

Isaac and Prayer

One scene in this week's *sedra* has left a mark on Jewish law. Abraham has sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. He finds Rebecca, and brings her back with him. The first glimpse she has of her future husband is significant. Isaac has 'gone out into the field towards evening to meditate.' It is a fitting image.

Isaac is the quiet figure among the heroes of Tanach. Jacob and Moses meet their future wives at a well, where they perform acts of courage and kindness. In the case of Isaac, it is Rebecca who does the act of kindness at the well — and Isaac himself is not even there. Instead it is his father's servant who has been sent to find her.

Isaac is withdrawn, inward, introspective. In their marriage it is more often Rebecca who is the active partner. Meditating in a field — that is Isaac's characteristic gesture. He is a man of complex psychology. How could he not be? Bound and almost killed as a child, one can only guess at the mark that moment left on his soul. The result (since the Torah usually gives us only oblique hints about people's inner feelings) is that he is curiously opaque. We know less about him than almost any other personality in Bereishit.

The Talmud, more concerned with *halachah* than psychology, draws its own inference from the verse. Isaac's 'meditation' was a prayer. 'Towards evening' means afternoon. If Isaac's behaviour had normative implications, it meant that he instituted Minchah, the afternoon prayer. What is the connection between the patriarchs and prayer?

The Talmud records a famous disagreement among the Sages as to the origin of the three daily prayers. Were they a substitute for the sacrifices that once took place in the Temple? Or did their origins go further back into Israel's past?

It has been stated: Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina said, 'The prayers were instituted by the patriarchs.' Rabbi Joshua son of Levi said: 'The prayers were instituted to replace the daily sacrifices.'

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina, and it has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Joshua son of Levi.

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina: Abraham instituted the morning prayer, as it says, "And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood", and "standing" means prayer, as it says, "Then Pinchas stood up and prayed."

Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, as it says, "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field towards evening," and "meditation" means prayer, as it says, "A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his meditation before the Lord."

Jacob instituted the evening prayer, as it says, "And he encountered [*vayifga*] a place, and *pegia* means prayer, as it says, "Therefore do not pray for this people nor lift up prayer or cry for them, nor make intercession [*tifga*] to Me."

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Joshua son of Levi: Why did they say that the morning prayer could be said until midday? Because the regular morning sacrifice could be brought until midday. Rabbi Judah, however, says that it may be said up to the fourth hour because the regular morning sacrifice may be brought until the fourth hour.

And why did they say that the afternoon prayer can be said until the evening? Because the regular afternoon offering could be brought until the evening. Rabbi Judah however says that it can be said only up to the middle of the afternoon, because the afternoon offering could only be brought up to the middle of the afternoon.

And why did they say that for the evening prayer there is no limit? Because the limbs and fat that were not consumed on the altar by the evening could be brought during the whole of the night.

More is at stake in this disagreement than halachah and history. At issue is the very nature of prayer itself.

There were two distinct spiritual traditions in biblical Judaism. On the one hand were the patriarchs and prophets. They were, if one can put it this way, ordinary people with extraordinary gifts — the gift above all of being able to speak and listen to the voice of God. The patriarchs were shepherds. So too was Moses. They wore no robes of office. They lived far from the cities of their time. Alone — away from the



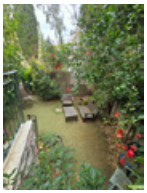
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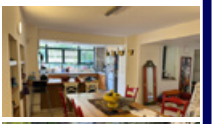
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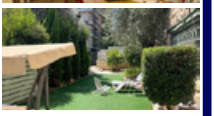






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noise of urban civilisation — they heard and heeded God's word. They prayed as the situation demanded. No two prayers were the same. They spoke from the depths of their being to the One who is the depth of all Being. That is patriarchal and prophetic prayer.

There was another type of religious personality: the priest. He *did* have special robes of office. He was a "holy man", set apart from others (this is the root meaning of *kadosh*, 'holy', in Judaism). For him, *avodah*, Divine 'service', primarily meant the offering of a sacrifice. Everything about the sacrifices was subject to detailed prescriptive rules. The *temidim* or regular sacrifices had their own time (morning and afternoon), their own place (the Sanctuary, later the Temple), and their own precisely defined ritual, never varying, always the same.

Spontaneity, essential to the prophet, is disastrous for the priest. Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, seized by the mood of the moment, made their own offering at the inauguration of the Sanctuary, and died as a result. If the prophet represents the "now" of the religious life, the priest represents eternity. They speak to different aspects of the soul, and different needs of society. Without spontaneity, the spirit withers; without structure, it lapses into chaos. Without prophets, the faith of Israel would have grown old; without priests, it would never have been able to become the code of a nation.

The question at issue between Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Joshua son of Levi was therefore: to which of these traditions did prayer belong? To the patriarchs or the priests? To supplication or sacrifice? To the personal dialogue of the soul or the collective worship of the nation?

One of the most remarkable and little noted facts about Judaism is that to this day we maintain both practices — because we say each Amidah (standing prayer) twice: once privately and silently as individuals, and then a second time publicly and collectively as a community (the "Reader's Repetition"). The silent prayer belongs to the world of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Rachel and Hannah — it is private, personal and can include (within certain halachic parameters) individualised requests. The Reader's Repetition follows the logic of the sacrifices (which is why there is no repetition in the case of Maariv, the evening service, because there was no nighttime sacrifice in the Temple). We thus preserve both the patriarchal and priestly traditions.

Equally significant is the different character of the prayers — due to the different personalities and histories of the patriarchs.

My predecessor, the late Lord Jacobovits of blessed memory, used to point out that the position of the sun at the various stages of the day mirrored that of the patriarchs themselves. In the morning, the sun is in the east — and Abraham began his life in the east, in Ur of the Chaldees, namely Mesopotamia. In the early afternoon, the sun is overhead in the middle of the sky — reminding us of Isaac who spent his entire life within the land of Canaan, later to become Israel. In the evening the sun is in the west, as was Jacob who ended his life in the west, in exile in Egypt.

The characteristic mood of the different times of the day is also reflected in the lives

of the three fathers. Abraham is morning: the dawn of a new faith. It was he who broke his father's idols, recognising the inner contradictions of polytheism and paganism. His religious career began with a journey away from home, from his birthplace, and his father's house, to a new and unknown destination. Abraham represents beginning — a new chapter in the religious history of humankind.

Isaac is afternoon. There is nothing spectacular about the afternoon; there is no qualitative change from dark to light or day to night. Instead there is a slow transition, an almost imperceptible shift. Isaac is the bridge between day and night, and between the lives of Abraham and Jacob, both fraught with drama. His own life is relatively uneventful and passive. He is not the prime mover of events. Yet without a bridge we cannot cross from one domain to another. If Abraham is the iconoclast, Isaac represents the quiet courage of continuity, without which the entire project of the covenant would die.

Jacob is night. He sees his great vision of the ladder and angels at night. He struggles with an unknown adversary at night. He ends his days in exile, at the beginning of the long, dark night of slavery. Jacob's great strength is that he does not let go. He is born holding his brother's heel. He refuses to let go of the stranger wrestling with him. If Abraham is originality and Isaac continuity, then Jacob represents tenacity.

The verbs associated with each are also different. Abraham 'rises early in the morning' and 'stands'. When it comes to prayer, he is the initiator. Acknowledging that he is "but dust and ashes," he nonetheless utters the most audacious prayer of all

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time: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" That is prayer as *amidah*.

Jacob, by contrast, 'encounters'. It is not he who seeks God on his flight from home but God who seeks him. The phrase the Torah uses just before Jacob has his vision of the angelic ladder is *vayifga ba-makom*, which in rabbinic Hebrew could be read to mean, 'He bumped into God.' There are spiritual experiences we have when we are least expecting them — when we are alone, afraid, thinking of something else altogether. That was Jacob's vision of prayer. Not everything in the life of the spirit is under our control. The great transformative experiences — love, a sudden sense of beauty, an upsurge of happiness — happen unpredictably and leave us, in Wordsworth's famous phrase, 'surprised by joy'. The glory of Jacob's epiphany is that it happened at night, in the midst of fear and flight. That is prayer as *pegiah*.

There is a third kind of prayer. Isaac is 'meditating' in the field — but the word *sichah* in modern Hebrew means not only meditation but also, and primarily, conversation. When the Talmud says, in the context of Isaac, *ein sichah ela tefillah*, we could translate this phrase as "conversation is a form of prayer" — and in a profound sense it is so. Prayer is a conversation (between heaven and earth). But conversation is also a prayer — for in true conversation, I open myself up to the reality of another person. I enter his or her world. I begin to see things from a perspective not my own. In the touch of two selves, both are changed.

A genuine human conversation is therefore a preparation for, and a microcosmic version of, the act of prayer. For in prayer I attend to the presence of God, listening as well as speaking, opening myself up to a reality other and infinitely vaster than my own, and I become a different person as a result. Prayer is not monologue but dialogue. Before every Amidah we say, "O God open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise." In a real sense, therefore, in prayer we do not simply speak; we are also spoken to and through. God — and the traditions of Jewish faith — speak through us. The very words we use are not our own but those of thousands of years of our people's history as they encountered God and articulated their response. Prayer is like an electrical connection. While it lasts, we become a channel through which the energy of the universe (creation) and Jewish history (redemption) flows, and which we make our own. That is prayer as *sichah*.

Thus there are three modes of spirituality and we experience each in the course of a single day. There is the human quest (Abraham, morning prayer), the Divine encounter (Jacob, evening prayer), and the dialogue (Isaac, afternoon). That is how three events in the life of the patriarchs – Abraham's early rise, Isaac's meditation in a field, and Jacob's vision at night — became not just events in the past but permanent possibilities for us who follow in their footsteps, guided by their precedent, lifted by their example, enlarged by their spirit, summoned to their heights. ■

Rabbi Sacks zt"l was the Former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. These weekly teachings are part of his 'Covenant & Conversation' series on the weekly Torah teaching. With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. Visit www.RabbiSacks.org for more.