

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

“Fill Our Eyes with Light . . . Cause Our Heart to Cling” (Part 2)

Last week we looked at the phrase “*ha'er eyenyinu*” (Fill our eyes with the light of Your Torah), and now let us look more closely at the continuation of the same sentence: “*vedabek libeinu bemitzvotekha*” (and make our hearts cleave to Your mitzvot) [*Siddur Sim Shalom Daily*, 32].

The Hebrew root *D-B-K* (to cleave) brings powerful connections; in the second narrative of Creation, the Man (Adam) says of the Woman, “This one at last, bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh . . . Therefore a man leaves father and mother to cleave [*vedavak*] to his wife” (Gen. 2:23–24).

Further, at the end of Torah portion Netzavim (Deut. 30:19–20), Moses offers the most transcendent articulation of the values and purpose of the Covenant: “I call heaven and earth to witness today, that I have set life and death . . . before you this day . . . Choose life! . . . By loving Adonai, your God, to hear God's voice and to cleave [*uledavkah*] to God.”

The Torah uses the word *cleave* for the most profound relationships: human marriage and the relationship between a person and God.

At this moment, just before the Shema', the text of this prayer invites us to ask God to bring us into that relationship. Intimate relationships are not built overnight or easily, whether with God or a human partner. Wishing and asking, even praying can be the starting point, but only the starting point of a lifelong quest. The words of the siddur serve for many as a source of inspiration—and even more so when set to the diverse musical traditions of our People.

Hasidic teachings developed the concept of *dveykut* (cleaving) as a goal for each person to attain to the limit of his or her capacity. In addition to the standard liturgy, varied meditative and contemplative practices are developed to guide and support each person in his or her quest. These teachings identify each person's soul as containing within it a divine element that longs to (re)unite with the Divine Source—a goal brought to fruition as *dveykut* is attained, even momentarily.

For some it is the pathway of mitzvot (commandments) that build the bridge to *dveykut*. As we fulfill the mitzvot, putting on tefillin, sanctifying Shabbat and Holy Days, visiting the sick and supporting those in need, we align ourselves with God's will, and draw closer to the Divine—both the Divine within us, and the Divine transcendent.

There are many paths, but ultimately, one goal.

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 Terumah
Exodus 25:1–27:19
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Parashah Commentary

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

For the 2013 Graduating Class of JTS Rabbis and Cantors

If you care deeply about the present and future state of the synagogue, as I do, it's difficult to resist the temptation to draw lessons from the remarkable vision of communal worship set forth in this week's Torah portion. I do not intend to resist. Three aspects of the divine plan for the Tabernacle strike me as particularly relevant to our contemporary situation.

First, as commentators have noted for centuries, God does not promise to dwell in the sanctuary that the Israelites will construct, but to dwell *betokham*: in them or among them. The point of the Mishkan was to enable the Children of Israel to sense God's presence in their midst while they wandered the wilderness; to bring them together in what Martin Buber called a “living Center;” to raise them above the mundane concerns of daily life; to assist them in infusing their days with holiness.

That is still the point of the sanctuary, I believe. If worship services in synagogues today do not achieve these ends—if the words do not inspire us, the music does not elevate us, the processions and ceremony do not move us—something is seriously wrong. Like the Israelites of old, we devote enormous resources to building sanctuaries, and do so in the hope that we too will feel, when we walk through their doors, that we have entered the precincts of the Holy One. Some synagogues of my acquaintance succeed to a remarkable extent in doing those things. It is a joy to be part of their worship services. One is uplifted on a regular basis by the music, the words, and the silences. That is not true of other synagogues, however—and all too often it seems that the members or clergy of those institutions have reconciled themselves to settling for much less. This is sad. The mission of the synagogue is too important to compromise on quality. Our ancestors worked hard to endow routine service in the sanctuary with such power, majesty, and holiness that God's presence became palpable. This should be our objective also. We too should work hard at it.

God's promise to dwell “in them” or “among them” points to a second key requirement of communal worship: that it take place in a *community*, a word which I (like the Torah) take to mean far more than an assemblage of individuals. Communities share a common language, practice, and commitment. Their members come together for purposes that are central to their lives. They are not just consumers of various services for which they pay a fee. Members of a community bring *themselves* to the endeavor. The ancient Israelites were free to decide what they would contribute to the building of the Tabernacle, but everyone had to bring *something*. These gifts were not trivial. They could be material: gold or silver, precious gems, or beautiful cloth. Other contributions could take the form of skills, artistry, or

design. Soon, when the Tabernacle was completed, they would bring offerings of well-being, thanksgiving, or atonement. They would pour out their hearts and afflict their souls.

It is (or should be) the same with contemporary synagogues. If members of the synagogue community are joined together in networks of shared activities and relationships—if they are not simply present (as opposed to absent), but what we call “fully present” to one another—the communal whole becomes far more than the sum of individual parts. Every prayer is raised higher and penetrates deeper thanks to the prayer of others. The spirit swells. Grief is more easily borne. I have been fortunate enough to be part of such synagogue services. I hope you have as well.

A third requirement for achieving the sort of synagogues we desire is found in the commandment to do “*ke-khol asher ani mareh otkha*” (Exod. 25:9). Some translators, including JPS, follow commentators who understand the word *ke-khol* to mean “exactly as.” In this reading, God says that the boards should be X cubits long, and Moses makes sure the carpenters saw them to that exact length. Other readers, including me, take *ke-khol* to mean “in accordance with.” God gives the blueprint. The People of Israel figure out—using skill and creativity in faithful obedience to the divine directives—how to translate the plan into reality.

This notion of the building process is consistent with the larger divine-human partnership set forth at Sinai. God needs artisans with the skill of Bezalel (and prophets such as Moses and Isaiah, or jurists and teachers like our Sages) because the matter of bringing Torah to life is *not* as simple as sawing boards to a certain length, or looking up a particular situation in a divinely revealed instruction manual and doing what is specified there. God relies upon the creativity, intelligence, and will of the human beings created in His image. That is why God calls Bezalel, calls Moses, and calls the Sages. Through them and their work, God calls the rest of us. Indeed, as complex and detailed as the instructions given for building the Mishkan and performing the sacrifices are, careful reading indicates that many necessary details are not supplied in the Torah. “Oral law” is required to complement and complete “written law.” Human initiative is valued by God, Who is the source and model of that initiative.

About 25 years ago, an art show in New York featured drawings by master artists such as Michelangelo that were copies of drawings done by other great artists. Inevitably, the copies differed from the originals in significant ways that revealed the particular talents, styles, and perspectives of their makers. Adam Gopnik, reviewing the show for the *New Yorker* (July 4, 1988), put the questions raised by the exhibit this way: “How can copying lead to change? Looking more closely at the Michelangelo drawing, we discover that what had seemed at first a faithful, even dutiful replication—an act of filial piety—is in certain crucial ways not faithful at all.”

The religious language here is striking—and, if one follows my reading of *ke-khol*, Gopnik’s use of it is utterly mistaken, as we learn in subsequent pages of his review. “Filial piety” does not mean doing exactly as our parents did. “Faithfulness” in art or performance does not mean copying in detail an earlier work or performance (including one’s own). Is Pacino’s Shylock “unfaithful” to Shakespeare because it differs from Olivier’s? When Isaac Stern played a Beethoven violin concerto one evening, should it have been judged by its exact likeness to the performance of the piece he gave the night before, or to some ideal that existed in the head of the composer?

The answer of course is “no.” Gopnik is clear on the point: “The show demonstrates with beautiful clarity that every copy, no matter how faithful, produces subtle variations, and that it is the readiness to take advantage of those variations, created in the act of making, which has been one engine of change in art.” The artist or performer does not set out to depart from the original. He or she feels obligated to make it live in and through his or her own work—through that artist’s self, that artist’s life. Art is far more than mechanical reproduction. So is life. So is piety. Tradition, as Conservative Jews have long taught, means change through continuity, and continuity through change. Our aim is to conserve and, by doing so, to serve. Our means require bringing all we have to the task, and all we are.

Synagogues today need honest and thoughtful discussion of what this sort of faithfulness means for communal worship. Parashat Terumah reminds us that sincere desire to stand

before God and one another is required. So is the creation of communities that are far more than assemblages of individual consumers. And there is artistry: copies made holy by dedication to the task of being present and coming near to the Source of all Creation. The ancient Israelites, who were far from perfect in character—and so like us in many respects, including this one—can inspire us to work at the task of sanctuary building until we get it right.

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A Taste of Torah

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

My words of Torah this week are dedicated to the memory of Rabbi David Hartman (z”l).

From the details of law to the minutiae of a building plan, Parashat Terumah moves us into the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle. Repeatedly, God commands Moses to create the Tabernacle and its appurtenances exactly as God has “shown” Moses. God declares, “Exactly as I *show* you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so you will make it” (Exod. 25:9). Then, with regard to the branches of the menorah, Moses is instructed, “Note well and follow the patterns for them that are being *shown* you on the mountain” (Exod. 25:40). And finally, regarding the ark, Moses is told, “Make it hollow, of boards. As you were *shown* on the mountain, so will they be made” (Exod. 27:8). What were these blueprints that Moses was shown? How may we understand the plans to which Moses was privy?

Nahum Sarna explains,

It remains uncertain as to what is intended to be conveyed precisely by Moses being shown by God a “pattern” (Hebrew: *tavnit*) of the Tabernacle and its parts. It might imply belief in the existence of an actual, visible, celestial temple of which the earthly structure is to be a replica. This interpretation is favored by the famous vision of Isaiah . . . in which he sees a vision of the ritual being enacted in the temple in heaven. Also, it can be shown that Hebrew *tavnit* usually refers to the imitative reproduction of a material entity that exists in reality. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that *tavnit* might imply the conceptual form, the likeness and image of the ideal, invisible, archetypal form that is present in the mind of God, and that is made manifest to Moses, who alone is privileged to perceive it. (*Exploring Exodus*, 201)

Regardless of what this pattern is and conveys, the image of God showing Moses the divine plan for the Tabernacle is extraordinary and moving. It reveals the profound intimacy between teacher and student. God, acting as Pedagogue and Chief Architect, shows Moses, the contractor, exactly how it is that the divine plan will be implemented in the world. Yet, more than being solely about ritual space, the image and idea we are given in Parashat Terumah are a metaphor for bringing holiness and goodness into the world at large. And for that to become realized, the entirety of Torah becomes the *tavnit*, the pattern or blueprint, for bringing the holy into a profane and imperfect world.

This past week, I had the privilege of attending the Jerusalem funeral of the one of the greatest leaders and thinkers of the Jewish world, Rabbi David Hartman (z”l). One of his students, Professor Yisrael Knohl, spoke about the legacy Rabbi Hartman gave the Jewish world, summed up in three qualities all beginning with the Hebrew letter *aleph*: *ahava* (love), *emet* (truth), and *ometz* (strength or conscientiousness). Rabbi Hartman used these three elements as his *tavnit* to repair a broken world. May we all be privileged to perpetuate and emulate his model.

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