

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

Menuchah Nechonah—Perfect Rest

“God filled with mercy, grant perfect rest, *menuchah nechonah*, under the wings of Your Presence, the Shekhinah . . . to the souls of all those slain, young children and teachers, at Sandy Hook School. May their resting place be in *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden, and may their souls be bound up in the gathering of all life. May they come to be at peace in their place of rest and we say: Amen.”

The paragraph above is my own adaptation of *Ei Malei*, traditionally chanted at funeral and memorial gatherings. This is a prayer; it is addressed to God, and it asks, perhaps demands, a response. The request is not for anything measurable in this world, in this life, but for the souls of those who have died, and especially, this week, for the souls of those murdered at Sandy Hook School, young children and adults alike. Many contemporary prayer texts are careful not to stray too far outside the comfort zones of modernity; we speak of peace and healing, of harmony and growth, of care and nurture. We avoid the word “death” and struggle to contemplate the soul, and what it might be.

Ei Malei accepts the finality of death, and goes further—it affirms the reality of the soul, asking that God bring the soul to rest in closeness to God's Presence. We affirm that we are all—every human being alive—created in the Divine Image; the *neshamah*, the soul, is the part of us that carries that Image; after death the *neshamah* returns to its source, and we pray that God will grant ultimate peace and rest to the returning soul.

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and dean of the Division of Religious Leadership of The Jewish Theological Seminary, provided guidance to all our students in the days after the shootings. He addressed many important areas with these simple words: “Prayer helps.” He urged students to share with those who are grieving resources of the soul as well as of the mind. It is fundamental to our work at JTS that the needs of the mind and soul are woven together.

The words and melody of *Ei Malei* have been a source of comfort to many; others turn to the Psalms. The offices and phones of the rabbis and cantors of all the Jewish people are open to anyone in need. May these words and melodies bring comfort to a world that has been wounded, once again, by needless taking of life.

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 Va-yehei
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Deborah D. Miller, Associate Director, Melton Research Center of Jewish Education, William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education

It's Not What You Say . . .

A number of years ago, I took my grandson to see *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. During the intermission, he said, “This is the best show I ever saw in my whole life!”

I smiled. He was four. His whole life? When can we look back and say, “*All my life* I have (believed / felt / acted as though . . .)”?

Certainly Jacob is in this position in the final parashah of the book of Genesis, as he lies on his deathbed. We, too, can look back on his life and see what patterns emerge as we consider what kind of a person he has been. At the same time, we see Joseph, the early favored son, standing with his father in his final scene on earth—and serving as a contrast to him.

We have learned that two trees do not make a pattern—it takes three. So we have to look at a series of events in order to learn about Jacob. What can we discern?

To my mind, there are two salient aspects of Jacob's life. One is that he has been true to his name throughout his long life: He was named *sneak/supplanter* at birth, and has rarely veered from that description. He has exercised poor judgment in his family life, and made it difficult for his children to live nobly. He has shown no growth of character, and no wisdom gained from experience. On the contrary—after seeing the devastating familial effects of favoring Joseph, he still persists in blessing the younger of Joseph's two children more than the older, in spite of Joseph's attempts to correct him.

Joseph, in contrast, *has* learned. If Jacob's social and emotional maturity looks like a flat line, Joseph's shows growth, change, and learning from life. He magnanimously looks beyond the hurts his brothers inflicted, takes his

brothers in and nurtures them, and sees to all their and their families' needs. He can see the bigger picture—how their deliberate injuries inadvertently resulted in his ability to save a whole civilization. Having this perspective, he can try to relieve their well-deserved guilt.

I'm afraid that my low opinion of Jacob and my high opinion of Joseph are all too evident. For me, the proof of the differences in their characters is captured in an amazing repetition of a key phrase. In two different stories, in two different contexts, Jacob and Joseph say the same thing. In each the tone is totally different. And each reveals the essential character of the protagonist.

The first instance occurs early in the founding of Jacob's family life. His less-loved wife, Leah, has already borne him four sons, and Rachel, the much-beloved one, has none. She turns to Jacob in despair and says, "Give me sons, for if you don't, I'm a dead woman." Jacob responds, "Am I instead of God, Who has denied you fruit of the womb?" We can imagine Jacob's tone of voice when he says, "Am I instead of God?" He is sarcastic, belittling, and terribly distanced from her pain. He abandons her emotionally. (This is in tremendous contrast to his own father's attitude when Rebecca was unable to conceive—Isaac took it upon himself to pray on her behalf, without her asking. We don't even know if Rebecca wanted him to,)

And now we come to the same phrase, this time from Joseph's mouth. The context this time is after the death of Jacob, when the brothers realize that they are totally at Joseph's mercy, and that if he wants to exact revenge for their deeds of decades earlier, their father is no longer present as a protective factor. The brothers are so fearful of Joseph's possible actions that they send a messenger to him, claiming that their father had charged them to beg Joseph's forgiveness, and had charged Joseph to forgive them.

In this story, Joseph realizes how desperate the brothers are, how vulnerable. He cries when he hears them, realizing that they still have no understanding that he has changed and has no petty wish for vengeance. They fling themselves at his feet, declaring themselves his slaves, and he says, "Fear not, for am I instead of God?" Here we imagine a totally different tone of voice: it is soft, reassuring, and compassionate.

Jacob and Joseph use the exact same words, but one uses them to demean and the other to reassure. One is callous, one is caring. Neither is really talking about God; rather, each is talking about his relationship with a person or people who are at a low point in life, and in need of emotional sustenance. The repeated phrase captures something essential about these two men, whose heirs we are.

Here is the great irony. Earlier, I said that there are two salient aspects of Jacob's life. This is the second: at every turn, at every transition in his life, God has been a living, encouraging presence for him. From the time he flees his home in mortal fear of Esau's wrath after tricking him out of their father's blessing, through the time he runs from Laban, his father-in-law, to the time he decides to move down to Egypt—in every instance, God reassures Jacob that He is with him. This is truly love, freely given.

And in Joseph's life? God never speaks directly to Joseph, yet Joseph always refers to God, defers to God, and attributes his attainments to God. In that way, we are much more like Joseph, who makes the effort to make God part of his

life. And yet, we are also like Jacob, who may not deserve to have God's reassurance, but receives it anyway. We are called *Yisra'el*, named for the less noble of these two men. This is enormously heartening: If God can love Jacob, God can surely love us.

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A Taste of Torah

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

The response of Joseph's brothers in the aftermath of Jacob's death is dramatic: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong we did him!'" (Gen. 50:15). The brothers fear and surmise that Joseph will now exact vengeance for their misdeeds. Despite Joseph's seeming forgiveness and admission that it was God who orchestrated the events that brought him down to save Egypt and his family, they remain stuck in the past. One cannot begrudge their feeling of radical insecurity. Perhaps this is indeed an *et ratzon*, an auspicious moment for payback. However, what is Joseph's moving response? First he cries, and then, Torah goes on to teach, "*vayinahem otam vayidaber al libam*" (he comforted them and spoke to their hearts). How does Joseph's reaction reflect both on his brothers and on the development of his own character?

Rashi, the prolific medieval exegete, comments, "*devarim hamitkablím al halev*" (he spoke words that found ready access to their hearts). In Joseph's thoughtfulness, sensitivity, and creativity, he realizes that he has to set a new course, create a new agenda, and now find a compelling way to connect to the heart of his brothers. With the loss of his father, Joseph sees that he is both in a position of power and in a situation where comfort and reassurance are needed. He senses the fear of his brothers and responds with overwhelming emotion and compassion.

First, Joseph is clearly pained by their reaction. Our protagonist's tears are testament to his shock. The fact that his brothers remain fearful speaks to an open wound in the family. He realizes fully there is still much emotional work to be done. Second, he makes clear that real power sits solely in the hands of God. Even if he desired to exact punishment on his brothers, it is not his decision to make. As powerful as he appears to be, Joseph communicates the message that God is far more powerful and that He is the ultimate Judge and Decisor. Third, Joseph makes clear that his tale of suffering brought about the saving of many people. Were it not for his painful journey, the nation of Egypt and, indeed, the entire Near East would have been devastated by famine. Joseph brings life. Finally, Joseph gives a personal assurance that he will take care of his family—his brothers and their children. With his remarkable and touching response, Joseph is a model to us all of looking past pain and doing everything one can to make familial peace.

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