

## 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

### Following Boston, Prayers for Healing

Once more murderous acts have literally blasted their way into our hearts and souls. Images from the bombs in Boston are seared into our minds and memories, and these depictions challenge us. Our faith in humanity is challenged no less than our faith in God.

We know that violence—senseless, base, despicable violence—has been directed against us before, but in these first days we feel closer to the abyss, and we search for comfort and consolation. Even as we recall the metaphor affirming that God is “close to the broken-hearted” (Ps. 34:19), we recall also that Aaron, after the tragic death of his two sons, was silent (Lev. 10:3). For many, the gatherings of communities for prayer and shared comfort have been a source of strength, and even of inspiration; for others, the pathway forward will be less clear. Those most immediately touched by death, injury, and trauma (to body, mind, and soul) need care, attention, and understanding for a long time.

There is no “right way” to mourn; every religious leader knows that the aftermath of a tragedy is not the moment to even try to “explain God” or “to speak for God.” These are the hours and days when human presence may feel like so little, but truly is the greatest gift of all. Our prayers need not bring us all the answers, but may open our hearts and souls, and inspire us to turn to God in times of sorrow as well as in times of celebration. There are hints in the Bible that God “hides” from us, and the kabbalah of Isaac Luria teaches about *tzimtzum*, the doctrine that suggests that God is significantly withdrawn (so to speak) from the world, allowing human freedom, and consequently the possibility for evil. Nevertheless, I personally find comfort in the assurance of Jeremiah 24:14, “If you search for Me with all your heart, I shall let you find Me”—even if the heart is broken.

In the electronic version of this column, found at [learn.jtsa.edu](http://learn.jtsa.edu), I share with you two prayer texts that express some of the anger and anguish, the hurt and the hope born out of the tragedy. Some readers will find, perhaps, that these words express their own feelings; I know those who wrote these prayers will be glad that their work has been of service. And if these are not your thoughts, not your words, we believe that God probes the human heart, and that your thoughts too will be heard.

In the electronic version you will also be able to hear a setting of the Prayer for Healing composed by renowned musician and songwriter Debbie Friedman (z”l), and also a wordless melody of yearning attributed to Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, sung by Rabbi David Zeller (z”l).

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 Emor 5773

### Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS.

Two themes in this week's Torah portion strike me with particular urgency and force: how Israelites should mourn the dead, and the qualifications required for the priesthood. These themes are important in any time or circumstance, and especially so in the wake of a tragedy such as the bombing at the Boston Marathon. Our commentators have of course had a lot to say about both of these matters over the centuries, and my colleagues at The Jewish Theological Seminary and I focus on them quite a bit as well—and, in particular, on the relationship *between* the two. For JTS prepares religious and spiritual leaders for the community of Israel, a major task for whom—carrying forward the work of the ancient priesthood—is to help individuals and families deal with illness, bereavement, and death. Our future rabbis are now required to undergo rigorous training in Clinical Pastoral Education. I want to explain why by reflecting on the directions for confronting loss and training clergy that Parashat Emor provides.

Let's begin, as the Torah does, with mourning. The priest is not to “defile himself” by coming close to death, the Torah commands, except for deceased parents, children, and siblings. (Lev. 21:2). He is not to shave his head, gash his flesh, or trim the “side-growth” of his beard. The priest was to function as a kind of life force to the community: an arbiter and source of purity. Death, in the absence of these regulations, might have become a major preoccupation for Israelite priests, as it was for priests of other religions. It threatened to shatter the sacred order that priests were meant to build and protect.

One can't help but ponder the implications of these verses for Jews who are *not* priests or ancient Israelites (and perhaps for people who are not Jews). Leviticus time and again reminds us that we are bodies. We are frail. We are imperfect, subject to illness and error; we suffer contagion, and face mortality. The point of the Torah's insistence on these hard facts of existence is not to have us run from or repress them. Neither should we allow awareness of these matters to prevent us from embracing life, pronouncing it good, making it holy. The Torah, we might say, seeks to *contain* confrontation with death and disease inside a sacred order of community and meaning, in the same way these regulations in Leviticus are *contained* in the larger book and in the Torah as a whole.

Consider two comments made by our Sages in connection with death and mourning that drive this lesson home.

It was taught: R. Meir used to say: What is meant by the Scriptural text, ‘it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart’ (Ecclesiastes 7:2)? . . . [Let him realize] that if a man mourns for other people, others will also mourn for him; if he buries other people, others will also bury him; if he lifts up [his voice to lament] for others, others will [lift up their voices to lament] for him; if he escorts others [to the grave] others will also escort him; if he carries others [to their last resting place] others will also carry him. (BT Ketubbot 72a)

There is a measure of self-interest in the decision to do the right thing, accompany the deceased to the grave, and comfort those who mourn. It is hard to do these things, because as we stand before the coffin and watch it lowered into the earth, we know that our time will soon come. In one reading, then, Rabbi Meir is advising us to do for others what we want them to do for us when that happens. But I think he is saying something more. Sacred order is built one action at a time, one person at a time. If we want to live in a certain kind of community, we have to act in a way that helps maintain such a community. There is no moment “in life” after infancy when each of us is so totally dependent on other people as we are just after death: having needs we cannot supply; lacking agency to help ourselves; being unable to repay kindnesses bestowed on us.

That is why another rabbinic teaching asserts that caring for the dead is in fact an example of *imitatio dei*:

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: ‘Ye shall walk after the Lord your God?’ (Deuteronomy 13:5) Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the *Shechinah*? But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. (BT Sotah 14a)

As God clothes the naked, visits the sick, comforts mourners, and buries the dead, so should we. Rabbi Hama provides proof texts from the Torah for each of these divine actions, signs of intimacy with Moses and the patriarchs and modes of instruction in the early days of God’s relationship with Israel about the covenantal work that we are called upon to undertake. There is no human civilization that does not take on the tasks of burial (or cremation) in some form, none that does not guide the living through the process of mourning. Life must go on. A community as committed as Jews are to the notion that life is good and can be made holy is especially obligated to maximum care when it comes to these boundary moments that threaten to plunge individuals into despair and rend communities asunder.

I believe Israelite priests would have been incapable of performing their life-giving tasks had they been prevented from mourning those closest to them. One cannot be an agent of holiness in any time or place, including our own, if one does not share the experience of the people whom one serves. The priest of old—or contemporary rabbi—has to know—really know—that he or she is frail, has limits, commits transgressions, and sometimes fails in order to love, fully respect, and have empathy with the members of his or her community—all of whom, being human, do all of these things. I understand, I think, why the Torah wants the chosen representatives of the Highest, the True, the Good to be free of physical defect or impairment—prohibiting, for example, those with broken limbs, a growth in the eye, or a boil-scar. It wants the people urging their community on heights and depths of Holiness to reflect in all they do and are, body and soul, outwardly and inwardly, the wholeness for which they stand as representatives of God. It wants their flaws to be correctable.

There is no denying, I think, that the exclusions pronounced by Leviticus 21:16–23 are difficult to accept today. I’d urge us to accomplish Leviticus’s purpose with focus not on *bodily form* but on qualities of *mind, heart, and soul*. I want rabbis and cantors who deeply and unreservedly love Judaism and the Jewish People, and are prepared to proclaim and demonstrate that love. I want men and women so knowledgeable about their tradition, so immersed in and permeated with Jewish learning and Jewish practice, that they can transmit that learning and practice effectively, keep it ever relevant to their communities, and, when necessary, garb Torah in new interpretations that keep it alive in new conditions. I want them loyal to Jews and Judaism and also respectful of other communities and faiths. I yearn for souls on fire to serve God and hearts open to the human beings they serve, particularly when those people need them the most. This tends to be when they are most vulnerable, at the boundary moments, in a shiv’ah house or hospital, astride the grave. It takes exceptional qualities of character to get Jews to listen to hard truths that life and Torah need them to confront—and to be worthy of that attention.

Broken arms and legs are not an impediment to such religious leadership, but broken spirits are. Absence of hope for the future, confidence in life, or respect for one’s community are absolutely fatal. “Defects” of body should not bar the way to rabbinic service, but lack of integrity should and does preclude that service. Aaron’s sons and grandsons *inherited* the mantle of priesthood, while today’s clergy *choose* the role, often with a sincere sense of calling. The jobs are comparable, nonetheless, because the human situation has not fundamentally changed. I am grateful that so many Jewish young people (and some not young) continue to take on the responsibility of serving their communities. JTS is pledged to give them the very finest preparation imaginable.

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## **A Taste of Torah**

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

As we journey through these days and weeks, we find ourselves in the midst of *Sefirat Omer*, the counting of the Omer (the sheaf of barley offering, a ritual that took place in Temple times). Fittingly, this week’s parashah contains the original commandment: “And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—you will count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you will bring an offering of new grain to the Lord” (Lev. 23:15–16). In biblical times, the counting of the Omer was more than a mere ritual to the Israelites who worked the land. It was a concrete symbol that opened the summer season with the ripening of the barley and the bringing of an offering to the Temple. They would count the days until the presentation of the “two loaves” that were baked from the first of the wheat harvest and brought to the Temple on Shavu’ot. After the destruction of the Second Temple, this period became associated with mourning and uncertainty. Why?

Three compelling reasons are cited for connecting the period of the Omer with mourning and sorrow. First, the counting of the Omer today reminds us that it is impossible to observe the original ritual of presenting an offering of barley to the Temple. As such, the period is a constant reminder of the loss of the Temple and the oppression and dispersion that followed. Second, Tractate Yevamot 62b tells of Rabbi Akiba’s loss of 24,000 students. Though numerous versions of this story appear (with radically different numbers of students) in other sources, the Omer period became woven into the Jewish consciousness as a time of mourning for Rabbi Akiba’s disciples. Third and most compelling, Nogah HaReuveni, one of the founders of Neot Kedumim, a nature reserve of the biblical landscape in Israel, explains convincingly that this period was a time of great uncertainty for the Israelite farmer. Tractate Bava Batra 147a underscores this point, teaching, “The northern wind is beneficial to wheat when it has reached a third of its ripening and is damaging to olive trees when they have blossomed. The southern wind is damaging to wheat when it has reached a third of its ripening and is beneficial to olives when they have blossomed.” Because of the instability in the weather, one is wholly unsure if the crops will yield plenty or famine.

As I reflected on the counting of the Omer, I thought not only of these three connections but also about the biblical background of this tradition. That is to say, during this period, we journey literally and figuratively from the certainty of Israelite enslavement in the land of Egypt to the certainty of the gift of Torah. Between these two poles of certainty, we must wrestle with the radical uncertainty (represented by the chaotic winds characteristic of this time in the Land of Israel) of our journey. Through the chaos and unpredictability, we are blazing a path to blessing, hope, and redemption.

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