Service of the Heart (תדובע בלה): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Healing of Body and Soul (Part 2)

If an anthropology student from the University of Mars were to attend a Shabbat morning service in an American Jewish synagogue, what kind of understanding about our real synagogue lives might emerge in the student's term paper on the topic? The essay might suggest that announcements and kiddush are the most important parts of the experience because that is when the most people are present. The Martian professor (whose appearance we will not explore here) might urge the student to be more subtle and to observe closely the body language of the human participants to discern which parts of the service are most engaging and important to those present.

When I invite my students at JTS to identify which parts of the Shabbat morning service are most important to congregants, the first response from the class is often a theological (or halakhic) Top Ten—including the Shema'; the *'Amidah*; the sermon (from rabbinical students); the *kedushah* (from cantorial students); and, sometimes, the Mourners' Kaddish.

Then I ask them to think about the atmosphere at certain points—body language, attentiveness, focus, and sometimes open tears—and there is often significant (but never total) agreement that the *mi sheberakh* (prayer for healing) attracts the greatest engagement and attention from the congregation. This is a relatively new phenomenon that would not have been observed even a generation ago, even though it was not uncommon for a congregant with a sick relative to ask that a *mi sheberakh* be recited by the hazzan, rabbi, or *gabbai*. The well-known text and musical composition by Rabbi Drorah Setel and Debbie Friedman (*z"l*) have certainly added greatly to the experience of many congregations, but the importance of the *mi sheberakh* is palpable in synagogues where that text and melody are unknown.

In last week's commentary, we explored the liturgical text of healing from the daily *'Amidah*, noting that it addressed itself to healing of "body and soul." I suggest that the importance of this text, with its many rituals and melodies, grows out of a yearning among many contemporary Jews to bring their deepest experience, their inner pain, into the synagogue. Many of our texts and practices are of great antiquity, with profound depths of meaning—and are also arcane and hard to understand. We all understand illness and healing, and—theologically problematic though it might be—we can all imagine praying to an omnipotent God that our beloved friends and family members find healing of body, mind, and soul.

We recall that Moses prayed for his sister, Miriam; that Elijah prayed for a dying child; and that many Sages prayed for their colleagues and students and members of the community. Healing is in part a well understood medical science, but also a mystery. During the week, we turn to physicians and healers with their sciences and arts. On Shabbat and in prayer, we confront the mystery among our community, in the presence of the Torah, and always in the presence of God.

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

Torah from JTS

Shofetim 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Ofra Backenroth, associate dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, JTS.

Roads to Nonviolence

Is there a way to wage war in a humane way? As I am thinking about Parashat Shofetim, the weekly Torah portion, only a few weeks after the 46th anniversary of Israel's Six-Day War, I cannot avoid reliving the fear I felt when I heard the first siren on the morning of June 6, 1967. I was only a few months away from enlisting in the army for two years; many of my friends and family were called to the front. Then, as now, questions about the ethics of war were very much on our minds. Growing up, I was raised on the ideal of רהט קשנה (*tohar haneshek*, purity of the arms). I was educated to be an Israeli idealist, but I still struggled with the consequences of what seemed to be an unavoidable war. Reading this parashah, I am reminded that the issue of humane war was also on the minds of our Sages.

Deuteronomy is a legal corpus that extensively treats the questions of appropriate wartime behavior. Parashat Shofetim introduces the first group of regulations (20:1–9, 10–18, 19–20); interestingly enough, these regulations are not what one might expect from a body of laws related to warfare. One cannot find any mention of the strategic laws, logistics, and tactics of battle. Instead, the parashah deals with what might seem to be peripheral aspects of war and the people who are affected by it: women who are left behind when their husbands go to war; fatherless children; unattended cattle; fruit that is unharvested or spoiled or harvested by someone other than the rightful owner; and members of the side being attacked. I wonder what message our Sages wanted to leave us with this portion. As an educator, I wonder if we can draw a parallel between the rules of war explained here and our current teaching methodologies. If Torah teaches us to differentiate among people who are engaged in war, can we adapt the same approach to the way we treat people in general? Can we learn from our Sages' ability to see differences in situations and contexts that we can transfer to the way we treat our students?

The first rule defines those who are released from the duty of war: men who built a new house, planted a vineyard, or were betrothed.

> And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying: "What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it.
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> And what man is there that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not used the fruit thereof? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man use the fruit thereof. And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her." (Deut. 20:5–7)

The Torah is sensitive to all of those who planted a seed for the future but did not have the chance to benefit from it, and stipulates that if there is a chance that the soldier may die in battle and someone else will benefit from the fruit of his toil, he is deferred from service. These rules are for the benefit of

the individual and his family.

The Torah continues with a rule that protects the individual soldier and his relationship with the army as a whole, “And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say: ‘What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart melt as his heart’” (Deut. 20:8). Here we have an example of sensitivity to the emotional health of the individual and to the well-being of the army in general. The Torah recognizes the fact that not everyone is suited to fight in a war. While everyone is called to protect the Nation and the Land, there should be exceptions. These might be pacifists, artists, or those who just cannot face the killing fields. These individuals are commanded not to join the army so that they do not sow fear and discouragement among other fighters.

There is, however, a condition to this exemption. People who are allowed to avoid the battlefields still have responsibility for the good of the country. In Sotah 8:2 it is written: “All these hear the priest’s words concerning the battles of war and return home, and they supply water and food and repair the roads.” So the mishnah stipulates that while these citizens are deferred from going to the battlefield, they are still obliged to help with the war effort. They are still capable of contributing. Those who remain at home help the war effort by supplying food and water and by repairing the roads that are crucial to the soldiers who are on the front lines.

The concept of differentiation, exemplified in this rule, is at the core of the educational philosophy at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary. The school recognizes that differentiation—understanding that people come from different backgrounds, have various degrees of knowledge and ideas, and bring with them different talents and creativity—is the backbone of good instruction and effective leadership. Over and over again, I find it fascinating to see that our ancient texts express the same educational principles we teach our students. Working with students to find the best way to engage them is the most fruitful way of reaching them.

The Torah continues and explores another important principle that is highly valued by educators—conversation. In verse 10, the leader is required to try to make peace and solve the conflict in a noninvasive manner: “When thou drawest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it” (Deut. 20:10). And only if asking for peace does not work, then the army can attack. Torah encourages us to find solutions to our problems by trying the peaceful way and finding common ground instead of attacking. Parents, educators, and leaders need to learn from this stance and encourage conversation and peaceful problem resolution.

To this end, The Davidson School invited the Jewish Dialogue Group (JDG)—a grassroots organization founded in 2001 to foster vibrant, respectful dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other challenging issues within Jewish communities—to teach our education students how to have effective conversations before they left on The Davidson School’s winter break trip, Visions and Voices of Israel. Knowing too well how difficult it is to lead a polite conversation about the various issues surrounding Israel and the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, the goal of the program is to facilitate difficult conversations in a way that encourages questioning, seeking common ground, and strengthening relationships. The hope is that the students who learn the process will emulate these skills and teach their own students to approach conflicts in this fashion. This is yet another way in which The Davidson School continues to empower students to learn about one another across political divides.

The weekly portion tells us that conflicts, arguments, wars, and loss may be unavoidable; however, as educators, the least we can do is try to inculcate feelings of respect for the other, and encourage listening and finding a way to respond in a civilized manner. This may, one day, help in making violent disagreement avoidable.

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A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matt Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Leave Egypt Behind

The Cairo Genizah—a treasure trove of Jewish history rediscovered by Solomon Schechter toward the end of the 19th century (43,000 fragments of which are housed in The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary)—attests to the rich Jewish life that flourished in Egypt and beyond. Such testimony to the success and richness of the Egyptian Jewish community over many hundreds of years is especially surprising given the pronouncement of this week’s Torah reading, Parashat Shofetim. In legislating laws concerning the appointment of a king over Israel, Torah states emphatically, “He shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the Lord has warned you, ‘You must not go back that way again’” (Deut. 17:16). How are we to relate to the Torah’s prohibition of returning to Egypt? Is this a blanket prohibition on living in the land of Egypt? Or is this legislation somehow restricted in a particular way?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments:

> If this simply meant to forbid a return to Egypt, it would probably just have said it explicitly rather than placing an emphasis on the manner or way of the return . . . For in fact Egypt had been a land of refuge from Palestine from the earliest times of Jewish history. Abraham went down to Egypt because there was a famine in Palestine. For the same reason, Isaac was about to go there and was only restrained by direct instructions from God. Israel’s whole settlement in Egypt was only brought about by the famine in Palestine, which made the sons of Jacob go repeatedly to Egypt to buy food. So the natural fertility of the Egyptian soil gave Egypt an ascendant superiority over other countries and that made other countries, especially Palestine, appear dependent on them. Accordingly, the meaning of this verse is that you will not go from Palestine to Egypt as in the past to obtain from there any national necessities which your own land does not supply. You are not to make yourselves dependent on Egypt. (*Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 339)

Torah then does not concern itself with the possibility of renewed Jewish settlement in Egypt. The biblical concern within the context of the Israelite king revolves around the quality of the relationship between Israel and Egypt. As the Israelites march toward freedom in their own Land, they are cautioned about the fragility of their status. They are now free, and that freedom cannot be taken for granted. They are forbidden from returning to the same power dynamic—that is to say, they may not once again become dependent on Egypt. From this moment forward, they must demonstrate their economic and political independence. And more than that, Israelite dependence is on God—not on any human construct. By protecting their newfound status and nurturing their relationship with God and Torah, the Israelites ensure that they will never again return to the shackles of Egyptian slavery. One cannot think of a more important message as we enter the month of Elul—preparing for our sacred reunion with God, Torah, and community.

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