

## 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.

### Could "all" be in vain? A liturgical response to Ecclesiastes

The opening words of the book of Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) have troubled those who read the Bible for a very long time, and remain a challenge—ancient, but still provocative. "*Havel havalim, . . . hokol havel*" (In vain, in vain, . . . it is all futility) (Eccles. 1, 2). Last week we began to look at the passage "*mah anu meh chayyeinu*" found in the preliminary service (daily and Shabbat), and I noted the extraordinary feature of this "prayer"—the questions included within the text (Who are we? What is our life? etc.). If we think of prayer as addressed to God, it is remarkable to find within this prayer that we ourselves are questioned. The final words of the paragraph (in the Ashkenazic version) bring us face to face with the troubling opening of Ecclesiastes: "*ki hokol havel.*" ("because everything is futile" or "because everything is in vain").

How can our liturgy place this depressing, even nihilistic, assertion upon our lips every day? We might understand a prayer that opened with these words, and offered some way forward, or even some refutation, but this text is the opposite. Rabbi Simon Greenberg (z"l), a beloved professor at The Jewish Theological Seminary, offers a daring solution embraced by the translation in *Siddur Sim Shalom*. He suggests that the words of Ecclesiastes are intended as a foil, as a "straw man" proposition that we are to reject. The final sentence of our prayer seems to read: "Even the superiority of humans over the beasts is nothing *because (ki)* everything is futile." Based upon his deep scholarship of Hebrew language, Greenberg proposes that the word *ki*, generally translated as *because* (a declarative), should in *this* case be translated as *if* (a conditional), bringing us to a very different reading: "Even the superiority of humans over the beasts is futile *if (ki)* everything is futile."

Now we have a choice—and an invitation each day, presented by our liturgy, to make that choice. If the nihilistic proposition that "all is futility" is true, then there is nothing of worth in our human superiority to the beasts, for indeed there is nothing worthwhile. But if we reject that view—if even on the worst days of our lives, we can reject nihilism and find even one source of meaning and worth in the world—then we turn away from Ecclesiastes, and we affirm that humanity is indeed superior to the beasts, and that we can find and offer answers to the deep questions of our life.

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](mailto:sabarh@jtsa.edu).

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Toledot  
Genesis 25:19–28:9  
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## Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS.

What do you make of our matriarch Rebecca? Certainly she is the boldest and most independent of the mothers. When as a girl she sees a stranger at the well, she rushes to water his caravan of thirsty camels, and then invites him to stay at her house. When offered the chance to travel with this man back to a distant land and a mysterious husband, she volunteers without hesitation. When her pregnancy becomes difficult, she seeks out God and challenges God with the bold question, "Why do I need this?" When her husband seems ready to bless the wrong son, she quickly conspires to rearrange the action so that Jacob will receive the primary blessing. In all of these actions, Rebecca is seen as a woman of strength and decisiveness.

Yet Rebecca's strength has dreadful consequences. In deceiving her blind husband, she humiliates him and causes him to shudder in fear. In depriving her eldest son Esau of his blessing, she causes him to explode in anger and to plot his brother's murder. And in securing for Jacob both blessings, she causes him to flee for his life, alone into the lonely night of exile. Is Rebecca strong and righteous, or is Rebecca headstrong and wrong?

Presumably, the way to answer this question is to look at the prophecy received by Rebecca when she sought out God. Here is U.C., Berkeley Professor Robert Alter's translation of the oracle found at the beginning of our parashah (Gen. 25:23):

Two nations—in your womb,  
Two peoples from your loins shall issue.  
People over people shall prevail,  
The elder, the younger's slave.

The problem is that this prophecy is ambiguous, especially in its final clause, "*v'rav ya'avod tza'ir.*" Biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman suggests that this could mean either "the elder shall serve the younger" or "the elder, the younger shall serve."

Rebecca, together with most readers, interprets the prophecy in the first fashion, understanding that Esau must be subjected to Jacob. This interpretation sets the course for their family and perhaps for the history of their descendants. But perhaps Rebecca got it wrong? Perhaps the oracle truly meant that the younger boy, Jacob,

was to serve his older brother, Esau? Perhaps Isaac got it right in trying to bless Esau with physical dominion (27:29), while reserving for Jacob the covenantal blessing (28:3–4). Perhaps this family could have been spared the fraternal anger, hatred, and division if Rebecca had only understood her prophecy differently. But perhaps all of this tension was ordained by God, and was a necessary stage in the emergence of Jacob as Israel, patriarch to 12 tribes.

Rebecca's prophecy is not the only ambiguous utterance found in the Bible. JTS Professor Stephen A. Geller studies this phenomenon in his 1996 book, *Sacred Enigmas*. In a 2007 volume of essays in honor of Dr. Geller, JTS Professor Benjamin D. Sommer continues this path with a chapter titled, "Prophecy as Translation: Ancient Israelite Conceptions of the Human Factor in Prophecy." Dr. Sommer examines, among other texts, an incident described in 1 Kings 22. There, the evil northern king Ahab gets 400 prophets to support him in his desire to invade the neighboring country, Aram. Yet the southern king Yehoshafat asks him to seek one more opinion from the prophet Micaiah ben Yimlah. This prophet repeats his colleagues' words, "Go up, so that the Lord will deliver into the hands of the king," but interprets the prophecy in the opposite fashion. Rather than predicting that the enemy will be delivered into "the hands of the king," it is the king who will be delivered into the hands of the enemy. Ahab ignores Micaiah's interpretation, invades Aram, is taken captive, and killed.

Dr. Sommer shows that the 400 prophets erred not in their hearing of the message, but in its interpretation. Perhaps they were cowed by the king into delivering the message that he desired. Perhaps they simply lacked the courage and the zeal to speak truth to power. But perhaps the message itself was intentionally ambiguous, and the responsibility of interpretation was invested in the prophet by God. Indeed, Dr. Sommer points to Numbers, chapter 12, to show that God intentionally obfuscates to all prophets save Moses. The prophet must be attuned to the divine message, but must also interpret with integrity, guided by a sense of justice and righteousness.

The Rabbis also discern this phenomenon of obscure prophecy. In the Talmud (Yevamot 49b) they say, "all of the prophets saw through a cloudy speculum (*aspekliyya she'eina me'ira*); but our Master Moses, saw through a clear speculum." Maimonides builds on this theme, differentiating the prophecy of Moses from that of other prophets. Moses can prophesy at will; Moses can see the matter clearly; Moses can stand and speak with God without fainting; Moses alone is unable to return to ordinary life because his prophetic commission is clear and continuous (Yesodei HaTorah 7:6).

For most prophets, then, interpretation is as important as the prophecy itself. Indeed, interpretation is part of the prophecy. This is reminiscent of what the Rabbis say about dreams. In the Talmud (Berakhot 55a), Rav Hisda claims that a dream without interpretation is like an unread letter. Indeed, the dreamer has an opportunity to seek a better interpretation and to transform an evil omen into a blessing.

What should guide interpretation? Prophecy is not magic. The role of the prophet is not to force the hand of God, but to be guided by God's way. What is God's way? Justice and righteousness, kindness and peace. Perhaps Rebecca understood correctly, and her boys were destined to battle. Perhaps she was justified in deceiving Isaac and depriving Esau of his blessing. But it seems to me that an interpretation that ensures enmity is of necessity flawed.

We can't know how the story might have developed had Rebecca allowed Isaac to bless his older son. But we can work in our own capacity to interpret our sacred

tradition in ways that create just and compassionate communities. As our families gather in thanksgiving for the earth's bounty, may we also be blessed in appreciation for one another, so that we become not like Jacob and Esau, but like brothers and sisters who dwell together in peace.

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## A Taste of Torah

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

As famine envelops the Land of Israel, Isaac seeks refuge in the territory of the Philistines. Toward the end of his sojourn with these native inhabitants of the land, a curious episode unfolds. God blesses Isaac; so much so that he "reaped a hundredfold the same year." The narrative continues:

The man grew richer until he was very wealthy: he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him. And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug . . . And Avimelekh [the king of the Philistines] said to Isaac, "Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us." So Isaac departed from there . . . and dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham . . . and he gave them the same names that his father had given them. (Gen. 26:12–19)

How may we make sense of these events in our modern day?

Nahum Sarna explains,

Isaac submits to the expulsion order without protest. He moves his family and belongings beyond the recognized urban limits of Gerar to the same region in which his father had once made a prolonged stay. Abraham's sojourn could not have been accomplished without the digging and maintenance of several wells. In order to establish clear proprietary rights, each well would be given an identifying name. Since Abraham's death, the Philistines had blocked them up. Isaac now restores them and revives their original names so as to make ownership incontestable. (Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 186)

Rabbinic tradition teaches *ma'aseh avot siman l'vanim* (the deeds of the ancestors are a sign unto the children). As I read through Isaac's drama with the Philistines in concert with Professor Sarna's commentary, I was struck by the extent to which the biblical episode prefigures the future of the Jewish people. At a seemingly endless number of points of our history, Jews have travelled the same path as Isaac. Objects of envy, they are compelled to uproot, dig new wells, and remember the names of the old wells. The episode described by Torah most resonates with the Zionist narrative of the 20th century. Having been driven from their homes, the *halutzim* (early pioneers) arrived in the Land of Israel and began their lives anew. But most powerfully, they remembered the places and names of their ancestors. Just as Isaac employs the names that Abraham gave to the old wells, so too do the Jews returning to Israel remember the legacy of their ancestors. Isaac, in his interactions with the Philistines, is a refugee who acts with a pioneering spirit and sense of optimism. It is in this inspiring vein that he goes on to further the national project of the Jewish people.

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