

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

Serve God With Joy

I recall reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* while in elementary school, and being stumped by a description of the powerful singing in church of "Old Hundred." What might this "Old Hundred" be, and why was it being sung in church with such fervor? Eventually, I found out that this was Psalm 100, and was sung by the community as it learned that Tom Sawyer was alive, and had mischievously staged his own disappearance.

Within this short psalm is a simple and powerful command: "*Ivdu et Adonai b'simchah!*" (Serve God with joy!), and it is the attempt to fulfill the teaching that has inspired visionaries over the generations to seek renewal and fervor within the structures of Jewish worship. We have looked in [previous essays](#) at the way in which Jewish worship is seen as *avodah* (service), just as the priestly rituals of the Temple are cast as *ha'avodah shebalev* (service of the heart, for which this series of essays is named). Our verse from Psalm 100 makes a demand beyond even the concept of *kavanah* (intention)—it demands that we find joy in our worship.

There are certainly many among the Jewish People who see the prayers as rote duty, in which we express the thanks and praise that are due to God. But it is difficult to find joy in carrying out a rote duty. Hasidic masters from the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Hasidism) onward have turned to this teaching over and over as the basis for introducing ecstatic song, and even dancing, into an otherwise serious order of worship.

The teaching is no less applicable in our own times, and many of the innovations in modern Jewish worship can be understood in its light. For some, there is true joy in new words—new poetry that explores and deepens the themes of worship. The new prayer books of the Reform and Conservative movements (*Mishkan T'filah*, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, and *Mahzor Lev Shalem*) are wonderful exemplars of attempts to find poetry that stirs the heart and mind alike. A wonderful mix of new and old sounds, classic *hazzanut* juxtaposed with Israeli compositions, and traditional *nusah* and *nigunim* of diverse Hasidic courts have come to adorn modern Jewish worship. Sometimes with instrumentation and sometimes a cappella, there is an array of joyful sounds of praise to be heard in our synagogues. This, in so many places, is the true sound of "Old Hundred," the sound of serving God with joy.

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

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Tetzavveh
Shabbat Zachor
Exodus 27:20–30:10
February 23, 2013
13 Adar 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Rabbinic Fellow and Director of Planned Giving, JTS.

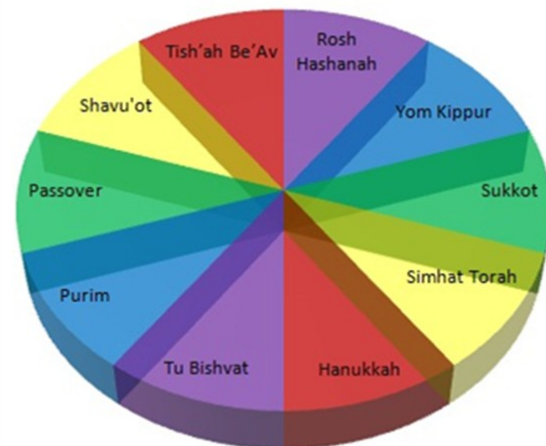
Parts of a Whole

A strange fact about being human: we never see any object in its entirety. We perceive in three dimensions, but see only in two so that our seeing is always at the mercy of our believing. Art historian David Rudd Cycleback, in his [online collection of essays](#), describes this well:

Not only are things like coffee cups and sticks and tree branches partially visibly obscured by overlapping other objects, but we can never see all sides and parts of an object at once. Even with an apple you've turned in your hands, you can't be sure whether it's fresh or rotten in the core until you bite or cut it apart. Humans live and learn in an environment where information is always obscured or otherwise hidden from view.

Given this fact, we know that we need many sources to inform our perceptions of reality. It is with a great sense of wonder, then, that we recognize in our own holiday cycle many parts that add up to a whole: a microcosm of this basic truth. In fact, as we look more closely, we notice a pattern in the cycle, one that requires the whole to be laid out before us so that we may fully appreciate it.

Seen as a two-dimensional whole, we understand that certain themes experienced from a particular angle on one holiday are revisited from another angle on another holiday; and, in fact, that those themes and holidays lie directly opposite from one another in the calendar cycle. So, for example, Passover and Sukkot, both in green above, our two weeklong holidays celebrate (a) the beginning of the harvest and its culmination and (b) the Exodus from Egypt and God's protection during the ensuing years of wandering. One occurs in the spring; the other,



directly opposite, in the fall. Or Hanukkah and Tish'ah Be'Av, in red on the chart above: one is a celebration of light during the shortest, darkest days of the year, and the other is a day of darkness during our brightest season. One celebrates miracles and military victory, and the other marks tragedies and political defeat; one, the rededication of the Temple, and the other its destruction. If we celebrate only Passover, but not Sukkot; only Hanukkah, but not Tish'ah Be'Av, then we experience only a small portion of the reality and the wholeness that the totality of the holiday cycle enables us to live out.

This brings us to the holiday so soon upon us, Purim. Since Purim sits directly across from Yom Kippur on our chart above, we wonder: what connects these two most disparate of holidays? *Yom HaKippurim k'purim* puns the Zohar ("Yom Kippur is like Purim," a pun on the close sound of the Hebrew), and, ever since this was written in the 13th century, rabbis have wondered just how the two might be alike—what the Zohar could have meant.

At its most superficial, we understand the two to be diametric opposites. Yom Kippur is solemnity; Purim is lightheartedness. On Yom Kippur, we fast and afflict our souls; on Purim, we feast, drink, and tell jokes. If on Yom Kippur we take ourselves seriously, on Purim we mock ourselves and make light of life.

More deeply than this, Yom Kippur is a day in which we insist that there is a God who sits in judgment of us. It is the day on which we comfort ourselves with the awesome yet soothing consolation that there is a God watching over us, a God who cares about what all of us do as individuals and, not unlike Santa Claus, a God that keeps track of who is naughty and who is nice—and also that this God has the power to grant us life. So if we give full expression to our consciences, then we will be granted *teshuvah*, the chance for more time to do things better.

On Purim, we insist just the opposite. We read the Megillah, which does not mention God even once. We sense that the miracles of the story come about by nature or coincidence; that we have only ourselves to rely on because life is a game of lots (*purim*), and our fate has only to do with the luck of the draw. Purim is the holiday in which we declare that life is chaos, God seems absent from our lives, none of us knows what is right or wrong (the Talmud suggests we drink until we cannot distinguish between Haman and Mordecai [BT Megillah 7b]), and we celebrate because we are alive and must adopt an attitude of making the best of it.

Either one of these holidays gives us only a partial truth. Together, they make a whole.

We who cannot perceive things in their wholeness sense only a contradiction here. We spend most of our days insisting that either God exists and rules over us or does not; that there is a structure and system of rules at work governing our lives, or there is not. But our actual experience of life is that we can only see part of the apple at any given time; in reality, we experience both God-is-in-charge, Yom Kippur-like moments as well as life-is-a-game-of-chance, Purim-like moments. We go through stages of life in which we foster deep faith, and others when we throw up our hands in bewilderment. We sit and argue with friends about faith and whether there is a God or not, and we know that the truth lies somewhere between the two seemingly contradictory positions that life is full of Yom Kippur days and Purim days, and that the parts add up to the whole.

Since we can never experience the whole but only the parts, we have no choice but to live day by day, one holiday at a time, with its particular message for us. This weekend, we celebrate Purim. We celebrate the miracles of life's good fortune and with light hearts we will throw a masquerade party. But we know that this is part of a larger truth, and that the great wisdom of Jewish living is one in which the cycle of the year brings us in touch with all that we need, one revelation at a time, for spiritual wholeness.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Clothing Ourselves in Sanctity

Clothing offers keen insight in two complementary directions. First, the garments one wears reveals one's personality. While a neat, well-fitting suit may convey a sense of professionalism and conservatism, jeans and a tie-dyed shirt reflect a casual, relaxed, and liberal sense of self. And just as clothing offers insight into the internal, so too does it give us a sense of what is transpiring around us: a kittel (white ritual robe worn at liminal moments) or tallit (prayer shawl) adorned signals a moment of prayerful reflection; tuxedos and gowns frequently tip us off to a wedding reception; and black garments often represent mourning. This week's parashah, Parashat Tetzavveh, raises the issue of clothing in relation to sacred space. Moses and the Israelites are commanded, "You will make sacred vestments for Aaron, your brother, for honor and for glory." How are we to relate to the sacred vestments described in the parashah? To what extent is such clothing intrinsically sacred? Or do these vestments impart sanctity only when adorned and at a particular moment in time?

In his explanation of our verse, Abraham Ibn Ezra, a Spanish exegete, suggests two possibilities regarding these bigdei kodesh, sacred garments. He writes that either these vestments are holy because "they are worn in a sacred place" or that they somehow impart kedushah (holiness) as described in Ezekiel: "They will put on other garments, lest they make the people consecrated by contact with their vestments" (44:19). According to Ibn Ezra then, harmony is achieved between clothing and space, affirming the sanctity of the act in which the participant is engaged; or that there is some mystical emanation—the clothing itself radiates holiness. Nahmanides takes the seriousness of these garments a step further. He writes, "The priestly garments were required to be made for their own sake, not merely as priestly accoutrements. It may even be that the one who made them was required to do so with kavanah, full intention, that they should serve the purpose specified for them." Even the act of making the clothes must be endowed with a sense of holiness.

As Purim approaches, Megillat Esther (the Scroll of Esther) reinforces the significance of clothing. As sleep evades a weary King Ahasuerus, he turns to the royal chronicles and realizes that Mordechai, who had saved the king's life, was never rewarded for his heroism. Ahasuerus's notorious advisor, Haman, is brought to him, and the king queries, "What should be done to the man that has brought glory to the kingdom?" Thinking that he will be the one to be honored, Haman enthusiastically answers that among other things, "They will bring royal clothing that the king is accustomed to wear" (Esther 6:8). Such clothing should be draped on the one to be honored. To Haman's great displeasure, the tables are turned and he is forced to parade his nemesis, Mordechai, upon a royal horse and draped in kingly raiment. Haman and Ahasuerus understand well the power of clothing. These garments will call attention to Mordechai, marking him as a royal honoree deserving of the respect not simply of the king but of the entire Persian nation.

All too often we relate to clothing in a casual and superficial way. As evidenced both by our parashah and the Scroll of Esther, clothing conveys messages as well as holiness. It is a lesson worth keeping in mind as we consider how to properly adorn ourselves in the synagogue. While many communities seek to nurture a more relaxed environment, our parashah gives us pause to think otherwise. Clothing is truly for "for honor and for glory"—for the honor of ourselves and for the glory of God.

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