

## 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

### Torah—Vision Beyond the Text (Part 1)

In these weeks leading to the festival of Shavu'ot, designated by the Rabbis as *Z'man matan Torateinu* (Season of the Giving of Torah), let us look at the way that Torah appears in our liturgy. *Torah* refers, of course, to the *humash*—the Five Books of Moses—but the siddur makes clear that it is much more than that. In the preliminary service, the blessings for the study of Torah (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, 63) are followed by verses from the *humash*, and these verses are followed immediately by selections from the Mishnah and Gemara, thus making it clear that these texts are Torah as well. The writings of the Sages (even to the present day) are not seen merely as commentary or amplification of Torah—rabbinic writings are also Torah, the “Oral” Torah.

The point in the Shabbat service when the Torah scroll is returned to the Ark is a peak moment for many people. The words and music come together in a shared outpouring of yearning—and even love—for the Torah and all that it embodies and embraces. We have profound shared memory and connection with the ancient symbol of the handwritten Hebrew text on parchment with wooden rollers, each of which is called an *Etz Hayim* (Tree of Life). When we sing the words *Etz Hayim hi* (154), these radically reframed words from Proverbs 3:18 connect the visceral physical reality of the *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) with the Tree of Life of the Garden of Eden, and our vision of the ultimate life eternal. This can be found in the blessing after the Torah reading that thanks God, “Who has given us Torah of truth, and planted among us eternal life” (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 142). The message of the blessing is clear: the Torah is the source in this world of eternity.

The liturgy then brings us to a phenomenal, radical, and unexpected juxtaposition. Right after we sing of the future of Torah as the Tree of Life to those who grasp hold firmly, we are suddenly taken to a strange moment in the Bible where past and future are inextricably and paradoxically comingled. The penultimate verse of Lamentations 5:21, “*Hashiveinu Adonai eleykha venashuva, hadesh yameinu k'kedem*” (Turn us back to You Adonai, and we will return; renew our days as of old), anomalously connects the past and future, and this final metaphor—as the Ark is closed—invites us to recall the best of the past and bring it forward as we create the future with the entire Torah, Written and Oral, as our guide. 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](mailto:sabarth@jtsa.edu).

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Behar–Behukkotai 5773

## Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies, Louis Stein Director of the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies, and director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue, JTS. He is the author of *Sage Tales: Wisdom and Wonder from the Rabbis of the Talmud*.

## Yom Yerushalayim—Inhabiting the Land

This time of the year every day of the calendar counts. We are in that period between Passover and Shavu'ot when we perform the biblical commandment of counting the Omer—a measure of barley that was offered as a sacrifice when the Jerusalem Temple still stood. On Sunday of this past week, we counted the 33rd day—called in Hebrew, Lag Ba'omer—a day that welcomes springtime with outdoor activities such as hiking and sports. One of the oddities of the Jewish calendar is that our Torah reading cycle, which distributes the Five Books of Moses serially throughout the calendar year, imagines there are 54 portions. To make up the disparity with the 52 week solar year, every now and again we combine Torah readings. This week, we read the portion called Behar (Lev. 25:1–26:2) with the following portion, Behukkotai (Lev 26:3–27:34), and bring the reading of Leviticus to a close. On Wednesday of next week (the 43rd day of the Omer, May 8), we recall the reunification of Jerusalem in June 1967 by celebrating Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day).

Our double Torah portion opens with God's command to Moses to tell the Israelites, “When you come to the land that I am giving you, and you inhabit the land.” No sooner did I read this verse as I prepared to write these words of Torah, than my own counting of the days flashed back 46 years to my first time ever in Israel, when I was a teenager on Camp Ramah Israel Seminar. We arrived in Israel one month after the Six Day War. The Torah says “When you come to the land that I am giving you,” and there I was. I look back now, decades later, and ask myself, “What were my parents thinking allowing me to go to Israel so soon after the end of that war?” Of course, I have sent both of my own children (now adults) on Ramah Israel Seminar. And I have taken them to Israel on a family trip. But still, anyone who was sentient back then remembers the palpable tension in the days leading up to that fateful war.

But we were teenagers, and there we were in those heady, triumphalist days.

We had won, and the Land was ours. We ventured into the Golan Heights, and peeked into blood splattered Syrian bunkers. We went south to the Negev, and visited Kibbutz Sde Boker, where former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was living in retirement. It was odd for us, in the midst of our hero worship, to learn that the old man thought Israel should give back the West Bank to Jordan. Apparently, he considered it an albatross around the neck of Israeli democracy. How prescient Ben-Gurion turned out to be. In 1967, all eyes were on reunited Jerusalem. It was nothing then like it is now. We celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, in part, to commemorate that, in 1967, there was a barbed-wire wall dividing the city's Jewish and Arab sections. The war brought an end to that once and for all, or so we then prayed. The Old City's Jewish Quarter was virtually rubble, haunted by feral cats, the smell of urine wafting through the air. There was no plaza in front of the Wailing Wall; there, too, it was rubble, trash, and a mixed multitude of humanity: Muslims, Christians, and, once again, Jews.

The Camp Ramah directors had an exquisite sense of timing: we were brought to visit the Western Wall on Tish'ah Be'Av (the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av), during our tour's final week in Israel. Normally, Tish'ah Be'Av is a day of mourning and lamentation. We commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem's First Temple in 586 BCE; and, on the same day, the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple in 70 CE. And there we were in reunited Jerusalem almost 1,900 years later.

It was the most carnivalesque 9th of Av you might imagine. I, a mere teen, saw friends I hadn't seen in years on that day at the Wall. Everybody, but everybody who could be there was there. Hasidim, Mitnagdim, secularists, kibbutzniks, urban dwellers, army troops, tourists, men, women, all together, pell-mell among the rubble heaped before the Wall. No separation of the sexes, no differentiation between Jews and Gentiles, no security check in place (yet) for those visiting on that day. And everyone, from rabbi to rebellious youth, from scholar to secularist, was quoting a text from the Tosefta.

I had no idea what the Tosefta was. Indeed, I never thought of it again until I came to study for the rabbinate at The Jewish Theological Seminary half a decade later. The Tosefta is an early rabbinic work, edited in the first-half of the 3rd century CE, a companion piece to the essential document of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah. Here is the Tosefta we learned on that day:

All who mourn for Jerusalem will merit to see her in her joy, as it is said, "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her! Join in her jubilation, all you who mourned for her!" (Isa. 66:10) [t.Sotah 15:15 (following the Erfurt Manuscript)]

This coming week marks the 46th anniversary of unfettered Jerusalem. We pray for free access to all her holy sites for all who wish to worship there. Much as we saw on that first Tish'ah Be'Av in 1967, we yearn for a Jerusalem that is truly the City of Nations. Whether it be Jews enjoying Jerusalem or Muslims exulting in Al-Quds or Christians celebrating the Holy City, may all who love her rejoice!

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.*

## **A Taste of Torah**

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

### **The Promise of Security**

Parashat Behukkotai opens with a dramatic quid pro quo. Provided the Israelites follow God's laws and teachings, great blessings will be bestowed upon the Nation. We are told that rain will come at its proper season, the earth will yield of its fruits plentifully, and the Israelites will be satiated. Additionally, Torah makes an emphatic promise about peace, declaring, "You will dwell securely in the land. I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword will cross your land" (Lev. 26:5–6). While it would have been sufficient for Torah to declare that you "will dwell securely in the land," it felt the need to elaborate about peace being granted and the absence of vicious beasts. How are we to understand the multiple expressions of peace in these verses?

Joseph Bekhor Shor writes,

There are humans who dwell securely in the world and simply do not give their hearts over to fear. But were they to shift even slightly and open their hearts to fear, they would be terrified. And there are those people who are insecure and fearful even though there is no need. Therefore the verse says, "you will dwell *toward security*," meaning, your hearts will not live in dread and you will not live with a false sense of security since "I am placing peace in the land." There will be no one to do harm; there will be no threatening wild beast, nor will there be a sword. (*Commentary on Leviticus* [translated from the Hebrew], 234)

According to Bekhor Shor, God's promise is twofold: it is about physically dwelling in peace, and feeling secure psychologically. It is a total state of peacefulness. Yehuda Nachshoni underscores Bekhor Shor's point in writing,

This peace is also the one we long for, in which "the wolf will live with the lamb" (Isa. 11:6) . . . Before the sin of Adam, says Ramban, there was no such thing as prey, even among animals. If the Jews live in *Eretz Yisrael* according to the Torah, the earth will revert to that state, and the lion will eat straw like the cow. Peace will envelop *Eretz Yisrael* and the surrounding countries, the entire world, and even all animals. (Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah*, 876).

Let us hope and pray that loyalty to and observance of the teachings of Torah will affect a greater harmony in the world—one in which we will be privileged to live in peace and security all the days of our lives.

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*