

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.

Psalm 30: Dedication of the "Inner Temple"

Psalm 30 has the enigmatic introduction: "A Psalm of David for *hannukat habayit*—the dedication of the Temple"; enigmatic because David never built or saw the Temple. It was his dream, but a dream only brought to reality by his son, Solomon. So we wonder how it came to be that we have a song (psalm) ascribed to David for an occasion he could not have seen, and we also wonder why this psalm became a part of traditional Jewish liturgy, always recited at the end of the preliminary blessings, followed by mourners' kaddish (see, for example, the Rabbinical Assembly's *Siddur Sim Shalom*, page 14).

I offer two approaches—each approach offering not only a solution to an interesting historical riddle—but also a spiritual insight into the unfolding message of our liturgy.

First, it is important to note that our psalm immediately follows a lengthy series of rabbinic texts that describe the daily sacrificial rites (e.g., the *Koren Sacks Siddur*, pages 42–55). *Siddur Sim Shalom* replaces the topic of sacrifices with texts addressing peace and justice (pages 9–12). The inner message is far removed from either the fixed ritual of sacrifices or even analytic reflection on core Jewish values. The psalmist recalls moments of terror or defeat, thanking God for the gift of life, snatched literally from the grave (verse 4). The experience of fear and weeping at night is shared by all humanity and verse 5 celebrates: "Tears may linger during the night, but joy is found at dawn." The psalm takes the praying Jew from the formality of study to the reality of the joy that can be found in the presence of God. The juxtaposition of classic study with Psalm 30 invites us to find balance between study and praise, between mind and soul.

A second approach suggests that the psalm is not about the dedication of any earthly structure, but that each individual might be seen as a *bayit* (vessel) that can, if we so choose, be dedicated to the service of God. Psalm 30 is then a challenge addressed to each of us, each day: are we dedicating ourselves, our words, our thoughts—even our doubts and fears—to becoming an "inner temple" dedicated to the Divine? In verse 11, we seek support: "Shema!—Listen Adonai and be kind to me! Adonai be my source of help!"

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarh@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat No·ah
Genesis 6:9–11:32
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Rabbinic Fellow and Director of Donor Relations, JTS

The Windows

by Constantine P. Cavafy, Greek poet, 1863–1933

In these darkened rooms, where
I spend oppressive days,
I pace to and fro to find the windows.
When a window opens, it will be a consolation.
But the windows cannot be found, or I cannot find them.
And maybe it is best that I do not find them. Maybe the light will be a new tyranny.
Who knows what new things it will reveal?

Hovering at the edge of the question of what life on the ark was like for Noah, is the problem of the window.

But before we get to that: let's agree that the story of Noah and the ark is a parable, rife with symbolism of our own negotiation of transitions and traumas of all kinds. Let's agree that, like Noah, we struggle to understand that the world we once knew is not the world that endures for our entire lifespan. Let's agree that fear of change is the greatest human dread. And let's agree, too, that at some point in our own survival stories, we find a way to cope and begin again—just as Noah, in the end, sets foot on dry land and plants a vineyard there too.

And now, back to the window.

The ark's window bothered the Rabbis. It is a technical problem: in Genesis 8:6, Noah "opened the window (*chalon*) of the ark that he had made," but in the very thorough account of the construction of the ark earlier in the parashah, no window was ever made. "What window?" the Rabbis wonder. Rashi glosses that the window is the *tzohar* of 6:16, which is indisputable because no one knows what a *tzohar* is and the word does not appear again in all of Tanakh. It is translated by the Jewish Publication Society as "daylight," based on the tradition begun in Targum Onkelos, and picked up by the Rabbis, that it was something that illuminated the ark, perhaps a daylight, perhaps a precious glowing gem. The Vulgate—the Latin translation of the Bible, done in the fourth-century AD—translates it as *fenestra*, meaning "window," and the medieval Rabbis take that up as exemplified by Rashi's gloss: "The window of the ark that he had made: this is the *tzohar*, and not the opening of the ark made for entering and exiting." But on the *peshat*, the literal level, a *chalon* is not necessarily a *tzohar* (whatever that is), and if it were, wouldn't we find the same word in both places?

JTS rabbinical student Shuli Passow has provocatively suggested that the window is not

the *tzohar* because the window was something entirely of Noah's own invention. I find myself thinking of it this way: Noah was going stir-crazy, shut in the ark for days on end, trapped with a small group of people and lots of animals needing his care, and watching the world around him disappear. I like to imagine that one day he decided he needed a place to sit and look outside and daydream about a different kind of a life; about what might come next, after the ark. And so he built a window. This, I posit, is why the window isn't mentioned in the construction scheme: because Noah didn't build it then. Noah built it during the flood. Maybe before the waters were up too high on the sides of the ark, or maybe right there in the thick of things, while the rains were pouring down. Maybe he got soaking wet in the process and even let some of the rain water into the ark—life is messy like that sometimes. Especially in the middle of a crisis in which the survival of one's self and family (and perhaps all of life as we know it) is at stake.

Once built, it is from the window that Noah begins to tentatively dream about—and ultimately prepare for—his new life. He stands by that window and gathers the courage to open it, to imagine a different life than the one he is living. Bravely, he tries sending different things out, tentatively testing. The raven, the dove, his hand—all three with the verb *sh"l"ch* (send)—then each is brought back into the ark, as he slowly readies himself for whatever comes next.

The raven. The language is so vague, we don't even know if it came back to the ark or not: if it came and went a dozen times or just once or for how long it was gone. One has the impression that a lot of time passed, a lot of time in which Noah waited by the window. Patiently? Impatiently? With hope? With dread? Cassuto suggests that Noah learned nothing from the raven (*ad locum*); I think quite the opposite: that sending something out through that window was the most courageous and important first step, for it opened up the possibility that a different reality lay on the other side. And how hard it must have been to wait, to sit still to see what might happen.

Then, the dove. By now, Noah has gotten used to the idea that things come and go in and out of his dream window. This time he has a goal in mind; he sends the dove "to see whether the waters had decreased." This is new: Noah is beginning to make plans, to turn his dreams of a new life—ever so tentatively—into reality.

Finally, Noah stretches (*sh"l"ch*) his own hand out too, catching the dove on its way home to him. The move betrays Noah's ambivalence: he is eager for the dove to tell him it is time to build a new life, but he is not quite ready yet. He is anxious to leave and nervous, ready only to stretch one hand out. The flood has been difficult enough; transitioning again from what has become the "new normal" to another new reality is a slow process. Noah is testing, waiting until the time is right, and readying himself because the world has changed.

Finally, two rounds of the verb "to wait" later—one in an unusual grammatical form (the *niph'al*, 8:12) that invites the commentators to wonder if Noah was full of disappointment or anticipation or what at this point—he sends the dove out again, and is rewarded with the olive branch. It is only with the passage of much time, it is only by waiting that Noah is ready for it. The olive branch, the concrete symbol that life on the other side of the window is possible and is indeed in progress, that the dove no longer needs the window or the ark, and neither does Noah. Both are ready for that new life for which Noah has slowly been readying himself.

The olive leaf is bitter, notes the midrash. Does that mean life is bitter on the other side? Or just that new beginnings are difficult? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests something more optimistic: "Our sages take this bitter olive leaf in the mouth of the dove to preach the great fact: Bitter, unusual, normally intolerable food, eaten in freedom and independence, is sweeter than the sweetest in a dependent condition. So for us the olive leaf is not a symbol of peace but of the value of independence and freedom and of content and moderation (*ad locum*)." The olive leaf, brought in through the window of

Noah's initiative, is the beginning of his new reality, the tangible result of his having been brave enough to build a window in the ark, to dream about a different life and to find a way to live it.

We each sail on the seas of unknown waters, wondering what new things might be revealed if we dare to open a window and dream-see what is on the other side. From Noah we learn that courage is part of being a *tzadik*, a righteous person; the daring to dream and build windows, to open them and slowly send ideas through them, is what brings us from one stage of our lives to the next.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Unrelenting human wickedness leads to the collapse of humanity and the world. Toward the end of last week's parashah, we read of the dissolution of boundaries; divine demarcations that brought order to a chaotic world. Torah teaches a cryptic story of "divine beings who cohabit with the daughters of man" (Gen. 6:4), illustrating one violation of the boundary between heaven and earth. And then, in the verse that follows, we are told, "The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5)—evidence of the human destruction of moral and ethical boundaries. Not surprising, God responds in kind or as the Rabbis say, *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure). God vows to "blot out" humans together with animals and begin anew. It is Creation reverting to chaos.

Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951), professor of Bible at Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1938–1951), paints a stark picture of this dramatic moment triggered by Genesis 7:24: "the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days."

The verb "swelled" connotes here a continuing state: the power of the water upon the earth continued one hundred and fifty days, and did not decline in appreciable measure till after this period . . . So the chapter closes with an awe-inspiring picture of the mighty waters covering the entire earth. We see water everywhere, as though the world had reverted to its primeval state at the dawn of Creation, when the waters of the deep submerged everything. Nothing remained of the teeming life that had burst forth upon the earth. Only a tiny point appears on the face of the terrible waters: the ark that preserves between its planks the seeds of life for the future. But it is a mere atom and is almost lost in the endless expanse of water that was spread over the face of the whole earth. A melancholy scene that is liable to fill the reader with despair. What will happen to this atom of life? (Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part Two*, 97)

Professor Cassuto successfully dramatizes the world in which Noah found himself. God's severe punishment reinforces the message that the person of Noah is an island of virtue in a sea of corruption. Only he and his family (along with animals) merit being chosen as the remnant that will recreate the world entire. Prior to the flood, they were the "tiny point" of hope; and, after the flood, they literally become a "tiny point" preserving the "seeds of life" on "the face of the terrible waters."

Every one of us has the capacity to become the "tiny point" of hope and change. Daily, we continue to face chaos and the destruction of moral and ethical lines. The challenge is to act in God's image, while demonstrating the loving-kindness of Noah. Only then will we restore order to a world in desperate need.

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