

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

"Our God and God of Our Ancestors"

Many prayers begin with the words "*Eloheyinu v'Elohei avoteinu*" (Our God and God of our ancestors). I hear from so many people that these words are difficult, and an impediment to finding a pathway in Jewish prayer. The word *God* raises an array of difficulties: people who are inclined to the view "I don't believe in God" might rightly feel that there is no integrity in addressing their words to God, an entity in whom (or Whom) they do not believe. Others find no security or support in the prayers and traditions of their ancestors, and say *Fiddler on the Roof* ("Tradition!") is not enough.

Let me offer a two-part approach to these words, drawn from the teachings of the Hasidic masters. The story is told:

In the town of Berditchev, the home of the great Hasidic master, Reb Levi Yitzhak, there was a self-proclaimed, self-assured atheist, who would take great pleasure in publicly denying the existence of God. One day Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev approached this man and said, "You know what? The God you don't believe in—I don't believe in that God either!"

There are simple understandings of God that we teach to children, and if a growing person has no chance to develop his or her vision of God from the "model" learned as an 11-year-old, as an adult that model may well—reasonably—be rejected. Rabbi Arthur Green's book, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* offers a beautiful, lyrical, and profound way to explore contemporary understanding of God. At JTS, we know that our rabbis and cantors would be filled with joy to explore the concepts of God with any member of the Jewish community.

A teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, (the founder of Hasidism):

Why do we begin prayers with the words "Our God and God of our ancestors?" Because when we say "Our God" we engage our own beliefs, our own explorations—and there may be a weakness, for our beliefs change, they may lack security. When we say "God of our ancestors" we connect to the past—which is unchanging, but may not be real for us.

Putting these together connects our past to our present, and offers greater strength.

There are many metaphors printed within our prayer books, and written upon our hearts. The journey of Jewish prayer seeks to bind together the past and the present, the printed and the spontaneous.

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.

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Parashat Bo
Exodus 10:1–13:16
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Rabbinic Fellow and Director of Planned Giving, JTS.

Afraid of the Dark

I cannot read the stories of the plagues without a knot in my stomach. What kind of God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that the suffering of both the Egyptians and the enslaved Israelites increases? What kind of God comes up with the death of the firstborn as the "final straw"? What am I supposed to do with these stories as someone who wants to believe in the God of Redemption and Compassion and Justice; who wants to feel *that* God's presence in my life? What do these fantastical-sounding and horrible plagues have to do with my life and my spiritual needs? Can't we just skip to the "and then God heard their cries and freed them from Egypt and so you shall celebrate Passover forever" part?

The Rabbis had as difficult a time as we do with this plague-producing God. They worked hard at justifying the plagues by offering tit-for-tat reasons for each one. So, for example, the Nile turning to blood was just reward for a people that worshipped the river as a god. The death of the firstborn was justified since Pharaoh ordered the killing of the Israelite baby boys a generation earlier. One plague, however, stands out from this attempt at defending a strict God of Justice: the plague of darkness.

For a species with weak night vision, who as children ask for nightlights and as adults the comfort of a flashlight ready to go in an emergency, the plague of darkness is, perhaps—second only to the death of the firstborn—the most terrifying of them all. The darkness was "thick," as if you could touch it; so thick that not only could people not see one another, they could not get up (Exod. 10:22–23); so thick that "he who was seated could not stand up, he who was standing could not sit down, and he who was lying could not raise himself up" (Exodus Rabbah 14:3). Imagine if you were unable to see or move because of the dark, with everyone around you similarly affected so that no one knew what was happening.

If the plagues up to this point are physical "miracles" to impress upon the Egyptians and Israelites the full range of God's power, the plague of darkness is

different. It is deeply psychological. In fact, the description of not even being able to get out of bed feels like the experience of depression, of being so “weighted down” and hopeless that a person cannot even get out of bed. Is this part of what this *sui generis*, penultimate plague is all about?

Why did God, before Whom there is no favoritism, and Who examines the heart and tests emotions, bring the plague of darkness upon the Egyptians? Because among Israel there were transgressors who had Egyptian patrons and who lived in affluence and honor, so they did not want to leave Egypt. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said: If I bring a plague upon them openly from which they will die, the Egyptians will claim, “Just as we were afflicted, so too were they (Israel) afflicted.” Therefore, God brought darkness upon the Egyptians for three days; man could not see his fellow man, but all of the Children of Israel had light in their dwellings. (Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Va-era 14)

The plague of darkness was different because it served not just to terrify the Egyptians, but also as a cover-up. God had business to take care of with the Israelites. The business was harsh: punishment, perhaps even the death of Israelites with wayward hearts. But mixed into this God of Justice is another God, and herein is where I find my opening to discover that God of Justice tempered by Compassion: because this is a God who is deeply invested in the hearts and emotions of each individual. That this God demands justice, yes; but this is a God who doesn’t judge us without examining our hearts and testing our emotions. This is a God who cares deeply about us and our individual journeys.

Moreover, this is a God who does not play favorites. Not for individuals, whose hearts and emotions he knows well, nor for nations. Yes, the Egyptians suffered the plagues and the Israelites were redeemed into freedom, but the Israelites who didn’t deserve God’s compassion died, the midrash tells us. And, according to Exodus, there were Egyptians who left Egypt with the Israelites and became part of that people (as the mention of the “mixed multitude” who left with the Israelites in Exod. 12:38 suggests). Our fates are not sealed by community, reputation, or circumstance; God is interested in what is inside each of us, and so our national story is made up of our individual ones.

It is only through the cover of darkness that God has the chance to deal with the Israelites as individuals, as the God of Justice and Compassion combined. As the midrash suggests, the darkness gave God the opportunity to punish some Israelites who deserved it. I like to think that it also served another purpose: to grant the Israelites a chance to repent. Sitting in their homes filled with light, visited by a God interested in what was happening in the depths of their hearts, they had three days in which to decide whether to change their intended course of action and leave their life of slavery in Egypt, or whether to stay in their old ruts. In our own lives, we know that it is often after coming through the darkest of days that we are able to begin again in new ways, filled with new faith and hope in the future.

I am not sure I understand the other nine plagues or the God who needed them as part of the story. Certainly, the plague of the firstborn is something to fast for every year, and to wonder about always. But what I learn from the plague of darkness is that the God who needed those other eight plagues is

also the God who brings us darkness in order to bring us closer to divine compassion—and that the story, which is ultimately about redemption and moving from slavery to freedom, involves coming through our greatest fears and darkest nights to find light and joy of our own. “For God is angry but a moment, and when God is pleased there is life. One may lie down weeping at nightfall, but joy comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:6).

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A Taste of Torah

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

Redemption in Place and Time

In his very first comment on Torah, Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator, made this week’s parashah famous for exegetic eternity. Querying as to why Genesis opens with an account of creation rather than commandment, Rashi quotes Rabbi Isaac stating, “The Torah [which is the law book of Israel] should have opened with the verse, ‘This month will be the first of months to you’ (Exod. 12:1) which is the first commandment given to Israel.” Indeed, the commemoration of Rosh Hodesh Nisan, the new month of Nisan, is the very first order of business given to the fledgling nation. Why is this particular mitzvah chosen as the first commandment for the People of Israel? Of all of the 613 mitzvot, what makes the marking of the Jewish calendar so significant?

Ovadia ben Yaakov Sforno, the 16th-century Italian commentator on Torah, writes,

From this point on, the coming months will be *your* months, to do with them as you wish—according to your desires. In contrast, during the many days of your enslavement, “you” days were not your days. For those days were devoted to the work of others and according to their will. Therefore, this is the first of the months of the year for you! For from this very point begins your new reality of free choice. (*Mikraot Gedolot on Exodus 12:1*)

In just a few remarkable sentences, Sforno distills the import of the first commandment gifted to the Israelites. Far from simply being a new counting of the months for this nascent nation, it is a command that speaks to the heart of identity, time, and freedom. With their newly found redemption, the Israelites must now live according to their precepts, their rhythm, and their festivals. The rules and regulations of their Egyptian taskmasters are now irrelevant—part of an oppressive past that has opened itself to new possibilities. With the gift of freedom and ownership, however, also comes the burden of responsibility. The Israelites must now learn to sanctify themselves and their time. It is a task that is easier said than done. As Ahad Ha’Am famously said, “The real task, the most difficult task, has still to be commenced. Pharaoh is gone, but the work remains; the master has ceased to be master, but the slaves have not ceased to be slaves” (*Contemporary Jewish Thought: A Reader* [1963], 42).

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