

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.

Or Chadash (New Light): Electromagnetic or Supernal?

"*Or chadash al Tsiyon ta'ir, venizkeh kulanu m'heirah le'oro*" (Cause a new light to shine on Zion, and may we all quickly have the privilege to benefit from its radiance). Each morning, before reciting the Shema', there is a blessing that opens with a quote from Isaiah praising God, "who forms light and creates darkness," and looks back to the first great act of Creation—the creation of light and the establishment of cycles of light and darkness, designated as *day* and *night*.

Many commentators have wondered about the *or chadash* introduced at the very end of this blessing (p. 31 in the Rabbinical Assembly's *Sim Shalom for Weekdays*). What does the phrase mean—is this new light to be somehow different? Will the laws of physics be abrogated, upsetting the natural order of the universe?

An alternate approach is to understand this as an entirely heavenly light, associated with the end of time, the messianic era. We recall the enigmatic prophetic metaphor, "In those days the sun will not be your light by day, nor the moon at night, but God will be your Eternal illumination (Isa. 60:19)." This certainly evokes a supernal, God-centered "light," and many commentators suggest that these words represent a yearning for messianic redemption. Some authorities, including Saadia Gaon (10th century), judged this messianic reference to be so anomalous that it should be removed entirely.

Aryeh Leib Gordon (19th century Vilna) finds a middle pathway in his *Tikkun Tefillah* commentary. After quoting Proverbs 6:23—"For commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light."—he observes, "There is yet a light greater and more exalted than the sun—and this (light) is the Torah!" Gordon's synthetic approach allows us to retain the idea of a spiritual light without messianic overtones.

In these final days of Hanukkah, we encounter lights each day. As noted last week, these lights embody holiness. Perhaps they inspire us to draw close to the Torah that is abidingly close to us, and to dream of the ethereal light in which all things will be seen with a greater and deeper clarity.

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 Mi-ketz
Shabbat Hanukkah
Genesis 41:1–44:17 and Numbers 7:48–53
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS.

What is the essential message of Hanukkah, the beloved Festival of Lights? Like many of our holidays, this celebration is protean, shifting shape to accommodate our changing Jewish needs. American Jews have viewed it as a celebration of religious freedom, as if Judah Maccabee were an ancient Roger Williams, championing the rights of religious minorities and establishing the separation of religion and state. Israelis have seen the Maccabees as early nationalists, rising up to wrest sovereignty over the Holy Land from its foreign occupiers, and establishing a political refuge where Jews could live in dignified self-determination. Mystics have viewed Hanukkah as the recurrent flow of hidden light from the uppermost realms of heaven into the darkest expanses of the material world so that every year is a miraculous expression of divine grace. And children everywhere have claimed Hanukkah as their own—it is the festival of candles, candies, doughnuts, games, and presents galore.

These multiple meanings may each claim a measure of plausibility, since defining the historical Hanukkah is practically futile. While the Hasmoneans (Maccabees) were in some ways traditionalists who sought to augment Jewish ethnic and religious solidarity in the face of Hellenism, they themselves were also innovators who bucked venerable Jewish traditions. Historian Seth Schwartz reviews some of these innovations in his book *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE*. The Hasmoneans were from neither the Davidic line of Judean kings nor the Zadokite line of the high priests, yet they eventually claimed both of these crowns. While they opposed the Seleucids, they integrated Greek language, rhetoric, and material culture into their own governing practices. The Hasmoneans conquered neighboring territories and mass-converted the Idumeans and other ethnic groups. This

large-scale integration of non-Judeans into the Jewish religion was in contrast to prior and subsequent Jewish policy, and had far-reaching consequences. Eventually, the Hasmoneans turned on each other, drawing in the Romans and sowing the seeds of destruction for Jewish sovereignty, Temple worship, and even existence in Judea.

The Hasmoneans both resisted and embraced Greek culture, and their holiday therefore exemplifies the inner Jewish conflict between piety and assimilation. Hanukkah always feels contemporary because most Jews continue to feel conflicted by its themes of integration and separation from surrounding cultures. Jews simultaneously want to participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of their Gentile neighbors while also maintaining a sense of Jewish difference and even destiny. The Joseph story always coincides with Hanukkah, and who could be a better exemplar of the challenges of living in two worlds than the grand vizier of Egypt? In Parashat Mi-ketz, Joseph rises in spectacular fashion from prison to the throne, changing his clothes, name, and even language to the extent that his own brothers do not recognize him. And yet within, he remains Joseph, son of Jacob, the Hebrew lad who remembers his essential difference and destiny. Joseph's appearance on Hanukkah reminds us that success in secular society must not be permitted to draw us away from our distinctive Jewish identity.

A final facet of Hanukkah, which is particularly apt for our times, is its demonstration of the possibility of and need for religious creativity. However Hanukkah began, it developed and flourished as a new Jewish festival replete with unprecedented rituals and liturgy. This feature of Hanukkah is recognized in an early collection of festival midrash called *Pesikta Rabbati* (#3). The text opens by noting that the Torah reading for Hanukkah from Parashat Naso in Numbers lists the gifts of Ephraim on the seventh day, prior to the gifts of Menashe on the eighth. This order follows the preference of Jacob, who back in Genesis reversed hands and blessed his younger grandson first. The text from Numbers likewise reverses the birth order of Joseph's sons, apparently in deference to the actions of Jacob. According to the midrash, Jacob made a decree that God, as it were, *had* to follow. The midrash then links Jacob's innovation to that of the Sages who invented Hanukkah. They decreed a festival that later generations of Jews would be commanded to follow, and which would eventually assume the status of divinely mandated religious law.

The essence of Hanukkah is thus the power of religious innovation. Judaism must continue to adapt its religious message, ever growing and evolving so that Jews may spread the light of holiness in every land and era where they live. As we celebrate this festival of lights, let us think of the innovations that are demanded by our day, and the ways that these can be bound to our tradition so that they too can become sanctified features of Judaism for future generations. *Hag urim sameah*—Happy Hanukkah!

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A Taste of Torah

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

The Joseph narrative continues its dramatic twists and turns as Joseph, through his talented dream interpretations, rises to become the second most powerful figure in the land of Egypt. More than that, he choreographs a masterful plan to save Egypt from a devastating and prolonged famine, and he becomes no less than a hero and savior to the Egyptian people. As Joseph's fortunes turn for the good, those of his family back in the land of Canaan take a turn for the worse. Severe famine plagues the land, and with it, Jacob turns to his remaining sons and urges them to make the long journey to Egypt to procure food. The brothers listen, journey to the south, find themselves accused of being spies (through a ruse executed by Joseph), return to Israel, and tell Jacob of the Egyptian ruler's demand to see Benjamin. Jacob acquiesces and tells his sons, as they are about to depart, "If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land (*zimrat ha'aretz*) in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man—some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds" (Gen. 43:11). Clearly, from the *peshat* (literal sense of the text), Jacob sought to appease a disgruntled Egyptian ruler so as to find favor in his eyes and protect his sons from the ruler's wrath. Is there another way of understanding Jacob's suggestion?

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav offers a very different reading of our verse. He writes,

When Torah teaches, "take some of *zimrat ha'aretz* in your baggage," it does not refer to fruits of the land. Rather, the verse is saying, "take with you the song of the land of Israel," take a tune or melody from its soil. And then, when you arrive in the land of Egypt, sing to yourselves that very same song from Israel and you will remember from where you came and the essence of your homeland and your birthplace. (HaCohen, *Likrat Shabbat* [in Hebrew], 42)

Although our chosen commentator makes a radical departure from the literal sense of our verse, his reading is poetic and insightful. Through the many dispersions of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel, it is song that has often been the bridge connecting them to their roots and powerful memories of home and of history. Too often, we underestimate the power of music. Melodies, songs, and hymns all have a mystical way of taking the listener on a journey. Musical composition moves the heart, jogs the memory, and awakens the soul. So perhaps, at the end of the day, Jacob knew precisely what he intended. Not only did he encourage his sons to bring gifts to the Egyptian vizier, but he also gifted his descendants with strength and *tzeidah la'derekh* (provisions for the way). Both the fruits of their land and the song of the soil would ensure that their roots remain firm, even when wandering far from home.

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