

Between the Lines

Insights from Midrash with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Genesis Rabbah 60:14

ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה לפנות ערב אין שיחה אלא תפלה שנאמר (תהלים קב) תפלה לעני
כי יעטוף ולפני ה' ישפוך שיחו וכן הוא אומר (שם נה) ערב ובוקר וצהרים אשיחה וגו'

And Isaac went out 'la-suach' in the field toward evening . . . (Gen. 24:63): By 'sichah,' prayer is meant, as it says, A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours out his plea before Hashem (Psalm 102:1); and thus too it says, Evening, morning, and noon, I plead and moan . . . (Psalm 55:18).

Uncertainty presents one of the greatest psychological challenges we face in life. The ancient Rabbis addressed ambiguities in the Torah and in life by seeking wisdom from connections between those worlds. This midrash reveals how they understood prayer as a cathartic response to the travails that test our faith and how such an outpouring can transform our reality.

The infinitive verb *la-suach* appears only once in the entire Hebrew Bible, and even today scholars debate how exactly to translate it. While some contend that it means “to walk,” others (such as the anonymous Sage behind this midrash) suggest that it means “to meditate,” basing their opinions on inferences from similar terms found in devotional contexts such as those quoted above. Combining those two definitions offers insight into this Rabbinic view of Isaac’s plight and ours.

Isaac went out walking/meditating literally at dusk and figuratively towards darkness. After meeting Rebekah there, the Torah notes that “he found comfort after his mother’s death” (Gen. 24:67). Whether or not Isaac entered the open space of “the field” seeking consolation, he meets his beloved in that place and returns with her to begin their new life together. As a result of the physical and spiritual act of leaving a place of mourning, Isaac has an encounter that changes the course of his life. That explanation, though, lacks the drama that the verses from Psalms add to this Rabbinic interpretation.

In searching the entire Tanakh for terms similar to *la-suach*, the Sage who composed this midrash chose the two instances in which *sichah* refers to a plea for help and for deliverance from crisis. This midrash, however, does not quote key parts of those parallel texts, perhaps in order to invite the reader to look more closely at what they describe.

Each psalm depicts the wrenching cries of a desperate soul whom God protects from mortal danger. Verses 2–3 of Psalm 102 illustrate the lament of one who is feeling God’s great distance: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry reach you. Do not hide your face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call.” The subsequent passage demonstrates the efficacy of such a plea: “As for me, I will call upon God; and Hashem will save me . . . He has saved my soul in peace from the battle that was against me” (Ps. 55:17, 19).

With this expanded reading of Isaac’s walking/meditation, the episode of meeting Rebekah in the field at dusk becomes one paradigm for the rabbinic understanding of prayer. I present this interpretation as a rabbi living in the twenty-first century, knowing full well that God did not answer the prayers of parents whose children I watched die. I present this interpretation not because I believe God responds with a “yes” to every request uttered but because I have felt God’s embrace when I have summoned the strength to cry in moments of agonizing pain. And from paralysis and deepest fear, I emerged. Thank God!

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

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



Torah from JTS

Parashat Hayyei Sarah

Genesis 23:1–25:18

November 14, 2009

27 Heshvan 5770

Parashah Commentary

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

Oh, if the atheists read the Torah! During this week’s parashah, we encounter a text that could have been fodder for the atheist argument against prayer. Shortly before his death, Abraham calls his senior servant for one last assignment. The servant is to return to Abraham’s homeland to find a fitting wife for Isaac, and, after swearing that Abraham’s bidding will be done, he sets off.

As he arrives in Abraham’s homeland, the servant prays to God:

O Lord, God of my master, Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, “Please lower your jar that I may drink, and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.” (Genesis 24:12–14)

The servant’s prayer is essentially the gambler’s prayer: he prays for luck. He is asking for God to preordain events, to intentionally set the stage and direct the future.

Richard Dawkins, possibly one of the most vocal atheists out there, takes issue with religion functioning this way. The chapter of his book *The God Delusion* devoted to prayer focuses on an April 2006 article in *American Heart Journal* reporting on a study that tracked 1,802 patients who received coronary bypass surgery and the role that intercessory prayer played in their recovery. These patients’ names were distributed to churchgoers across the country who were told to pray for the patients’ recovery. The study found that not only did prayer not play a role in the recovery process, but patients who knew they were being prayed for actually had a higher rate of complications. To Dawkins this is damning evidence for religion—we might as well blaspheme God and live our lives as atheists.

While Abraham’s servant leaves everything to the grace of God, his prayer is not unfounded. Commenting on this verse, Abraham Ibn Ezra reframes the “luck” the servant prays for by stating, “*Cause good fortune*: in the sense of God arranging that it should happen” (24:12). Here, the servant is asking not for good fortune, but for God to actually arrange the meeting with Isaac’s future wife.

Divine intervention in human affairs surfaces throughout Judaism, most notably in the Talmud tractate of Berakhot where we read, "Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven" (32b). In Dawkins's world, this statement is blasphemy. God does not dictate our actions—Dawkins's rhetoric would even go so far as to state that evils of the world (and in many of those cases evils in the name of religion) prove that God cannot dictate our actions. But this understanding neglects the nuanced history of this text and Judaism in general.

With all its depth of difficulty, "Everything is in the hands of heaven" has not been disregarded. Throughout rabbinic literature, great thinkers have grappled with the idea of God's omnipotence.

Moses ben Maimonides, for one, could not accept a world in which God dictated the future. He, like the vast majority of us, recognized our active role in our own future and considered our only recourse to be this interpretation of this excerpt from the Talmud. In his book *The Eight Chapters*, Maimonides wrote that when our Sages said that *everything* was in the hands of heaven, it referred to our physical characteristics (eye color, height, etc.) and those of the natural world. These attributes are in the hands of heaven. Everything else—every action we undertake, every thought we have, everything we do—is motivated by "the fear of heaven." What previously seemed to be a limiting term is, as Rambam can only understand it in our world, all-encompassing of our actions.

With Rambam's interpretation of the Talmudic passage, our understanding of God's role changes, but Abraham's servant seems to be left muttering in the desert. How do we understand the servant's prayer in a world where we believe that God cannot define the future?

Prayer in its many forms is an essential element of Judaism, but for many modern people it is difficult to find religious expression in traditional prayers. Discovering meaning in prayer—both our own and Abraham's servant's—demands interpretation. Prayer needs meaning beyond the words, and meaningful prayer requires an understanding of our need for prayer. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

Prayer is our attachment to the utmost. Without God in sight, we are like the scattered rungs of a broken ladder. To pray is to become a ladder on which thoughts mount to God to join the movement toward God which surges unnoticed throughout the entire universe. (*Man's Quest for God*, 7)

Prayer, then, is a moment to recognize our connection to the divine; to connect the rungs of the ladder and remember that we have a purpose larger than our current task.

At this point on his journey, when we hear his prayer, Abraham's servant has been forced to face the difficulty of his chore. It was not only finding a wife for Isaac, but also straying from the safety of Abraham's tent, encountering the outside world. It was then that prayer became of utmost importance. He needed to reconnect himself to the importance of his charge. This search was of divine importance and, "without God in sight," he recounted what he needed to make happen.

Dawkins's attack on religion would have been critical if he wrote during an age when our conception of religion had no depth—if we relied solely on the God of the Bible and were bereft of interpretation. Our ability to interpret the sacred has and will continue to keep skeptical believers working to ensure that the "movement toward God" doesn't surge unnoticed—maybe even by Dawkins.

The publication and distribution of the JTS 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

Genesis 24:13–14 Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, "Please, lower your jar that I may drink," and who replies, "Drink, and I will also water your camels"—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac.

Joseph B'khor Shor, "Here I stand by the spring," That is to say, "Behold, I will delay and wait by this spring of water and I will not go into the city itself. For one who wants to marry a woman must check three qualities: that she is beautiful, 'of good lineage,' and pleasant in her ways and loving with all of God's creations. Beauty can immediately be seen with one's eyes; 'lineage' can be checked by asking friends and relatives, but how will I learn if she is pleasant and loving? If I go into the city and stay in someone's home, and the young woman takes care of me: perhaps she was commanded to do so by her mother and father, and it is not out of her own heart and soul that she does it. And if she doesn't tend to me, maybe it is because of her modesty, and so it is impossible to check this quality in one's home. Therefore, I will be patient and wait here because here, whatever she does is done out of the goodness of her own soul and not because her parents are looking over [her] shoulder."

As Abraham nears the end of his days, he focuses on the future of his family. The patriarch lovingly turns to his chief servant (possibly Eliezer), asks him to take an oath, and sends him back to the "old country" to find a wife for his beloved son Isaac. Abraham is deeply concerned about endogamy—that Isaac's partner will be from his own people and not from one of the Canaanite nations among whom Abraham now resides. The servant, loyal to his oath, journeys back to the city of Nahor in Aram Naharaim and rather than enter the settlement to find a wife for Isaac, decides that he will tarry on the outskirts and wait for an appropriate match to approach him. What underlies the strategy of Abraham's servant?

Joseph B'khor Shor deciphers the servant's strategy, albeit through a very traditional worldview. The B'khor Shor delves into the servant's thinking, beginning with the premise that when one looks for a wife, three qualities are central: beauty, "connectedness," and loving-kindness. While the first two qualities are relatively easy to ascertain by sight and minimal research, the third quality is far more difficult. Joseph B'khor Shor portrays the servant's decision to stand by the well as a means of providing an important test of the potential mate's loving-kindness. By placing one's self in a public place where, typically, people meet and animals are cared for, the servant can objectively observe how people behave—free of other constraints.

What is so insightful about B'khor Shor's commentary is the extent to which he underscores external factors that motivate behavior. Many times, parental expectations and pressures or societal mores motivate us to a certain behavior that fails to reflect the true self. By placing himself in a kind of no-man's-land, Abraham's servant proves himself astutely sensitive and observant. One must observe how another behaves out in the world—not just in their home or hometown—in order to truly grasp his or her essence. The B'khor Shor gives us important food for thought—in terms of both the way we think of qualities we consider important in our partners and how we assess those traits in real life.

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