

## 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.

### Prayer(s) for the State of Israel

With sorrow in our hearts, we turn this week to the dangers facing *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, and all who live there. The circulation of “composed prayer texts” does not in any way preclude each person from pouring out his or her inner dreams and desires to God. It is the role of the rabbinic leaders of the community to prepare words that express the thoughts, hopes, and dreams within all of our hearts, and give concrete form to the value and ideals we cherish. Rabbi Reuven Hammer writes this week from the Jerusalem: “. . . I have added Psalm 91 to our services here during this period. I think it is particularly appropriate for this particular situation with its reference to arrows.”

The prayer below is composed by leaders of our Movement in Israel, Rabbis Simcha Roth (z”) and Michael Graetz:

May He who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah bless the residents of the State of Israel who live under the daily threat of missiles of death and destruction. May the Holy One strengthen their spirit and give them resolve to withstand this crisis until it passes.

May it be the will of the Most High to grant wisdom and insight to those leaders of the State charged with conducting the people's war, so that their actions are infused with courage, wisdom and intelligence which achieve a just goal. Lord of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, protect the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces in the air, on the sea and land, those in battle, those on the home front, and all the rescue and security forces. Save them from every trouble and evil design, and cause the works of their hands to be for blessing and for success.

May they go out in peace and return victorious and whole to their homes and loved ones.

O Heavenly One, bring peace to the Holy Land and eternal joy to its inhabitants, for Jacob again shall have calm and quiet with none to trouble him [*Ve'eyn macharid*]. And may the verse be applied to us: “But every man shall sit Under his grapevine or fig tree With no one to disturb him [*ve'eyn macharid*]. For it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke.”

It is worth looking closely at several of the ways in which this text is composed with exquisite sensitivity and humanity. It asks that God strengthen the spirit of those who face daily threats of death and destruction; it asks that those charged with leadership be blessed with wisdom in order to achieve a just goal. We ask not only victory for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), but that they all might return in peace to their homes and their loved ones.

Most of all, there are two biblical citations, each culminating with the Hebrew words “*ve'eyn macharid*,” affirming our dream, our prayer, for all Israel and all the Middle East: “Let no one spread terror, let no one make the people afraid.”

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](mailto:sabarth@jtsa.edu).

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yetzei  
Genesis 28:10–32:3  
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## Parashah Commentary

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

### How Angels Make Us Better People

I've never thought much about *mal'achim* (literally, angels), and I wonder if Jacob had thought about them either, before the encounter that took place when he departed the Land of Israel in flight from his brother's wrath. Jacob might have heard family stories about the divine messengers who announced the upcoming birth of his father to his grandparents. It would not be surprising if he knew about the heavenly beings who rescued his distant cousin Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah. I doubt that his father talked much about his near-death experience on Mount Moriah. Had it not been for an angel's intervention just in time to stop Abraham from using the knife, there would have been no Jacob, no continuing Covenant, no birthright to purchase from Esau, and no blessing to steal from him. Jacob must have heard enough about angels to recognize as “angels of God” the beings whom he saw going up and down the ladder in his dream at the start of his journey (and of our parashah), and to recognize them again when “angels of God” encountered him at the conclusion of his journey (and also, again, of our parashah). Jacob knew immediately that they were messengers who belonged to God somehow—and, thanks to them, he knew that he was, too. When I did think about angels, the occasion was usually an encounter at an art museum with paintings depicting Christian scenes such as the Annunciation, or pop culture images of white, winged beings playing harps or shooting love arrows. *Mal'achim* always seemed benign presences who bore good tidings, and certainly seem that way as Jacob takes his leave from one adversary—Laban—and prepares to meet another—Esau. Rashi believes that one set of angels accompanied and protected Jacob when he was in the Land of Israel, and another set outside the Land. Bereishit Rabbah offers this encouraging midrash:

“And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him” (Gen. 32:2). How many angels preceded our father Jacob when he entered the Land? R. Huna said in R. Aibu's name: 60 myriads. Thus it says, “And Jacob said when he saw them: this is God's camp” (32:3), and the Shekinah does not rest upon less than 60 myriads. The Rabbis said: 120 myriads, [for the Torah says,] “And he called that place *Mahanaim*” [meaning *two camps* (i.e., twice 60)]. R. Yudan said: He took of both camps and sent them as messengers before him, as it says, “And Jacob sent messengers” (Gen. 32:4).

But the Rabbis were not so sure about the intentions of other heavenly agents on other occasions. Indeed, as Solomon Schechter noted in his classic study *Aspects of*

*Rabbinic Theology* (1909), our Sages saw a certain rivalry between human beings and the angels; worse, angels threatened the very existence of humanity by arguing the case for the prosecution before God when human creatures were on trial and rejecting the mitigating circumstances offered in our defense. The angels wanted strict justice enforced, untempered by God's mercy. They objected to forgiveness of sin because the sinner had repented.

“Apparently, the world is so constituted that man should be a hybrid of angel and beast with the possibility of sin, which spells death, and that of conquering sin, which means life,” Schechter writes in explanation of the Rabbis' view of the matter. God had created the angels (along with other heavenly beings) on the second day of Creation, and the beasts after that. Dissatisfied with both, desiring a kind of being that was neither angel nor beast, God created Adam and Eve. This is striking: “angels have no Evil Yezer [urge] and are thus spared from jealousy, covetousness, lust, and other passions.” No wonder the *mal'achim* have neither sympathy nor empathy for human beings. They cannot *feel*. They cannot fail. They do not eat, and so never fear starvation or hoard grain. They do not sleep, and so never lose sleep from anxiety or commit error out of weariness. Angels obey without the slightest thought of not obeying (or any other thought). They are messengers, pure and simple, who never fail to deliver the message for which they are sent. We humans are not like that.

The Rabbis felt the need to appeal directly to God for protection against the divine messengers—and to make the case before God and humanity that the two Covenantal partners had more in common with one another than either did with the angels. “God loves Israel more than the angels,” Schechter summarizes. “Israel's prayer being [sic] more acceptable to him than the song of the angels, whilst the righteous in Israel are in closer contact with the Deity than the angels, and are consulted by them as to ‘what God hath wrought.’” God clothes the naked, and so do we. God raises up those who are bowed down, and so do we. God is merciful, and we too can show mercy. It is precisely our knowledge from the inside of good and evil that distinguishes us from angels, who are beyond good and evil—and so are incapable of formulating plans, making decisions, exercising judgment, or showing mercy. Those attributes—including conscience—are reserved for God and His partners on earth.

Jacob may or may not have felt comfort at the sight of the angels going up and down the ladder. But he surely breathed a sign of relief that “the Lord was standing beside him on the ladder.” He awoke and said—with wonder and thanksgiving—“surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Think of Kafka's hero in *The Castle*, who would have given anything to get past the myriads of angel-bureaucrats who tormented him and speak directly to the Lord above.

I was reminded last week at a conference on the subject of conscience that human beings often use animals to help us think about what makes us human. We hunt animals for food and pleasure, domesticate them for use and companionship, sacrifice them as gifts to fellow human beings or to God, and ascribe virtues and flaws to them in order to see those attributes more clearly. *Mal'achim*, too, serve this purpose, I think. They remind us that just as we are higher than the beasts (who, like us, are mortal), so we are lower than the angels (who are immortal)—and yet, in some ways, we are higher than those angels too, and should not wish to trade places with them, despite their immortality, any more than we would trade places with a cow, a river, or a stone. Better to be who and as we are.

That is certainly the message of Hollywood's most unforgettable angel. Clarence's job is to show George how much worse things would have been if he had not existed as the good man he is: *It's a Wonderful Life*, you see, for all the terror and heartbreak. For one thing, there is love in our world. Between Jacob's encounter with the *mal'achim* on the ladder and his encounter with the angelic camp, he “served seven years for Rachel and

they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her” (Gen. 29:19). For another, there are people who appear when we most need them to sound the voice of God that we most need to hear. They cannot but be messengers of God, at that moment. Or at least we cannot but see them that way. Like Clarence, they “earn their wings” by helping us rise to be the human beings that God intended.

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## A Taste of Torah

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

With the threat of fratricide hanging over his head and in light of his parents' wish, Jacob makes a quick exit from Beersheba and heads toward Haran, where he will presumably find a loving and loyal wife. As Jacob's journey ensues, a cryptic episode unfolds at the beginning of our parashah. Torah narrates, “Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set” (Gen. 28:10–11). Jacob prepares his makeshift bed in the wilderness and dreams of angels ascending and descending a mystical ladder. Gordon Wenham writes,

Other biblical stories of travelers overtaken by nightfall tell of them being put up for the night by people living in the area. That Jacob is forced to bed down under the stars may suggest his distance from human habitation, or his estrangement, or simply affirm that providence overruled the traditional custom of finding lodging in someone's house. (Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, 221)

Is there another perspective on Jacob's wilderness encampment?

Genesis Rabbah 68:10, a collection of midrash on the book of Genesis, relates,

“For the sun had set”—read that God extinguished the sun; that is, God caused the sun to set prematurely, so that God might speak with Jacob in privacy. God's action may be understood by the parable of the king's admirer who visited him occasionally. The king would command, “Extinguish the lamps, extinguish the candles and lanterns—for I wish to speak with my friend in secret.”

While Wenham spells out a *query* of the circumstances under which Jacob falls into his deep sleep, the midrash hints at a deep and insightful *answer*: shelter is not provided for the patriarch because God wishes to be the one to protect and communicate with Jacob. According to Genesis Rabbah, God is setting the stage for a personal tête-à-tête with Jacob—a meeting that can only unfold under the curtain of secrecy and darkness. Indeed, the midrash goes even deeper: it speaks to the closeness and intimacy of the relationship between God and Jacob. The message being communicated to the servant must be delivered in the confines of a closed space, and so a sacred place and appointed time are chosen for the revelation that Jacob receives. The setting is the wilderness. Stripped of distraction, here Jacob can now focus on the divine.

So too is the case with us. To encounter God and sanctity in our lives, we must remove ourselves from the daily routine—to visit a sick friend or relative, to make time for learning or to show our solidarity with Israel. Removing ourselves from routine is not an inconvenience. It is an indispensable step toward encountering the Image of God.

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