

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

Prayer in the Face of the Hurricane

"Prayer invites God's presence to suffuse our spirits; God's will to prevail in our lives. Prayer might not bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city. But prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, rebuild a weakened will." —Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman

As an enormous area of the country continues to be affected by Hurricane Sandy, with tragic loss of human life and vast destruction of property, naturally there are many who turn to prayer for comfort, for solace, for support—and perhaps for help or even deliverance. We envisage God as "*rofei lesh'vurei lev*" (the Healer of Broken Hearts) [Ps. 147:3], and we affirm in the daily *'Amidah* that God is the One Who hears prayer (" . . . *shome'a tefillah*"). How many prayers have been born out of our encounters with Hurricane Sandy, which remind us of the awesome powers of nature—powers that are not confined to faraway places?

As we emerge from the immediate experience of the hurricane, we recall a teaching to avoid "prayers uttered in vain"—prayers that ask for a miracle. The Mishnah (Berakhot 9:3) teaches that "One who supplicates about a past event utters a prayer in vain . . . If he is coming home from a journey and he hears cries of distress in the town and says, '[God] grant that this is not from my house,' this is a prayer in vain."

As the hurricane was far off, we might have prayed that our families, our homes, and those dear to us might be spared destruction—but the path of the hurricane became more and more well-defined as a phenomenon of nature, and the Mishnah guides us away from praying that laws of nature be suspended or overturned. This would be "prayer in vain." Our prayers turn, then, to the inner world of humanity—to our own hearts and souls—and we embrace the opening words of this essay, written a generation ago by Rabbi Isserman. We cannot pray for the floodwaters to miss our home or our subway station, for the winds to leave our trees untouched and our buildings intact, but we can pray that our hearts remain open, and that our souls find connection with God. I wrote the following prayer text as the effects of Hurricane Sandy were becoming clear:

"Your Power, God, Creator of the world, is manifest in the winds of the hurricane and the destruction they cause. We turn to You to pray for the wisdom and strength of those responsible for preparation and rescue, for administration and coordination—the first and last responders. May they find the strength and courage, the insight and judgment, the love of humanity to do their best to bring wisdom and technology to alleviate suffering, heal injury, and restore the services and infrastructure upon which our lives are based. And may we all give support, encouragement, love, and gifts as needed."

We do not pray to change the physical world, we do not pray for miraculous deliverance. We pray that we ourselves be strengthened and transformed—so that we, ourselves, will indeed transform the world.

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.

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Rabbi Marc Wolf
Vice Chancellor
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-vera
Genesis 18:1–22:24
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. David Marcus, Professor of Bible, JTS.

Regular screen watchers know that if in an opening scene the camera pans in on a detail like a dagger or a bicycle, then that detail—the dagger or the bicycle—will somehow have an important role to play later on in the movie. Known as foreshadowing, this cinematic technique has its parallel in literature in the rhetorical device known as prolepsis, which indicates a future event that is presumed to have occurred. Prolepsis is also known as anticipation, which is what the term literally means, because the details are anticipated or foreshadowed before they are developed in the ensuing narrative. Prolepsis is a characteristic feature of biblical Hebrew narrative, and, in recent studies, my colleague Dr. Robert Harris has convincingly demonstrated that it was a rhetorical feature well known to 12th-century Jewish medieval exegetes such as Joseph Kara, Rashbam (Samuel ben Meir), and Eliezer of Beaugency.

In the Bible, prolepsis is used in various ways. One is in the introduction of characters by names, descriptions, and epithets that will have relevance for that particular story. Thus, the meanings of the patriarchal names Abraham (Great Father) or Sarah (Princess) both have significance as the progenitors of the Jewish People. Abram will indeed be a father of a great nation, and Sarah will indeed be a princess, the ancestral mother of all of us. The proleptic knowledge that Sarah is barren clues the reader in advance of the importance of that detail when, in this week's parashah, we read of the birth of Isaac to very elderly parents.

Another type of prolepsis occurs when statements are made or details inserted that appear to be unnecessary or out of context. For example, when Bathsheba is first introduced in the story of David and Bathsheba, she

is described as being the daughter of Eliam (2 Sam. 11:3). This detail is unnecessary in that particular story, but is proleptically given in anticipation of the fact that Ahitophel, David's chief advisor, will later join Absalom's revolt against David (15:31). Eliam, we will be later told, is the son of Ahitophel (23:34), so Bathsheba is none other than Ahitophel's granddaughter. Ahitophel's rejection of David is now made clear to us. He did it because of David's outrageous treatment of his granddaughter and her husband: David had an illicit affair with Bathsheba, and had Uriah, her husband, killed.

Another example of this type of prolepsis is seen at the very end of this week's parashah, when Rebecca's genealogy is given at the end. The announcement of the birth of Rebecca at this seemingly inconsequential point in the narrative (immediately after the Aqedah story) is proleptic because it anticipates the events to be related in next week's parashah (Hayyei Sarah) in the story of getting a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24).

Perhaps, though, the most characteristic type of prolepsis is when acts are described as happening before they actually take place. In this week's parashah, we read at the beginning of the Aqedah narrative (chapter 22, verses 1–2): "Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, 'Abraham,' and he answered, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.'" The statement that "God put Abraham to the test" is proleptic, because God has not yet tested him, but is about to do so in the ensuing narrative. The alert reader who is aware of this literary technique realizes that this proleptic statement serves to reduce the tension. He knows it is only a test, and Isaac will not really die, though Abraham does not have the same foreknowledge as the reader.

Prolepsis in the Bible, then, may be viewed as a rhetorical feature that allows the narrator to mingle present and future events; a technique indicating the certainty of future events. The narrator can report future events in the present, and, by this means, emphasize the certainty of the performance of the acts described.

This proleptic technique is one that, occasionally, we ought to consider emulating in our own lives. Too often we worry about the future, and about what can go wrong in our personal and professional lives: Will we fail this exam? Will we be able to accomplish this mission? Will we mess up in that important presentation? Will we be able to succeed in this business venture? Will we be able to make this marriage work? Will we be good parents to our as yet unborn children? Instead of worrying about these matters, we might be well advised to adopt a proleptic technique.

Let us envision success in our endeavors. This is indeed what sports' coaches advocate. In a soccer game, when we are about to take a penalty kick, we are told to envision the ball at the back of the net. With that outlook, we will have a much greater chance of scoring than if we worry about our kick. So when preparing for an exam, envision an A on the returned blue book; in that business venture, visualize your progress as

you complete your next five-year plan; and in your personal life, project long-lasting, happy, and fulfilling relationships. All this will be possible if you have a positive attitude, because—just like in the biblical narratives—you know that things are going to be okay.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Just after the expulsion of Hagar and immediately before the binding of Isaac, a curious and somewhat cryptic episode appears in Genesis 21. Once again, Abraham encounters Abimelech, the king of Gerar, along with the chief of his troops, Phicol. In a brief and mildly tense exchange, Abraham rebukes the two for attempting to steal his well. As a means of securing possession of the well, Abraham gives the gift of sheep and oxen to Abimelech, and the two of them make a pact. Abraham tells Abimelech, "You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well" (Gen. 21:30). The exact place is then named Beersheba, since "the two of them swore an oath" (Gen. 21:31). Immediately after the pact, we are told that Abraham's Philistine "friends" return their homeland, and then "[Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Beersheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God" (Gen. 21:33). How may we understand the act of Abraham's planting?

*Nahum Sarna writes that Genesis 21:33 "contains several unusual features and raises numerous questions" (Sarna, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, 221). While highlighting the 12th-century commentary of the Bekhor Shor, who "understood the purpose of the tree-planting to be commemorative of the aforementioned pact," Sarna rejects this explanation. He explains, "the difficulty . . . is that no analogous practice within a legal context is again to be found in the Bible, nor does anyone else plant a tree simply to memorialize some experience" (222). Sarna goes on to give us profound insight into the text. He writes that, in the ancient Near East, there existed a connection "with sacred trees and pagan cults, especially with fertility cults" (223). All of this became proscribed by Israelite religion, rejected out of hand. Our mysterious text, Sarna argues, represents Torah's preservation of an ancient story whose goal was to provide us with the origin of the significance of Beersheba as a shrine for the Israelites. Sarna adds, "[t]he careful editing is evidenced by the exceptional absence of altar-building, and the identification of the unique epithet 'el 'olam with [the Israelite God], as well as by the exclusion of any mention of a theophany" (225). The implicit message in the placement and editing, on the one hand, underscores the significance of Beersheba; on the other hand, it represents a clean break with pagan practice.*

Still, the power of Sarna's commentary is in quoting later rabbinic interpretation of our verse. Referring to Genesis 21:33, that "Abraham planted a tamarisk (eshel)," he notes that midrash (Genesis Rabbah 54:5 and Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 37:1) makes the claim that our patriarch established a "guesthouse": eshel (alef-shin-lamed) is an acronym for achilah (eating), shtiyah (drinking), and leviyah (accompanying a guest along the way). Professor Sarna concludes, "An incident belonging to the realm of personal piety in a ritual context has been transformed [by the rabbis] so that it now exemplifies God's demands on man in socio-moral context . . . the provision of wayfarers and of the homeless has itself been elevated by the rabbis to the status of a mode of divine worship" (226). And so may it be with us. May we continue to plant trees in the Land of Israel, and be generous in tending to the needs of strangers and guests.

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