

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.

My Lips, My Mouth, My Heart

With the cycle of Festivals behind us, and approaching the Torah portion Parashat Bereishit ("In the beginning . . ."), it is fitting to look at the very beginning of the core text of our liturgy—the *'Amidah* or *tefillah*. We turn to this ordered sequence of blessings in every Jewish service, whether with a community or praying privately. The structure and history of the *'Amidah* open enormous areas of reflection—to which this column will turn quite frequently—but here let us look at the phrase that comes, so to speak, even before the beginning. The words "*Adonai sefatai tiftach ufi yagid tehilatekha*" (God open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise) are from Psalm 51:17, and are printed in just about every version of the siddur (in smaller type) just before the opening of the *'Amidah* (see, for example, the Shabbat/Festival siddur of the Rabbinical Assembly on pages 35, 115, 156).

There is a teaching (applicable especially to *Shaharit*, the morning service) that there should be no interruption between the conclusion of the blessing ". . . *ga'al Yisrael*" (. . . God Redeemer of the people Israel) [Shabbat/Festival siddur of the Rabbinical Assembly 114] and commencing the *'Amidah*. How then is it permissible to insert our phrase?

We know from the Talmud that the text is from antiquity—it is recorded (Berakhot 4b) that the insertion of our verse was introduced by R' Yohanan. Some justify the insertion simply by noting that there is authoritative precedent—and so it must be permissible. Others see the words as necessary in order to prepare for the act of prayer, or almost as requesting permission (*reshut*) to pray. The recently published *Koren Mesoret HaRav Siddur* presents the insight of Rav Joseph Soloveitchik (z''):

On his own it is impossible for man to comprehend his needs and formulate them in a lucid prayer. His mouth is inarticulate, his tongue falters. He required divine assistance not only for his sustenance, but also to recognize his deficiencies and arrange his words . . . We cannot contemplate prayer unless we seek God's assistance in formulating our entreaties. (121)

I would suggest that there is a further, perhaps more radical, level at which to understand this verse. It is important to recall that there was wide knowledge of the texts of the Bible, and perhaps especially of the Psalms, in antiquity; and that a short quotation may well invoke a broader context and implication. So it is not without liturgical significance that Psalm 51 continues immediately from our quote:

For You do not desire an offering, or I would give it
You do not want a burnt offering
The (true) sacrifice of God is a humbled spirit
A broken heart, O God, You will not despise (Psalm 51:18, 19)

The wider context of our short quote brings a powerful message to affirm that prayer—the words of our all-too-human lips—is perhaps more desired by God than the sacrifices and offerings of the Temple. Perhaps we discern a remnant of an ancient polemic about the true worth of prayer; we certainly find a reminder and inspiration that our words count, along with the heart and spirit behind them.

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Parashat Bereishit

Genesis 1:1–6:8

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Richard Kalmin, Theodore R. Racoosin Chair of Rabbinic Literature, JTS.

I want to share some thoughts about the difference between Adam and Eve before and after they ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. To state things up front, my claim is that Adam and Eve did not just undergo a fall, but also a significant rise; to make that claim, I'm going to argue that two of the main characters, the snake and God, have often been misunderstood. The snake has gotten a bum rap, and God has usually gotten off much too easily.

We can't understand the role of the snake in the story by focusing on the character of snakes here and now, since clearly the one in the garden was much different from those in our world, after God's curse. We must start with the Bible's description of the snake via the word *arum*, translated as "shrewd" in Genesis 3:1. The word *arum* occurs often in biblical literature. It refers to something respected in some contexts, where it's translated as "prudent" or "clever," but feared or condemned in others, where it's translated as "crafty" or "wily." It can also be an attribute that is respected and feared at the same time.

Shrewdness throughout the Bible is a powerful commodity that can be put to both good and bad uses, but is not inherently good or bad. It's necessary for survival in a hard world, and it is this trait that the snake introduced into the Garden of Eden. In a tremendous play on words, Genesis says that without the snake's *arum*-ness (shrewdness), Adam and Eve were totally *arum* (naked and innocent) [2:5]. To be truly human they had to eat the fruit—and it was the snake, who knew exactly what would happen to Eve if she ate, who enabled them to do that. It knew that Eve was wrong when she said that she would die if she ate of the fruit or touched it (3:3), and also knew that God was wrong (or lied) when He said to Adam and Eve that "You must not eat of the fruit, lest you die" (2:17). The serpent responds to Eve, "You are not going to die" (3:4), and of course Adam and Eve don't die when they partake of it. Even afterward, God has to banish them from the Garden, lest they eat from the Tree of Life and live forever (3:22). As far as I can tell, Adam and Eve are no more susceptible to death after they eat the fruit than they were before. It is only when God banishes them from the Garden and they have no more access to the Tree of Life that they are once and for all condemned to mortality.

The snake also knows "that as soon as you (Adam and Eve) eat of the fruit your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and evil" (3:5), and the its words are confirmed by the narrator in 3:7: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened." The snake's words are also confirmed by God in 3:22: "And the Lord God said, 'now the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.'" One false hint we get that the snake might be evil comes in Eve's claim to God that "The snake duped me, and

I ate” (3:16), but of course she is trying to deflect blame for disobeying God from herself and onto the snake, so why should we believe her? Also, the snake’s opening question seems to be designed to deceive her—this doesn’t mean the snake is purely evil, but only that it’s capable of evil, just like Adam and Eve after they taste the fruit. The snake is morally complex, but not one-dimensional.

Adam and Eve do nothing wrong when they listen to the snake and disobey God by eating the fruit, since God’s command to them was an attempt to keep them in their place, to keep them basically the same as the animals but clearly distinct from God, thereby preserving God’s special status. Only after Adam and Eve eat from the tree are they capable of fear and deception. But they are also able to show initiative for the first time, and discover they can do things for themselves, such as make clothes (3:7). Before the snake enabled them to acquire the knowledge of good and evil, they just did what they were told; now they have something of God’s creativity in them.

Such powerful wisdom leads to a heightened ability to experience the pain of these evils, which is another way in which Adam and Eve become like God when they eat the fruit, since the God of the Bible experiences emotions on a grand scale. Only a few chapters later, the story of the Flood begins with the grief of God and his anger toward his own creatures: “And the Lord was sorry that he had made man upon the earth and it grieved him to His heart . . . and God determined to make an end of all flesh” (Gen 6:6–7).

The verb translated “grieved” here (*ayin/tzadi/bet*) is exactly the same root used in the words for “pain” in the curses of Adam and Eve in chapter 3 (verses 16–17). This passage helps illustrate the point that God in the Bible is a God who is capable of suffering as men and women suffer. This seems to be what the Garden of Eden story is saying: the snake’s wisdom brought power into Creation, but with it came a heightened sensitivity to suffering. In this respect also we’re like God.

The capacity of humans to do evil, even to kill in the heat of anger, like Cain in the next part of the story, makes us like God—for we all know that God has a terrific temper, to the extent that He employs human beings, prophets like Moses in the desert, to try to talk Him out of destroying the Israelites when they make Him angry. And the Israelites firmly believed that evil as well as good came from God, even evil that was inexplicable and unpredictable, or unfair, by any standard of human justice. God punishes children for the sins of the parents (Exod. 20:5, 34:7); causes the Israelites to disobey Him, and then punishes them for doing so (Isa. 63:17); and hardens Pharaoh’s heart, prolonging the Israelites’ suffering, to magnify His great name (Exod. 4:21, 7:3, 9:12). I say this to make the point that Cain’s murder of Abel doesn’t mean that humanity after the garden has become less God-like. In fact, it means the opposite. You might object that if Cain’s act of murder is another example of human beings behaving like God, then why does God disapprove of Cain’s actions? However, I think I can handle this objection by saying that it is a recurrent theme of the early parts of Genesis that God wants to keep humans from becoming like Him (for another example, see the story of the Tower of Babel), so His disapproval of Cain’s actions and His prohibition of murder fits that pattern well. According to God, only God has the right to take human life, and Cain trespasses by arrogating that right to himself.

Seen in this way, chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis, which tells the story of how human beings come to be like God, can be seen as a commentary on the claim in chapter 1 that God created man in His image. If my reading is correct, then our creation in the image of God is true of Adam and Eve before they ate of the fruit, but much more so afterward, when they acquired personalities as interesting and morally complex as that of God Himself and, of course, as that of the snake.

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A Taste of Torah

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

With the celebration of this coming Shabbat, we return to the beginning—specifically, to the narrative of Creation. Counter to the way many of us were taught in our youth, the *peshat* (literal sense) of Torah demonstrates clearly that God does not create the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). God turns to the primordial building blocks, and from these materials crafts a world and all it contains. In fact, God’s essential act over the days of Creation involves separation, boundaries, and order. The Hebrew *v-d-l* (as in *va’yavdil*, [God separated]) is an expression that one finds repeatedly throughout the first chapter of Genesis. Of special significance is establishing the boundary between the water and dry land. On the third day, God declares, “Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.’ And it was so” (Genesis 1:9). How may we better understand this gathering of waters?

Renowned biblical scholar Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951), professor of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1938–1951), writes that our chosen text

should be studied against the background of the myths current in the Orient, as well as . . . the ancient epic poems of the Israelites. The peoples of the East used to tell many stories about the battle waged by one of the great gods against the deity of the sea . . . Mesopotamian mythology described in detail the combat of the creative god against Tiamat and his ultimate victory over her . . . Similar myths were known to the Canaanites . . . As for the Israelites, it is clear from many allusions in the Bible, as well as from a number of legends in rabbinic literature, that there had existed among them an ancient poetic tradition that told of Rahav, the lord of the sea, who opposed the will of God and would not confine his waters within given limits, until the Holy One subdued him and slew him and fixed a boundary for the waters of the sea that they should never pass (see Isaiah li[nes] 9–10). Here there is no trace of war between the gods as related by the gentile myths, but only the revolt of one of the creatures against his Creator. [That said], the underlying thought of Torah is: “Far be it from you to think, as do the Gentiles, that the sea is endowed with an autonomous divine power that fought, as it were against the Creator of the Universe . . .” (Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One*, 36–39)

Later biblical writings and rabbinic tradition preserve what is absent in Genesis. For instance, Psalms 74:13 declares, “You divided the sea by Your Might; You broke the heads of the dragons on the waters”; Tractate Hagigah 12a reads, “Resh Lekeish taught: ‘When the Holy One created the sea, it continued to expand until the Holy One rebuked it and caused it to dry up.’” Even though Torah, as Cassuto points out, makes a clear distinction in its narrative from Near Eastern myth, the true richness of our literary inheritance is that we were able and wise enough to preserve oral traditions. It is these traditions that enrich our understanding and enable us to experience the full texture of the written text. May Cassuto’s wisdom and God’s creative act inspire us all toward learning Torah in deeper, multidimensional ways.

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