

Tze U'Imad—Go and Learn

Weekly Talmud Learning with Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz, director of admissions, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קמח עמוד א
משנה. שואל אדם מחבירו כדי יין וכדי שמן ובלבד שלא יאמר לו הלויני. וכן האשה מחבירתה ככרות.

גמרא. אמר ליה רבא בר רב חנן לאביי: מאי שנא השאילני ומאי שנא הלויני?
אמר ליה: השאילני - לא אתי למיכתב, הלויני - אתי למיכתב.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 148a

Mishnah: A person may borrow bottles of wine or oil [on Shabbat], so long as he does not say to the lender, "Loan me . . ." This is also the case with a woman who borrows loaves of bread from her neighbor [on Shabbat].

Talmud: Rava b. Rav Hanan said to Abbaye, "What's the difference [if he says] 'Lend me...' or 'Loan me?'" [Abbaye] said to him, "[If he says,] 'Lend me . . .' [the lender] will not write down [the debt.] [If he says,] 'Loan me . . .' [the lender] will write down [the debt]."

Another type of behavior that our Sages proscribed on Shabbat includes acts that may lead to Torah prohibitions. For example, we have seen that writing two letters (or a single word) is seen by the Mishnah as a Torah prohibition. Our Sages inherited a non-Torah prohibition on transacting business over Shabbat, lest one record the transaction in a ledger. (The prohibition on business can already be found in the Prophets and Writings. See for example, Isaiah 58:13, Amos 8:5, and Nehemiah 10:32.) However, our Sages remained aware that this prohibition was not of the same magnitude as Torah prohibitions and treated it with leniency.

In the above source we see examples of cases in which a kind of transaction is allowed by our Sages on Shabbat in order to further the pleasures of Shabbat. If one runs out of wine or challah or other food on Shabbat, or simply has forgotten to prepare these things before Shabbat, what can one do? One might look at any acquisition of foodstuffs as a transaction and simply forbid it. Our Sages did not take this approach. They made a distinction between formal and informal transactions. The former usually involves writing, the latter does not. Our Sages allow us to informally borrow the needed items to enhance our experience of Shabbat.

But how do we determine when the transaction is informal and friendly, and when it is formal and businesslike? Our Sages focused (I think, wisely) on the words spoken by the two parties engaged in the transaction. The words we use define the nature of our relationships and transactions in life. We negotiate our way in the world through the words we use. May we all use our words wisely on Shabbat and during the week.

Questions:

1. Do you agree with our Sages' lend/loan distinction here? Why or why not?
2. How can we use the discipline of Shabbat to help us gain more control over the words we use?

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



Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yishlah

Genesis 32:4–36:43

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16 Kislev 5769

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, vice-chancellor and chief development officer, JTS.

This past Sunday, the *New York Times* ran an article on praying for “God’s bailout.” Accompanying the article was an image of hundreds of worshipers gathered at the Greater Grace Temple in Detroit praying for the miraculous resolution to the imminent bankruptcy of the auto industry. Gripping much of the country and the world, this recession is particularly impacting the communities of metropolitan Detroit—autoworkers, executives, and salespeople alike. All find themselves searching, through whatever inspiration and revelation possible, for an end to the financial crisis. As the article reported, “While Congress debated aid to the foundering Detroit automakers Sunday, many here whose future hinges on the decision turned to prayer” (*New York Times*, December 7, 2008, “Detroit Churches Pray for ‘God’s Bailout’”). Delivering a sermon entitled, “A Hybrid of Hope,” Bishop Ellis of the Grater Grace Temple said to his congregants, “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but we need prayer. When it’s all said and done, we’re all in this thing together.”

The article went on to quote religious leaders and congregants, all professing their belief in the power of prayer, and I have to admit that I found it somewhat challenging to read. The prayer the article was speaking about was not one that I am familiar with, not one that I practice on a regular basis. In Judaism, we are often most comfortable with prayer that is fixed, set in black type on the pages of our siddurim. Using prayer as the medium to express our deep, personal feelings, inadequacies, fears, thoughts, beliefs, and desires may be something we hear about from a rabbi or cantor in shul, but doing so in a public forum and sharing it with our neighbors isn’t something you usually see at the local synagogue.

While self-expression through personal prayer isn’t something modern Judaism has embraced, it is easy to find moving occurrences of it throughout our history. With Parashat Va-yishlah this week, we encounter Jacob, who uses prayer as the very intimate medium for communicating his personal feelings to God, himself, and his community throughout his narrative.

This week, as Jacob prepares for what he can imagine will only be a contentious

reunion with his brother, his messengers return to deliver the news that Esau is coming personally to meet him. In response, Jacob makes all the necessary logistical precautions to secure his family and possessions and then prays,

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, "Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you!" I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet You have said, "I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count." (Gen. 32:10-13)

What an incredible scene and expression of fear, vulnerability, and faith! We can feel the tension and almost taste the tears. Imagine Jacob standing and looking at his extended family as they cross the banks of the Jordan to safety, all the while imaging the worst fate at the hands of his brother. What more could he do? How else could he prepare for this moment? All that remains is for his soul to call out to God in a genuine expression of hope.

We need not look all the way back to the Tanakh for other expressions, though. The visceral need for self-expressive prayer outside the covers of our siddurim has been present within Judaism for millennia. Most famous of these are the short prayers that the rabbis of the Talmud recited on completing the *'Amidah*, but even these have been codified in our prayer books.

Aliza Lavie, a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Bar-Ilan University, and a faculty member at JTS's Rabbinic Training Institute this coming January, covers these centuries of prayer in her new book, *A Jewish Women's Prayer Book*. Inspired by a moving interview of a mother who had lost her baby daughter in a terrorist attack in Israel, Lavie sought to find the voice of prayer that would "convey the strength and fortitude" of women throughout Jewish history and offer words of comfort through meaningful prayer (Lavie, xviii). Her almost encyclopedic collection of women's prayer reveals an evocative dialogue between women and God not only because they are sharing words not found in our siddurim, but also because she uncovers a voice that has itself been underrepresented in the codified world of Jewish text. When her book was originally published in Israel, it became a best seller, touching both religious and secular readers. Now in English translation, it will find an even greater audience.

Her historical walk through women's prayer touches many times in a woman's life that have been left without either an accompanying expression of prayer or a personal contextualization—issues with fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, welcoming Shabbat and festivals, and times of crisis. In each prayer we find simmering to the surface many of the same feelings we heard in Jacob's. Although the catalyst may be different, the emotions are familiar.

The exposure to this rush of emotion and deep relationship with God makes me want to search for my personal "prayer voice"—and connect to God in the way that Jacob and subsequent generations have. In this challenging time, may we find the comfort we need—and maybe can only find—through prayer.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Genesis 33:10–11 "But Jacob said [to Esau], "No, I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please accept my blessing which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty."

Ramban "Please accept my blessing"—In other words, the gift . . . They called a gift which one sends of one's own free will "a blessing" because it is sent from that which God has bestowed or blessed . . . However, a specific gift of that which has been agreed upon as due the king is called a tribute.

Parashat Va-yishlah witnesses the reconciliation between two brothers who had parted ways some twenty years earlier. Scarred by the pain of losing his father Isaac's blessing to his younger brother, Esau vows to kill Jacob in retaliation. Given this mortal threat, Jacob is urged to journey to Haran to find himself a bride and a future. Twenty years pass and Jacob begins a long road back home with his two wives, many children, and great wealth. Hearing that his brother is approaching with some 400 men, Jacob fears the worst. He divides the family, wrestles with a mysterious assailant, undergoes a name change, and, in the end, confronts a brother that is all-too excited and conciliatory when standing in Jacob's presence. Wisely, Jacob does everything he can to appease Esau and even employs powerful language in his own gesture of conciliation. Rather than asking Esau to accept a *minhah*, or *offering*, Jacob uses the language of *berakhah*, or *blessing*. The intent is the same—in conveying the notion of a gift. But the nuanced language is dramatic in recalling the blessing that Jacob stole many years before—giving us the impression that Jacob is now making amends and in some sense returning the blessing to its rightful owner. Ramban, however, gives us an alternative reading.

In thinking about this idea of a gift conveyed through the word *berakhah* or *blessing*, Ramban adds a rich dimension. He argues that Jacob's use of this word for gift reflects the thinking of a theologically sophisticated patriarch. Jacob, it appears, has matured in the time he has spent dwelling in his uncle Lavan's home. And he recognizes that all that he travels with now is ultimately a blessing from God. And so, even though it is he who literally offers the gift to his brother, he realizes that the gift has its origins in God's good graces. Were it not for God shining the Divine countenance upon Jacob, he would never have come to this point. Jacob, in a moment of recognition of the Divine, gives from his pocket but makes a profound statement of humility.

In this year of great economic turmoil and uncertainty, we must pay careful attention to the lesson Ramban teaches us. We need to appreciate each and every blessing in our hands and more than that, we must recognize the Divine source of that blessing. We must continue to hold our financial accomplishments with open hands—that is to say, hands that are open to giving, open to healing, and open to building bridges to a more hopeful future.

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