

# *Torah Table Talk – Iyun Tefillah*

## **Recalling Sacred History**

### **as Prayer and Praise**

*Parshat Lech Lecha*, Genesis 12:1-17:27

**Torah Table Talk is sponsored by Silvia and Steve Levy  
In honor of the marriage of Julie Levy and Matthew Liff**

#### **I. Introduction**

I have a confession to make. I talk too much when I am sitting in synagogue. This is particularly true during *P'sukei D'zimra*, the preliminary service. When I reach the *Sh'ma* and the Amida I concentrate more intently but it is hard to do so at the beginning of services. When you're sitting next to a friend (or the synagogue president) it's hard not to chat. I suspect that if I were sitting in the Oval Office in the White House, I would be too nervous to carry on a conversation with my neighbor. Why don't I feel the same about *Melekh HaOlam*, sovereign of the universe? Few of us, however, are that serious about prayer.

Part of the problem is one of language - how can you concentrate on your words when you don't understand what it is you are saying? And part of the problem is theological - we are uncertain how we feel about prayer. Whether or not we have mastered the Hebrew language, it is helpful to understand the dynamics behind our prayers. What is it we are doing when we pray? How does the liturgy work? How can we translate the words of the prayer book into a meaningful relationship with God?

This week I have chosen a passage from *P'sukei D'Zimra*, the preliminary service - one that we might not even take note of. It contains a summation of the Torah, from creation through the splitting of the Red Sea. It is taken from one of the more obscure books of the Bible: Nehemiah. By looking more closely at it, I believe we can learn what it is we try to accomplish by reciting *P'sukei D'Zimra* each morning.

You alone are Adonai. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all they contain. You give life to them all, and the hosts of heaven worship You.

You are Adonai, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur Kasdim, changing his name to Abraham. You found his heart faithful toward You, and You made a covenant with him to give his descendents the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Girgashites. You fulfilled your promise for You are righteous. You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt. You heard their cry at the Sea of Reeds. You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, all his servants and all the people of the land, because You knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You created for Yourself renown that remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but You cast the pursuers into the depths, like a stone into the mighty waters. (*Nehemiah 9:6-11*)

#### **Sources and Reflections**

##### **1) Connection to the Parshah**

- Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur Kasdim...Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai and they set out together from Ur Kasdim for the land of Caanan but when they came as far as Charan, they settled there. (*Genesis 11:27-32*)
- Then He said to him: "I am the Adonai who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to assign this land to you as a possession..." On that day Adonai made a covenant with Abram saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenite, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites... (*Genesis 15:7, 18*)
- When Abram was 99 years old, Adonai appeared to Abram and said to him: "Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you and I will make you exceedingly

numerous...And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you a father of a multitude of nations...." (*Genesis 17:1, 5*)

## 2) **Context**

The passage from Nehemiah quoted above is part of *Psukei D'Zimra*, literally, "Verses of Song." Rabbis often refer to this part of the morning liturgy as "the preliminary service;" it allows the davenner to 'get into the zone' for prayer by reciting psalms and other biblical passages. *Psukei D'Zimra* is a little like the opening act at a rock concert that gets the audience psyched before the star performers take the stage. The recitation of the *Sh'ma* and the *Amida* are the heart of the morning liturgy. *P'sukei D'Zimra* are preparatory meditations that allow the davenner to recite these central prayers in the liturgy with sufficient concentration. The core of *Psukei D'Zimra* is an opening blessing (*Baruch Sh'amar*), the last six passages in the Book of Psalms (Psalms 145-150), and a concluding blessing (*yishtabach*). In addition, several other biblical passages were added to *Psukei D'Zimra* including the passage from the Book of Nehemiah above.

## 3) **Content**

The passage from Nehemiah presents the biblical history in brief. Few people read this book of the Bible so it is interesting that they are quoted here. The passage begins with a celebration of God as creator: "You alone are Adonai. You made the heavens...the earth and all that is on it..." It then speaks of God's covenant with Abram (who becomes Abraham) and God's promise to assign the land of Canaan to his offspring. It concludes by mentioning Israelite bondage in Egypt and redemption at the Sea of Reeds. Though slightly different in Genesis, this week's Torah portion and the passage from Nehemiah closely parallel one another.

## 4) **Concepts**

Psalms 145-150 are more generic in their praise of God; they do not focus on Israel's historic experience. The passage from Nehemiah serves to bridge the sense of wonder expressed in Psalms with our unique historic experience as God's covenanted people.

These passages celebrate our sacred history. It is worth noting that the passage from Nehemiah and the song at the Sea which follows it in the liturgy (Exodus 15) were not part of the original liturgy but were added at some later date. The earliest version of the *Siddur* was edited by the Babylonia rabbi, Amram Gaon, in the ninth century CE. It includes the passage prior to the Nehemiah passage from Chronicles: "David praised Adonai in the presence of the assembled. (*vayivarekh david*)" Rabbi Amram's *Siddur* does not continue with Nehemiah or the Song at the Sea (*az yashir*). These two passages add a uniquely 'Jewish' element to *Psukei D'Zimra* and set the tone for the rest of the Shacharit service.

## 5) **Halachah L'Ma'aseh: Applying Law to Life**

**Shulchan Aruch 51:4** One must be careful \*to avoid interrupting his prayer with speech from when he begins saying *Baruch S'amar* until he reaches the end of the *Amida* prayer. Even for the sake of a mitzvah one should not speak in between *Baruch Sh'amar* and *Yishtabach*.

**51:5** In between the psalms which constitute the song verses, one should greet a person out of respect and return a greeting to everyone. In the middle of a psalm one may greet a person out of fear and return a greeting out of respect.

*\*Mishnah Berurah Be careful. This is because Baruch Sh'amar is a prior-blessing to the song verses and Yishtabach is an after- blessing to them. Between the blessing Yishtabach and the blessing Yotzer (the blessing immediately after the Borchu) it is of course forbidden to make an interruption....and from Yotzer onwards one may not interrupt, because he is engaged in saying the blessings of Keriat Shema.*

**Commentary** The *Shulchan Aruch* is the primary code of Jewish law written by Joseph Karo in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the *Mishnah Berurah* is a 19<sup>th</sup> century commentary on this important code of Jewish law. In the statement above we see that speaking, even during the preliminary service should be avoided since it will disrupt one's ability to develop concentration in prayer. Since the blessing at the beginning of *Psukei D'Zimra* (*Baruch Sh'amar*) and the blessing at the end (*yishtabach*) are connected to one another, any extraneous conversation would be considered a disruption. Rabbi Karo makes exception in the cases where one is greeted by someone else or if one is in the presence of someone deserving of fear/reverence.

## **Iyun Tefillah: Meditations on Prayer**

“Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge.” - A.J. Heschel

As we begin the morning service we recite *Psukei D’Zimra*. By looking more closely at the passage borrowed from the book of Nehemiah in relation to the rest of this section we are able to draw certain conclusions about the nature of prayer and religious experience.

First, we learn that the preliminary service was meant to be sung, not read. That is why it is called, *Psukei* "verses" *D’Zimra* "of song." *Psukei D’Zimra* is meant to touch the heart, not the head; nothing touches us more deeply than song and shared song in particular.

Second, the choice of passages we recite or sing in *Psukei D’Zimra* is instructive. Psalms 145-150 speak of God as a universal power: "I glorify you, My God; I praise you throughout all time." (Ps 145) "God brings justice to the oppressed and provides food for the hungry." (Ps 146) "The Lord delights in those who revere Him..." (Ps 147) "Praise the Lord all who share the earth." (Ps 148) There are only a few passing references to Jerusalem and Israel. It is only after acknowledging God as a cosmic power that we turn to the God of the Bible: creator, covenant maker, redeemer. *Psukei D’Zimra* culminates with the Song at the Sea, when the people of Israel, "Witnessed the great power which Adonai wielded against the Egyptians - they feared the Lord; they trusted in Him and in His servant Moses." Like the splitting of the sea, *Psukei D’Zimra* is meant to bring us to a place of faith.

Third, the original context of the Nehemiah passage tells us something about its significance. Chapters 8-9 of Nehemiah describe a pivotal moment in the history of the Jewish people following the destruction of the First Temple. After years of exile, they were allowed to return to their land and rebuild the temple. Nehemiah and Ezra gathered the people together for what may have been the first public reading of the Torah (in Hebrew and translation). The people are overcome with emotion: "Nehemiah...and Ezra...said to the people: 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept when they heard the words of the Lord.'" This ceremony took place on the first of Tishri (*Rosh Hashanah*) and in subsequent days. At the end of three weeks of public ceremonies, the people assembled once more for a solemn fast at which Ezra reviewed the history of the nation beginning with creation through the Exodus. Nehemiah 9:6-11 is the beginning of Ezra's monologue. This passage, then, marks one of the most significant moments in Jewish history. Like the splitting of the sea, it was a moment in which the nation affirmed their faith in God.

### **Encounter**

- How is the passage from Nehemiah similar to and different from the parallel passages in our Torah portion?
- What does Nehemiah mean when it says that God found Abram's heart 'faithful'? What do you think he is referring to in the Genesis narrative?
- How can we transform *Psukei D’Zimra* into a more effective way of creating *kavanah*, concentration and inner intention in prayer? What could you do personally to make prayer more meaningful?
- Is faith an inherent quality or are there ways of nurturing and developing faith?

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