

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

Love—Great and Eternal

The first paragraph of the Shema' invites us to affirm the unity of God, and then engages the topic of love, the love from a person to God: "*ve'ahavat et Adonai Eloheykha*" (You shall love Adonai your God). Several important questions present themselves. First, is the phrase "you shall love" to be understood as an imperative? The grammar supports such a construction, leading us to wonder how love can be commanded. A command can be given to bring specified sacrifices, to eat matzah on Pesah, and to show deference to the old, but how can we be commanded to love? Some commentators avoid the dilemma by suggesting the meaning is that we are to behave in a way that would express our love for God, but this avoids the deeper question about how and why this love for God is born in our hearts and minds.

My friend Rabbi Leila Gal Berner suggests that the text can reasonably be read to suggest an element of Divine yearning. "Oh . . . if only you would love your God with all your heart, soul and might!" This is consistent with the talmudic teaching, "*rahaman liba ba'e*" (the All-Merciful desires [only] the human heart). Reading in this way, the Shema' invites us twice daily to offer the one thing that God cannot command—because it is impossible—human love.

In the evening and morning liturgy, the Shema' is preceded by a paragraph that speaks of God's love for the Jewish People: in the evening, we find "*Ahavat olam beyt Yisrael ahavta*" (With eternal love have You loved Your people Israel); and in the morning, "*Ahavah rabah ahavtanu*" (With great love have You loved us). In each case, the text speaks of the Torah as the visible sign of God's love. It is given to us as a gift, and in that gift of love, in the text of the Shema', is the command/yearning for that love to be returned.

The liturgical texts offer us a pathway. The (evening) text of *Ahavat olam* states "*uv'Torato neh'geh yomam valaila*" (In his/His Torah we will meditate day and night). The words are ambiguous as to whether the Torah is "His" (God's) or "his" (the person praying). Rashi, commenting on the source of this phrase in Psalm 2, suggests a process: at first the Torah belongs to God, but after a person learns and studies it, then that person becomes a partner with God for those words of Torah. Perhaps we can discern in this expression of mutuality about Torah a path to a relationship of growing love between each person and God. Love of God can arise in our hearts as we feel and perceive more and more that we are loved by God, always.

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

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Beha-alotekha 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Ute Steyer, research and program manager, Center for Pastoral Education.

New Generation, Old Leaders

To paraphrase Moses's meltdown in Numbers 11:11–15, "Lord! I'm so done with them! I can't take it anymore. These people are nothing but a bunch of whining losers." Yet the People are doing what they have been doing since day one of the Exodus: complaining. About the lack of water, the lack of food, and now the lack of meat. So why is Moses losing his temper so completely this time?

The beginning of the book of Numbers presented us with a rather rosy picture: all of Israel encamped by tribe around the Tabernacle, with God's glory resting in their midst and all of the People preparing for a life of holiness, learning the teachings of the law from Moses. But the continuation of Numbers describes all sorts of mishaps, and blames them on shortcomings of the Israelites. Actually, the differences within the book were so great that *Chazal* considered the beginning and the end as different books interrupted by a middle section (10:35–36), which is marked by two inverted letters (*nun*) in the text.

The discrepancy between previous accounts of Moses's leadership in the face of crisis and what we see now in our parashah seems to imply that something is not working anymore. This is also supported by the lack of angry reactions on God's behalf on previous occasions of excessive complaints. At those times, God just told Moses to get the People water or made the manna appear, with no anger and certainly no punishment. But here, God unleashes His rage.

The difference is in the nature of the complaints. In Exodus, the People requested basic necessities of survival (food and water), while in Numbers, the complaint is about the menu: "not manna again." But if that alone was the problem, then surely the one-month "Atkins diet" of meat and God's

flaring rage should have been enough to settle the issue. But the parashah points in a different direction: right before God announces to Moses that He will bring the quail, He instructs Moses to gather 70 elders of Israel (Num. 11:16) so that “they shall bear the burden of the people with you.” (11:17). We remember that once before, Moses had been instructed to find others who could assist him (Exod. 18:21–22) in judging the People. Somehow, these selected elders did not really become leaders. In Exodus, they were carefully instructed to apply certain rules in order to judge simpler cases, yet to leave the difficult decisions to Moses. Here the case seems different. God tells Moses that *He* will share some of the prophetic insight with the 70 elders that Moses chose—elders who had already established themselves as leaders. It says in 11:16, “whom you have experienced as leaders and officers of the people.” So far, so good. But why would it make a difference?

The Israelites’ complaints now have a completely different character. These leaders belong to the same generation of elders who left Egypt, and can remember all the hardships that the People endured there. How will they be able to understand the new generation? This generation is no longer struggling for pure survival, but desires a bit of comfort and luxury. Let’s face it: idealism, enthusiasm, and charisma can be powerful driving forces and overcome enormous obstacles, but they will run out eventually. There will come a time when “when I was your age, I had to walk 15 miles to school, uphill both ways” will cease to make an impression on the younger generation. The hardships and sufferings of previous generations will become part of the collective memory, but they will not be personal, lived memory. And, at one point, they will fail to be the driving force of identity.

Maybe this is how Eldad and Medad (11:26) can be understood. They did not follow the call to go up to the Tent of Meeting with the other elders, but remained in the camp with the People—the same People who had grumbled. Maybe Eldad and Medad were able to see this widening (generational) gap and understand it for what it was: not a revolt, as such, but a normal process of growth and development. The People are slowly transforming.

Eldad and Medad seem to be right. Although they did not go up to the Tent of Meeting, they too receive the spirit of God and speak in ecstasy, this symbolizing their being affirmed as leaders by God. To Moses’s credit, he seems to understand what just happened, and although asked to intervene and stop Eldad and Medad, he recognizes their leadership and maybe also their subtle criticism against the “old guard.” *Chazal* also mentions that none of the other elders ever prophesized again (as referenced in verse 11:25, “but did not continue”), but Eldad and Medad went on to prophesy “until the day of their death” (Sifrei Numbers Beha-alotekha).

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A Taste of Torah

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

The Importance of Being Humble

An unfortunate incident mars the otherwise solid familial bond between Moses and his siblings in Parashat Beha-alotekha. While in Hazerot, Aaron and Miriam engage in disparaging talk about their brother’s marriage to a Cushite woman. Jealousy sparks their venom as they malign their brother and declare, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?” (Num, 12:2). To Aaron and Miriam’s dismay, God “hears” their provocative words, holds them accountable, and punishes Miriam with a plague of leprosy. In the midst of this troubling episode, we receive a striking description of Moses and the depth of his relationship with God: “Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth” (Num. 12:3). God continues, “With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord” (Num. 12:8). What is the import of such a qualification of Moses and his intimate relationship with God? How may we better understand Moses’s essence?

Yeshayahu Leibowitz writes,

No place in Torah does it state that Moses was wiser than any man, nor does it say that he was more righteous than any man, nor does it say that he was mightier than any man, even though we can deduce from events that he was wise, with the greatest comprehension of any man and that he was righteous and mighty. But the Torah finds it proper to stress only one thing: that Moses was more humble than any other man . . . Humility without any doubt, is a high level of human perfection. Human nature is such that each person considers himself to be great and important—if not consciously, at least subconsciously. In other words, it is not natural for a person to be humble . . . It is only one who attains the level of Moses, and who really “understands and knows God,” that really realizes that no man can understand and know God. He attains the truest and greatest humility. (*Accepting the Yoke of Heaven*, 134–135)

To be humble, as Leibowitz explains, is to strive for the one of the highest levels of “human perfection.” Pridefulness too often becomes a stumbling block in the pursuit of power. Learning to become humble allows one to internalize the discipline of self-contraction, and in so doing, makes space for the wisdom and inspiration of others. Each of us contains only part of an eternal Truth. By Moses’s modeling what it is to be humble and the Torah’s keen emphasis on this quality, we are encouraged to strive to emulate one of the great leaders of the Israelites and the Jewish People.

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