

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Abigail Treu

Genesis Rabbah 65:9

ל אי זה היופי שלי אני ובני נכנסין לעיר ואין בני אדם מכירין בין האב לבן מפני שהיה אדם" א ע צריך אתה להפריש בין האב לבן" אמר אברהם רבש, חי מאה ומאתים שנה ולא היה מזקין הלך ולן, ל הקדוש ברוך הוא חייך ממך אני מתחיל" א, ובין נער לזקן שיתכבד הזקן בנער ע"אמר לפניו רבש, באותה הלילה ועמד בבקר כיון שעמד ראה שהלבין שער ראשו וזקנו לכך, (שם כ) והדר זקנים שיבה, (משלי טז) אמר לו עטרת תפארת שיבה, עשיתני דוגמא: נאמר ואברהם זקן

Until Abraham there was no old age, so that one who wished to speak with Abraham might mistakenly find himself speaking with Isaac, or one who wished to speak with Isaac might mistakenly find himself speaking with Abraham. But when Abraham came, he pleaded for old age, saying, "Master of the Universe, You must make a visible difference between father and son, between a youth and an old man, so that the old man may be honored by the youth." God replied, "As you live, I shall begin with you." So Abraham went off, passed the night, and arose in the morning. When he arose he saw that the hair on his head and of his beard had turned white. He said, "Master of the Universe, if You have given me white hair as a sign of old age, I do not find it attractive." "On the contrary," God replied, "the hoary head is a crown of glory." (Prov. 16:31)

As I slip from youth into middle age, I find myself greatly sensitized to our culture's idolization of youth and idealization of youthful beauty. Some mornings I like the gray strands now at my temples. They're visually interesting and existentially mysterious. Other days I want to blot them out, regain the lush brown I've known and loved. As the midrash reminds us, this is not just a feminine issue: there comes a point where each of us, men and women alike, looks in the mirror and realizes (in the words of the late poet laureate Stanley Kunitz) "I am not who I once was."

Dr. Vivian Diller, author with Jill Muir-Sukenick of *Face It: What Women Really Feel as Their Looks Change*, writes: "The truth is, millions of us now in our 40s, 50s, and 60s are preoccupied with thinking about the physical realities of growing older. We anxiously stare in the mirror like insecure adolescents and are surprised and embarrassed that we care so much."

It is difficult not to. If the rabbis could imagine Abraham's dismay at the physical signs of aging, how much more so for us, men and women, living in a culture in which we are constantly bombarded with visual images of young, vigorous bodies. We might resist, struggle with disappointments or identity shifts, or wish our looks weren't changing. But the last word of the midrash is given to God, who sees the emotional toll that going gray has taken on Abraham and comforts him. His words are directed to his heart, a reminder that old age is a time of glory. We, like Abraham, are distracted by the changes in our appearance and tricked by our culture's emphasis on youth into forgetting that with age comes experience, that a head of white signifies a certain wisdom and important lessons learned. As Diller advises, "We need to embrace the multidimensional meaning of beauty that begins with *Webster's Dictionary* definition—"a quality that gives pleasure or exalts the mind"—and go deeper beneath and ultimately beyond."

For more information about JTS programs and events, or to learn more about JTS, please visit www.jtsa.edu.

Rabbi Marc Wolf
Vice Chancellor and
Chief Development Officer
(212) 678-8933



Torah from JTS

Parashat Hayyei Sarah

Genesis 23:1–25:18

November 19, 2011

22 Heshvan 5772

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer, Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

To Speak Is To . . .

After the many narratives that explore deeply the life of Abraham and his family, we find in this portion an interlude in which the focus is upon Abraham's elder servant—not named in our text, but often assumed to be Eliezer (mentioned in Gen. 15:2). Eliezer has been charged by Abraham to find a wife for Isaac—not from the local (Canaanite) population, but from Aram, the place of Abraham's birth.

Let us pass over the deep and troubling questions of broad context: Why does Abraham not do this himself? Why does he not engage directly with Isaac—perhaps the two of them might make the journey together? In fact, the Torah records no occasion after the binding of Isaac on the mountain when father and son are together—until Isaac and Ishma'el come together to bury their father.

After accepting the task from Abraham, Eliezer prepares and sets out on the long journey, arriving at the city of Nahor (Gen. 24:10). And then we reach a moment (Gen. 24:12) when he . . .

My own writing pauses, for here we have a small puzzle of language, and religious behavior leaps across the millennia to our own challenges and inner life. The Hebrew word is *vayomar*, which would normally be translated as "and he said." This is what we find in the contemporary translation of the JPS version (in our *humash Etz Hayim*) and in a number of other translations. But in the translations by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan and a number of others, the word *vayomar* is rendered as "and he prayed."

The rendering is not unreasonable if we look at the rest of the passage:

And he said/prayed: "YHVH (Adonai, Lord), God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham. Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels,' let her be the one whom You have decreed for your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

Now, there have certainly been moments when Abraham spoke with God—most famously in the impassioned debate about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah—but there is no moment that it would occur to us to say that Abraham "prayed." Jacob, when on the run from the vengeance of his brother, Esau, makes a vow to offer God a 10

percent “deal” (tithe) on any wealth that he might accrue if his life is spared (Gen. 28:20). Most famously, Moses cries out to God when his sister, Miriam, is afflicted with disease: “O God, please heal her” (Num. 12:13).

And yet there is no word in these biblical narratives uniquely reserved for the phenomenon that we call *prayer*. Perhaps we have over-compartmentalized our language, and now we feel that there is a special kind of language, a special kind of speaking that is reserved only for the moments when we reach out to the Divine. It seems that our ancestors in the Bible spoke to, bargained with, and cried out to God more naturally than is the case for many of us. Later in the Bible (the prayers of Hannah, Solomon, and the psalms), there is a more structured context of prayer—but little or no identifiable fixed liturgy.

It is hard to recall, but true, that Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth, David, and Jeremiah (to name a few) never attended services in a synagogue; they never met a rabbi or hazzan (these had not yet been invented); and the form of organized service of God that they knew was principally based upon the offerings and rituals of the Temple, carried out by the *kohanim* (priests). Nobody ever told them to “turn to page 73 and stand.”

Heschel has suggested that we know where to go for the various purposes of our lives. We go the library for books, to the museum for art, to the bank for money, to the university for learning, and to the concert hall for music (whether rock and roll or symphonic). Has the synagogue come to be seen as the place we go to seek the Divine—and the *only* place to undertake that quest?

For many among the contemporary Jewish community, I believe that this is in fact the case. Talking to God is seen as the mission of the synagogue and its staff. But the ease with which Eliezer takes a moment to speak/pray to God, the natural language with which Hannah expresses herself, the intricate and profound existential pleas of the psalms, and the short, urgent *cri de coeur* of Moses on behalf of his sister remind us, and call us all, to bring the conversation with God into the events and course of our lives, wherever we be.

The Hasidic sage Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav urges every person to undertake the practice of *hitbodedut* (private conversation), each day, with God. He goes to some lengths to insist that this not be in Hebrew, but in each person’s mother tongue, the language of their most comfortable communication. Many people report that undertaking this free-form, undefined prayer has supported the opening and flowering of the soul, deeply enriching the experience and depth of the fixed liturgy in synagogues.

Eliezer knew that he needed help, and he prayed for it in the greatest detail. Not short onchutzpah! We are reminded of the story of the young child who prayed to be given a bicycle for the upcoming holiday. Later observing the absence of a bicycle, a relative asked if the prayer had been answered. “Of course,” replied the child. “The answer was ‘No.’” There are those who claim that we live in a time when God is absent or eclipsed; many in contemporary times are challenged to find the encounter with the Divine Presence—in their private lives or in synagogues. But the encounters of Abraham and Eliezer inspire us, and the words of God, as conveyed by Isaiah, urge us onward:

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask;
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek.
I said, “*Hineini, hineini* [Here I am, here I am]”
To a nation that did not call My name.” (Isa. 65:1)

The Divine awaits us all, in our moments of fear and challenge, of joy and exultation, and inside the doors of our own synagogues.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

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

At the opening of this week’s parashah, Abraham is occupied with arrangements for the burial of his beloved wife, Sarah. Subsequent to his period of mourning, Abraham turns to the Hittites, the ruling authorities of the land in his day, and politely requests a plot. Our forefather entreats his hosts, “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial” (Gen. 23:4). The Hebrew expression used for a burial site is *ahuzat kever*, more accurately translated as “a literal grasping or holding or possession for burial.” How may we understand the nuance of the original Hebrew expression? What precisely is Abraham requesting from the Hittites?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

The word *ahuzah* occurs exclusively referring to landed property which is just what cannot be grasped. It is never used in connection with mobile property . . . The object is not gripped by the owner; rather the owner is gripped and held fast by the object and that in fact is the case with the possession of land. Land holds its owner; he is chained to it which is why land can be a guarantee for its owner . . . So that the underlying idea of *ahuzah* is being settled, the act of permanent settling. Abraham does not ask for permission just to bury his wife. He wants his wife to rest in her permanent everlasting possession of her resting place . . . He had tarried for many years as an alien in the country and had never tried to acquire a single foot in it. For wandering was his calling. The necessity for burying his wife was the first cause that brought him the need to acquire the possession of land in the country. His wife’s grave was to be the first bond that attaches him to the land, the place that draws him to it and holds him: *ahuzah*. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 382)

Samson Raphael Hirsch’s exegesis on *ahuzah* is deeply moving. Not only are we held (sometimes hostage!) by land in our lives, but oftentimes we are held closely and affectionately by loved ones. With their passing, there is a powerful sense that we continue to be held or grasped by them. Sarah, who “grasped” Abraham during the length of her days, will continue to hold Abraham through the act of burial. The *ahuzat kever*, possession of a burial site, becomes the anchor for Abraham in the land, even though he is indeed a wanderer par excellence for much of his life. Ironically, it is the death of Sarah that leads to Abraham’s desire to be settled in the land. Through the acquisition of a burial plot for Sarah, Abraham embraces the legacy of his life’s partner and the divine promise. It is both a familial and national embrace that transcends one seemingly ephemeral chapter of one’s life—enduring for eternity.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.