

Torah from JTS

Parashat Yitro
Exodus 18:1–20:23
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22 Shevat 5773

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

Blessings

The famous Priestly Blessing (Num. 6: 24–26) is an ambiguous text in our liturgy that appears in various guises. It is presented as a selection for study from the Written Torah each morning (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, 5), and is chanted by the leader of the service at the end of the *'Amidah* (43). The text presents the Torah verses as a memory:

“Bless us our God . . . with the threefold blessing . . . pronounced by Aaron and his descendants, the Kohanim (Priests) . . .”

The leader of the service is not the one who “bestows” the blessing; we are reminded that this blessing is reserved for the *kohanim*, the descendants of Aaron. In some synagogues, during the additional (*Musaf*) service on festivals and High Holidays, this blessing is chanted by those who believe they are in fact descendants of Aaron; they raise their hands and “bless” the congregation, prompted word by word by the leader of the service. A media clip of this ritual at the Western Wall in Jerusalem is linked at the end of this essay, found online at learn.jtsa.edu.

The most fascinating and compelling version of the tradition of the Priestly Blessing is part of the Shabbat ritual at home on Friday night. Here the blessing text is bestowed from parents to their children, with no hesitation or restriction. The traditional explanation is that following the destruction of the Temple, the context of Temple and priest was transferred to the Shabbat table; the salt on the challah (bread) recalls the salt added to all sacrificed animals, and the role of priest falls upon the parents. So parents in that moment are fully “vested” with the power and authority to bless their children—and have done so for centuries. I have seen the blessing offered through four generations at the same Shabbat gathering; even a “child” of 60 years is not “too old” to receive such a blessing.

My wife and I have blessed our children every Friday night of their lives, and plan to do so at least until age 120; I urge all parents to join us. In giving blessings, we can give more than we have, and become richer as we do so.

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.

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.

A 20th-century modernist architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, is supposed to have said, “God is in the details.” (He is also associated with the dictum “Less is more,” which accurately sums up his architectural philosophy.) The first maxim is particularly relevant to the study of rabbinic texts. The Mishnah and the two Talmuds mostly address details of Jewish observance; they rarely discuss the purpose of individual commandments, nor how the mitzvot mesh to create an integrated religious ethos.

Maimonides was once asked by a proselyte named Ovadiah whether he could recite the phrase “Our God and the God of our ancestors,” which is found in the first *berakhah*, or section, of the *'Amidah*. Having come to Judaism rather than being born into it, Ovadiah is unsure of his obligation—right—to describe himself implicitly as a descendant of the Patriarchs by reciting this phrase.

Now it so happens that this question is discussed in the Jerusalem Talmud in connection with a similar issue addressed in the Mishnah. And yet Maimonides does not begin his response by quoting that passage. Instead, he brilliantly and movingly describes all Jews as being the descendants of proselytes that Abraham brought to monotheism (according to a rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 12:8). Thus Ovadiah should see himself as just one more of those who has come to understand the wisdom of Abraham's teachings. (By the way, Maimonides is obliquely—and brilliantly—creating a counternarrative to the Koran's description of Abraham and his spiritual mission.) Only then does Maimonides address the relevant passage in the Talmud; based on the conclusion reached there, he advises Ovadiah to include the phrase in his prayers.

Why does Maimonides follow this procedure? I believe it is because he understood that behind Ovadiah's question about a detail of religious practice there is a much more fundamental question: am I a second-class Jew? Does my acceptance of God and Torah integrate me fully into the Jewish nation? Or is it the case that, despite my commitment to a life of Torah, I am connected to, but never fully part of, the Jewish People? Doesn't the very fact that it is unclear whether I should recite “our God and the God of our ancestors” indicate that I am forever an outsider?

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It is this question that Maimonides answers in the first part of his response. I will rule in the halakhic matter you have brought before me, Maimonides is saying, but regardless of my response, know that your fundamental identity as a Jew is not and never will be in question. Happily, Maimonides' ruling reinforces the reassurance he offers Ovadiah, but in fact there is a view in the Talmud, cited by Maimonides in his response, that "our God and the God of our ancestors" should not be recited by proselytes. The debate is about the appropriate formulation of the liturgical text and never about one's status as a Jew.

I mention all this because of its connection to the rabbinic understanding of the *Aseret Ha-Devarim*, the Ten Commandments or Pronouncements, which will be read in our synagogues this coming Shabbat. While the rabbinic consensus is that there are ten mitzvot to be found in the Ten Commandments, there is not universal agreement as to what those are. The first verse, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt from the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2), is particularly contested. Maimonides counts this as one of the commandments while others do not. This verse, is in fact, not formulated in the imperative, and a number of rabbinic midrashim support the view that this verse is a preface to the Commandments rather than the first of them. What, then, motivates Maimonides to take his position?

Let me quote to you part of Maimonides' description of this in the opening sentence of his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah: "The basic principle of all basic principles and the foundation of all wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all that exists."

For Maimonides, the opening verse of the Ten Commandments is an axiom. We are obligated to "know" that God exists through philosophical demonstration, and at the very least must accept this as truth.

What sort of God is described here? A rather distant one. The phrase "primary being" is taken from the world of Greek philosophy, and it describes an impersonal animating force, not the biblical God who is engaged with humanity. This is not the God Who appeared to Moses at the Burning Bush, Who freed the Israelites from slavery, and Who entered into a Covenant with them at Sinai. All of this is implicit in the second half of the verse, which Maimonides, at least here, chooses to ignore.

Nahmanides, on the other hand, commenting on Maimonides' remarks, describes this commandment as meaning the acceptance of God as sovereign. For him, the second half of the verse is crucial; this God is the one who redeemed us, the People of Israel, from slavery. In fact, continues Nahmanides, the first verse may not be a mitzvah at all. Rather, it is a summation of what the People had experienced in Egypt and at the Red Sea. No commandment to believe in God's existence was necessary; they had already seen God's presence. By implication, it is through experiencing the presence of God, albeit in ways radically different from the miracles in Egypt, that one knows—experientially, not intellectually—that He indeed exists.

We see, then, that Nahmanides and Maimonides are not merely responding to the question of how to enumerate the commandments. For them, the underlying question is this: when we speak of God, of which God do we speak—a distant unknowable power or one whose presence in our lives and in our being is palpable? Is God simply the Primary Being or a sovereign?

I suspect that most of those who believe in God these days are inclined to think of

God as a power rather than as a presence. There are a host of difficulties with the claim or belief that we can have a meaningful connection with God as a living reality. But this is the God of the Bible, and this is God for me. Whatever we believe, we need to understand that this question is important as an existential matter, and not only an intellectual one. To paraphrase Heschel, don't simply believe *that* God exists, believe *in* God; find the ways in which your belief can shape the person you are and the life you lead.

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A Taste of Torah

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

The opening of this week's Torah reading, Parashat Yitro, stands in stark contrast to the conclusion of last week's parashah, Beshallah. In both narratives we are introduced to powerful non-Israelites. At the close of Parashat Beshallah, we are chilled by the brutality of Amalek in his brazen attempt to annihilate the newly freed Israelites as they journey from Egypt. Now, Torah provides the *tikkun* or antidote to Amalek in the person of Jethro. Jethro, or *Yitro* in Hebrew, is the father-in-law of Moses, and a Midianite priest. Exodus 18 opens, "Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt." Jethro then goes on to bless the God of Israel and advise his son-in-law on issues of leadership. Amalek seeks destruction; Jethro desires construction. Jethro is wholly life affirming. So what is it that Jethro hears that propels him to leave Midian and join the Israelites?

Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator, writes that Jethro had heard about "the splitting of the Reed Sea and battle with Amalek." Why does Rashi isolate these two events? Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen explains,

[O]ne must pay attention to the nature of both of these events. The splitting of the sea was, at its essence, a miraculous deed—supernatural and performed by God, the Redeemer of Israel. There is a completely different quality rooted in the battle with Amalek. Here too we see the hand of God, but more than that we see Joshua choosing soldiers and going out to wage war in an effort to weaken Amalek and defeat him. This was a military victory for Israel. If Jethro had heard only of the splitting of the sea or only of the war with Amalek, perhaps he would not have been moved to join the Israelites . . . One must assume it was the combination of the both of these events, God's power and the gumption of the Israelites, that compelled him to leave home and celebrate with the children of Israel." (*Likrat Shabbat* [in Hebrew], 72)

Avidor HaCohen teases out the essence of Rashi's commentary. What impresses Jethro so deeply is both the power of God and the strength of humanity as shown by the Israelites. God bestowed miraculous blessings on the Israelites in freeing them from Egypt. And the Israelites rose to the occasion of redeeming themselves when faced with another enemy in the person of Amalek. Notably, it takes an "outsider" to the Israelite community to point out the gifts with which they are blessed. Jethro is truly an inspiration—in the eyes of the Israelites, in the eyes of Rashi, and in our own eyes today.

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