fool her father parallels Rachel's use of menstruation to deceive her father. (That both stories involve idols is perhaps one of the more obvious connections, but because the text is silent on both counts, I will remain so as well.)

In these narratives, we see that despite being limited in their roles and having very little voice in the biblical text, Rachel and Michal create spaces for action. Furthermore, their agency reveals their desire for a countercultural female narrative. One of the largest criticisms of the lean-in / have-it-all debate is that it is solely for women who are fortunate enough to have a career and can decide whether to put their children in day care or stay at home. Most women are not in that financial position and most women have not made it to leadership positions in their fields because there is still significant gender discrimination in the workplace. Worse, still, for many women, there is no choice. Reproductive freedom is still a luxury for many in our country, so having a child necessarily means day care after a short, non–government-mandated maternity leave because not working is not a financially realistic option. Our task, then, is to consider what Rachel's story contributes to this conversation. What we see in Rachel is a woman who used the tools at her disposal—her menstruation—to manipulate a tense situation and subversively reject the yoke of control that her patriarchal context had placed on her. Let this story help us consider how we can make space and allow for the agency of other women in similar positions.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Being in the Land

Parashat Va-yetzei opens with Jacob's flight from the Land of Israel. As a result of his deception and betrayal, Jacob is forced to flee from the murderous intent of his brother Esau. His parents, Isaac and Rebekah, urge him to return to the "old country," where he will hopefully find both a worthy mate and a better future. The fear and uncertainty surrounding Jacob's journey lead to the mysterious episode with which the parashah opens. Genesis 28 narrates, "Jacob came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night . . . Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head . . . He had a dream; a stairway was set . . . and angels of God were ascending and descending." Strikingly, God reiterates the promise of the inheritance of the land to Jacob and his descendants, a vow made to his grandfather before: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and your offspring." Yet, on closer examination of the divine promise, we discover a subtle but dramatic difference between God's promise to Abraham and the promise to Jacob. God tells Abraham, "Lift up your eyes and see the place where you are . . . for all of this land I will give to you and to your seed for eternity" (Gen. 13:14–15). What is the qualitative nature of these two promises? And how may we derive meaning from them today, especially with regard to our own relationship with Israel?

Meir Shalev, prolific and poetic modern Israeli author, comments on the difference between these promises in his remarkable work *Reishit* (*In the Beginning*), a book about the first occurrences of various events and phenomena in the Torah. Shalev writes that the essence of Abraham's promise is connected to the eye (sight and seeing); Jacob's promise is connected to his body (the physical connection of his body resting on the land). To be sure, Shalev writes,

> [T]he eye beholds a vast area that is far greater than the body which rests on a small parcel of land. But seeing does not involve the same intimacy as physically resting upon something. From here we see that Abraham had a fleeting, distant and relatively cold relationship to the Land of Israel—distant and abstract—as only the sense of sight could impart. In sharp contrast we have the figure of Jacob—who had complete and direct contact with the land—contact between the land and his body, between man and the soil of the earth. (*Reishit*, 35 [translated from the Hebrew])

In many ways, we are witness to the paradox of the promise of the Land. Despite the promise given to Abraham, Jacob is forced to flee as a result of tragic familial circumstances. Still, Meir Shalev's keen sensitivity and literary eye leads us to a deeper understanding of the differing relationships of our ancestors to the Land of Israel. While Abraham's was one of *sight* and relative distance, Jacob's was one of contact and *physical connection*. This remarkable reading teaches us a great deal about our own relationships with the Land of Israel.

While it is important to keep our eyes upon the Jewish homeland, seeing from a distance is insufficient. We need to become part of the story. And the way we become part of this modern day miracle is by making ourselves physically present in the land. Living in Israel is indeed a sacred endeavor and treasured mitzvah. And frequent visits to Israel are no less important and vital to energize the Israel-Diaspora relationship. May we live with the keen sight of Abraham and the physical connection of Jacob—continually strengthening our ties and bonds to the promised homeland of Israel.

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