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.

Shomer Yisra'el—The One Who Guards Israel

In the weekday liturgy, after the *'Amidah*, we find in the siddur a little-known sequence of prayer texts known as *tachanun* (supplications); it can be found in *Siddur Sim Shalom* of the Conservative Movement, pages 59 through 63. It is not difficult to detect some ambivalence about *tachanun*, for there is a long list of days on which it is to be omitted, including Shabbat and all Holy Days, and all days of celebration—even the birthdays of famous rabbis.

Many who attend Jewish services comment upon the lengthy array of fixed texts that are to be recited. We look to find depth and inspiration through understanding and the interpretation of meaning, and through the melodies that might be introduced by the hazzan or anyone else leading the prayers. But it is certainly true that the fixed prayers are long and can challenge the soul of even the most devoted among us.

So it is interesting to look at the guidance of Maimonides concerning *tachanun*:

> "Afterwards . . . one should be seated upon the ground and prostrate oneself, and offer whatever supplications one wishes" (Laws of Prayer 5:13)

No fixed text is prescribed by Maimonides for *tachanun*. He is addressing the challenge of finding space for private and spontaneous prayer in an increasingly fixed liturgical system. While there are traditional sources claiming that the text of the *'Amidah* was fixed by the (mythical) Men of the Great Assembly, it is agreed by historians that the text (but not the themes) of the blessings of the *'Amidah* was fluid through the 4th century and perhaps much later. Each person was free to improvise their own prayer, based upon predetermined themes; and, after the *'Amidah*, each person offered whatever personal supplications they wished. As early as the Mishnah we find

> Rabbi Eliezer teaches: "If you make your prayer a fixed unchanging task, it is not *Tachanunim*" (Mishnah Berakhot 4:4), [and is thereby significantly deficient.]

As the text of the *'Amidah* became fixed, the place of spontaneous prayer or supplication came to be immediately afterward, identified as *tachanun*. There is a not-so-subtle irony that, in the course of time, fixed texts have emerged even for *tachanun*, guiding us through psalms and reflections on the themes of sin and forgiveness. The instructions in various versions of the siddur certainly encourage private prayer, but the length of the now-fixed text is considerable.

Toward the end is a beautiful poem, *Shomer Yisra'el*, of unknown authorship (*Siddur Sim Shalom* 63), which turns to God as the Protector of Israel—the People who recite Shema' Yisra'el—and Protector of the Holy Nation who affirm (God's) sanctity three times each day. Poetry is rare in the (daily) siddur, and perhaps this short text is intended to inspire each person to add personal prayers, reflecting their own life, their own needs. *Tachanun* calls us to let our head fall into our arms, and to address ourselves, in all humility, to the divine.

For more information about JTS programs and events, or to learn more about JTS, please visit www.jtsa.edu.

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

JTS The Jewish Theological Seminary

Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yishlah
Genesis 32:4–36:43
December 1, 2012
17 Kislev 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Cantor Nancy Abramson, Director, H. L. Miller Cantorial School, JTS.

Assumptions and Appearances

Things are not always as they appear to be. And when assumptions are based on circumstantial or incomplete evidence, we are often surprised or disappointed by what unfolds. My son, who is traveling for a few months after graduating from college, shared this experience in his blog:

> I arrived at the nearby train station. I had told Polly (one of my hosts) over the phone that I'd arrive at 1:15 on the train. As I waited for my transfer, [my destination] appeared on the departures board as a picture of a bus. I looked around and saw other people heading outside the station and figured it couldn't hurt to follow them. Sure enough, my "train" was a bus. And when it arrived at the prearranged time—when Polly had said she would be there to pick me up—I found myself alone at the station.
>
> Well, almost alone. There was a woman, face barely visible beneath rings and chains of metal, sitting on a bench beside a young blonde girl, who, a few minutes [later] asked in French if I'd come on the train. Apparently I responded in French that I'd come on a bus, though this I don't remember; nor do I know how to conjugate that response. After a few more minutes, I got the idea, turned to them, and asked if they were waiting for me. In fact, they were. This literal "metal-head" was Polly, the British woman with whom I'd been corresponding, and the blonde was her very young-looking 19-year-old daughter, Summer Rose, whom I hadn't known to exist.

My son was confused by his assumptions and expectations. If one were to read Genesis simply as a work of literature, one could assume that a major leitmotif of the book is that appearances can be deceiving. Patriarchs introduce their wives as their sisters, brothers bring a bloodied coat to their father as evidence of death, and Jacob dons animal skins to secure his father's blessing.

In this week's parashah, Va-yishlah, the narrative begins with yet another story in which what is seen is misleading. Jacob prepares carefully for his meeting

with his estranged brother Esau. First, he sends messengers to Esau, who report that Esau is coming with an entourage of 400 men to meet Jacob. Jacob is frightened, because he is unable to decipher Esau's intent. He divides his camp in two and prays for God's assistance and protection.

The next morning, Jacob sends gifts to his brother as a tactic to lessen the hostility he assumes Esau feels toward him. The gifts are arranged in droves of goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys, each grouping presented on the heels of the preceding flock. The total number of animals offered as gifts is 550, a generous and impressive number, meant to incur Esau's favor. Even the Hebrew term *minhah*, used here to mean *gift*, encourages ambiguity. It can mean a gift of respect and friendship or an offering in recognition of the giver's lower status. Jacob's intent is to blur reality, and instill confusion in Esau's mind regarding his stature.

We know that the reunion of Jacob and Esau ends in reconciliation, but not before Jacob's solitary encounter with an angel. The night before meeting his brother, Jacob moves his family and entire camp across the Jabbok River, and remains alone on the bank nearest to Esau's approach route. He then wrestles with a "man" until the break of dawn. "*Vayivater Yaakov l'vado, vayeavek ish imo ad alot hashachar*." The meaning of the Hebrew verb *vayeavek* is unclear, and creates a play on the names Jacob and Jabbok. Rashi suggests that the verb is connected to both *avak* (dust) and *chavak* (to entangle). Are Jacob and the angel simply kicking up dust, or are they meaningfully entangled? Is the mysterious man an evil omen, meant to weaken Jacob before he meets his brother, or is this an instance of Jacob wrestling with his conscience? Jacob has never been what he seemed; his actions have all involved deceitful motivations. He tricked his father, he ran from Esau, and he snuck away from Laban's house. Many of Jacob's important acts involved misleading or incomplete motives.

The poem "To a Louse," penned in 1785 by the British poet Robert Burns, illustrates in verse the consequences of misreading a situation. In the poem, a louse crawls onto the bonnet of a beautiful young woman as she sits in church. She incorrectly believes that the winks and stares she receives from congregants are on account of her beauty and lovely hat. In the concluding stanza of the poem, Burns comments: "O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us!" If only we could see ourselves as others do, Burns writes. When we make assumptions based on our perceptions alone, we can easily mislead ourselves.

In the dead of night, before his encounter with Esau, Jacob is given the gift to see himself as God sees him. While the angel wounds Jacob physically and emotionally, the Torah tells us that, when Jacob arrives in Shechem following the encounter, he is wounded in his hip socket, but he is safe and whole (*shalem*) [Gen. 33:18], and he has a new name. He is no longer Jacob, the man of entanglement, but rather Israel, father of a great nation. It is only when Jacob is given the gift of honest struggle before God that he becomes Israel. He names the place of the wrestling contest Peniel, meaning "Face of God." The one face that Jacob cannot manipulate is that of God.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Torah Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

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

Angels of Peace

This week's parashah opens with the rising tension between Jacob and Esau. Having parted ways some 20 years earlier, these angst-ridden brothers are about to encounter each other once again. Jacob has successfully escaped from the shackles of Lavan's home, and as he approaches the Land of Israel, he hears that his brother Esau awaits with 400 men. Jacob is rightfully anxious about the imminent reunion. And so, as a means of appeasing his brother, Jacob begins a process of rapprochement. Our parashah opens: "Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom and instructed them as follows, 'Thus will you say, "To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Lavan . . . I have acquired cattles, asses, sheep . . . and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor"'" (Gen. 32:4). Who are the "messengers" (*mal'akhim*) that Jacob commissions? And how will they work toward bringing peace to the strained relationship of these brothers?

Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator writes that Jacob did not send just any messengers to his brother Esau, but indeed he commissioned real *mal'akhim* (angels), to engage in this task. Rashi reads the word *mal'akhim* literally, not in its sense of *messengers* but rather in meaning *angels*. Embracing this powerful and poetic commentary, Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen writes,

> This comes to teach us that if one truly wants to achieve peace, one cannot rely on routine emissaries. Such people have their own interests at heart and they are liable to fuel the fire rather than bring peace. For the achievement of peace, one needs to rely on angels commissioned from above. For they are truly lacking in jealousy, contempt and petty competition." (HaCohen, *Likrat Shabbat* [in Hebrew], 36)

Although it is nearly impossible to find such angelic emissaries in this world, bitter conflicts require that we go the extra mile. Shmuel Avidor HaCohen is correct in citing self-interests as the culprit in perpetuating conflict. Angelic personalities, if not angelic beings, are capable of changing the world for the better. One cannot help but think of the conclusion of last week's confrontation in Israel. Angels arrived in the personalities of diplomats scurrying to bring about a cease-fire. And, thankfully, they succeeded.

As we enter the coming Shabbat, we hope and pray that Israel's South, like our ancestor Jacob, will merit dwelling in peace. Once Jacob parts ways from Esau, there is a sense of relative calm. May such calm envelop the State of Israel and the entire Jewish world now and for many years to come.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.