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Jacob's Remedy

A Prayer for the Dislocated

Nehemia Polen

Our Sages of blessed memory taught that [Jacob] instituted [*tikken*] the evening prayer service, *Arvit* (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 26b).

Now the Torah portion *Va-yetzei* (Genesis 28:10–32:3) presents our patriarch Jacob's provision of a remedy [*tikkun*] and pathway even for such people who are not privileged to be within, such as our own generations—we who have been expelled from our home, our life source.

In fact, there is a remedy [*tikkun*] to be found everywhere, by the power of Torah. The biblical emblem of this power is our patriarch Jacob, of blessed memory, as Scripture says, "Give truth to Jacob" (Micah 7:20); and truth is equivalent to Torah [thus setting up the equation Jacob = truth = Torah].

The Torah gives location and stability to everything. This is what our Sages intended when they taught, "There is nothing that does not have its place" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:3).

This is the meaning of the words "And he alighted upon the place ... [and he took] from the stones of the place ..." (Genesis 28:11).

My teacher, my grandfather, [Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter] of blessed memory, explained that the letters [of the Hebrew

alphabet] are called stones. Those letters—the signifying traces of Torah—are to be found everywhere.

But note: there are some places where those traces are more manifest, such as the Land of Israel and the Holy Temple—where God's sacred name is invoked; and there are other places where the signifiers are disarranged [*be-irbuv*], out of sight. In such places only the holiest individuals can discover the letters and arrange them appropriately.

We find this with the text of the Torah itself: there are some passages that can be understood readily according to their plain sense, while others require interpretation. This is also similar to [the Rabbinic interpretive practice] of "removing a letter, adding a letter, and explicating [a phrase or verse based on this rearrangement]" (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 26b) and [of cases where there is] a lacuna, a clause omitted in a mishnah which is restored by the Talmud.

This is the meaning of the continuation of the verse in Genesis, "... and [Jacob] took from the stones of the place and positioned [them] under his head (Genesis 28:11)."

"Positioning" [*simah*] is synonymous with "arranging" [*siddur*], as in the verse "And they shall arrange [*ve-samu*] the staves" [of the Ark of the Covenant; the priests carefully positioned or arranged the poles of the Ark in preparation for travel] (Numbers 4:6).

Therefore Scripture gives us Jacob's statement: "And this stone that I have placed [*samti*] as a monument will be a house of God" (Genesis 28:22). This means that Jacob arranged and built a structure and a home from the letters.

And this is the meaning of the Talmudic statement (cited above) that Jacob "instituted [*tikken*] the evening prayer service, *Arvit*."[1]

RABBI YEHUDAH LEIB ALTER OF GER, *SEFAT EMET*

The scriptural reading that prompts this teaching[2] is *Parashat Va-yetzei* (Genesis 28:10–32:3), the story of Jacob's flight from home in Beer-sheba, his arrival in Haran, and the subsequent events. Before Sefat Emet begins his discussion of this *parashah* (Torah portion), he

cites a Talmudic passage from Tractate *Berakhot* on the origin of fixed prayer. Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Hanina is quoted as saying that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob instituted the thrice-daily prayers. The ensuing discussion specifies that Jacob instituted the evening prayer (*Arvit*), based on Genesis 28:11—"And he alighted [*va-yifga*] upon the place," with another proof-text demonstrating the linkage between *pegiyah* and prayer.

Sefat Emet's introduction of a Talmudic passage before even mentioning the biblical text is rather unusual and demonstrates the centrality of this "evening prayer" in this piece, whose central concern is, what precisely is the meaning of evening prayer, *tefillat Arvit*?

To understand Sefat Emet's method, we first examine some key terms in the piece. Perhaps the most salient word is ***tikkun***, which we have translated as "remedy." The word is fraught with significance in the mystical tradition. In Lurianic Kabbalah, ***tikkun*** is a technical term signifying a process of cosmic restoration and reintegration, the work of reorganizing "the disorderly confusion that resulted from the breaking of the vessels."[3] As Gershom Scholem notes, the details of this process are enormously complex, essentially comprising the "restoration of the universe to its original design in the mind of its Creator." As Lawrence Fine has explained, Luria and his disciples also used the word ***tikkun*** in a more individualized sense, to describe regimens of penitential rites such as fasting to reverse the negative effects of specific sins.[4]

Sefat Emet is well aware of ***tikkun***'s rich semantic associations in the Kabbalah. But his first move is to remind us of the lexical connection between the kabbalistic ***tikkun*** and the Rabbinic ***tikken***—"instituted," "established." The famous Talmudic passage in *Berakhot* cited above presents two alternate contexts for the three daily statutory prayer services. One view, attributed to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is that the prayers were designed to correspond to the sacrifices offered in the Temple. The other view has them precede the Temple by many centuries, setting them back in the biblical period and associating them with the three Patriarchs. What is at issue in this dispute? For Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, *tefillah* (verbal prayer) is a ritual offering, responsible for maintenance of creation like the Temple service; while for Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Hanina, the statutory prayers are linked to

personal narrative, to the dramatic events in the lives of the Patriarchs and by implication our own. Sefat Emet's exposition develops the existential implications of Rabbi Yose's view.

As Nahum Sarna observes, at this point in the Genesis narrative, Jacob "is now an exile, utterly alone and friendless, embarking on a long perilous journey."[5] He "alights" upon a certain place. We should understand that the place does not appear to be special to Jacob in any way. Spiritual power and proximity to heaven are the last things on Jacob's mind. He is a young man in perplexity, confused and troubled by the family dynamics that have been revealed and intensified by recent events. The only thing he knows for sure is that his brother is quite understandably furious and may indeed be in hot pursuit right now. Jacob hopes for nothing more than a safe, quiet, uneventful respite from his troubles, a pause in his breathless decamping. It is for this reason that the dream and the vision of God are so astonishing, so unexpected, so transformative.

All of this is brought forward by Sefat Emet to his own time (the piece was written in 1885) by the phrase "we who have been expelled from our home, our life source" (*nitgarashnu mi-bet hayyenu*), which refers at once to the loss of Jewish independence after the defeat at the hands of the Romans two thousand years ago, but also to the nineteenth-century Jewish migration from the shtetl to big cities like Warsaw and Lodz, with the fragmentation of the secure, insulated world that had nurtured Hasidism from its early years. Sefat Emet creates a lattice-work of correspondences: between the biblical Jacob finding unexpected divine presence, promise, and protection; the Talmudic Jacob's institution of *ma'ariv* (evening) prayer; and the Hasidic master's own efforts to construct religious meaning and spiritual power in the face of ideological and social instabilities of urban modernity.

At issue here is the meaning of sacred place, which in Genesis 28:10–22 is a specific geographical location. As a result of his dream encounter with God, Jacob knows that the place where he has slept—which he calls Bethel—is "the house of God, and that is the gateway to heaven" (Genesis 28:17). This locative sense is consistent with the use of *makom* throughout Genesis, where the word typically means "cultic center," a location of sacred power attracting worshippers in search of supernatural guidance and assistance. For the Talmudic Rabbis, however, sacred place comes to include synagogues and study halls, *batei kenesiyot u'batei midrashot*. While retaining the locative notion of sacred place—the Temple Mount, Jerusalem, and the Land retain holiness in Mishnah and Talmud—sacred place for the Sages includes the four walls of the *bet midrash* and the four *amot* of the *halakhah* (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 8a). For the Rabbis, holiness is found in the word and the heart as much as in geography. Sefat Emet continues and extends this process, making explicit what in the Talmud is largely implicit: that Torah study is not just the learning of eternal truth or interpreting divine will, but the active creation of meaning, of sacred domains limned by mind and spirit.

In this reading, what saves Jacob is his ability to "assemble the stones of the place" around his head. According to Sefat Emet, this means that out of the shambles of his fugitive life Jacob arranged an edifice of meaning, a coherent conceptual structure, a "Torah of the place." In like manner, each generation is bidden to take the particularities of its own place and time, its own existential circumstance, and shape them into Torah.

Sefat Emet draws on an old tradition from *Sefer Yetzirah* that speaks of the primary elements of language, the letters of the alphabet, as stones; and the permutation of letters—a fundamental mystical praxis—as rearranging stones. The Rabbinic linkage of Jacob and Genesis 28:11 with the evening prayer now emerges as deep *peshat* (plain sense or contextual meaning). There is much more than a linguistic play at stake here; with one stroke, Sefat Emet convincingly shows why Jacob is assigned the evening prayer specifically. We are reminded that he is leaving his family, the land of his birth, not like his grandfather Abraham to find the Promised Land, but to escape it. It is dark; Jacob's fortunes seem in decline; the sun is setting for him! He is lost, confounded. He is, to use a word from our text, *be-irbub*, in a state of confusion, all mixed up. To the extent that he can assemble the stones of his place into a structure of meaning, he has indeed prayed the first *ma'ariv* (evening/mixture of day and night) prayer. He has instituted the prayer against perplexity, the prayer that sets order against chaos.

In the process, we see an expansion of the possibilities of sacred space. Since the sacred letters of Torah are everywhere, they can be

found, accessed, unscrambled, deployed to inscribe a sacred locus anywhere. While *Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem, Zion, the Temple Mount retain their original geographical referent and sanctity, now Warsaw too, that place of urban confusion, of the jostling of competing ideologies, political affiliations and social mores, where all that was solid seems to melt into air, can be reconstituted as sacred place.

The variations of geography parallel the variations in the Torah itself. There are some passages—and places—whose meaning is clear, direct, that speak to us with transparent power; and there are other passages and places that need much mindful attention. As the Talmud frankly acknowledges, in order to make a *derashah* (interpretation) work, elements of the text may need to be rearranged. And in order to make sense of a mishnah, the Talmud sometimes posits that there is a gap in the received text that must be filled in. This is an activist construction of meaning.

In our *Sefat Emet* teaching, all the levels are set into precise correspondence and dialogic relation. It is hard to identify one element at the center of gravity to the exclusion of others. Is this text about the biblical Jacob? Yes, but it's also about Talmudic exegesis. Is it about the power of prayer, the evening prayer? Yes, but it's equally about the power of Torah. Is it about the power of the person embodying exacting, meticulous holiness—"Only the holiest individuals can discover the letters and arrange them appropriately"? Yes, but it is also about the power of vital, fresh, creative reading—with at least a touch of what we might today call deconstruction, reading against the grain, for the purpose of construction to be sure.

Finally, the piece is manifestly about sacred space—which, as we've said, is no longer limited to special, chosen locations such as the Holy Land and the Temple (although it is certainly there in a particularly manifest way), but is anywhere we create a perimeter of the sacred by arranging the stones about us meaningfully.

So while this teaching is about our relationship to place, it is also about our relationship to time: how Jacob's time and our own time speak to each other, mutually inform each other—*ke-doroteinu*—"like our generations."

Our past informs our present, but just as important, our present speaks to our past. The generations communicate with each other, and

one of the tasks of today's telling the story of the Exodus is to articulate the order hidden in the chaotic events of long ago. We try to discern divinely imposed order where the original protagonists were confused and bewildered by their oppression. Here the hermeneutic enterprise becomes an instrument of liberation, reforming our understanding of past events and in a sense, the events themselves.

Once the *Sefat Emet* has selected and arranged the stones of his own exegetical construction, they come into precise correspondence. Each layer of text, each stratum of historical experience informs and enriches all the others. No single stratum, layer, or idea is the sole meaning or message of the piece. What Sefat Emet has constructed for us is an ordered yet expansive relational latticework, but perhaps rather than a lattice we might simply speak of a ladder—Jacob's ladder, where we are observing the angels ascending and descending. Perhaps we *are* the angels. The goal is not necessarily to reach the top, to get to heaven, but to continually ascend and descend, exploring the view from each step on the ladder. Meaning emerges in the contemplation of the correspondences and the constructed meaning that we call Torah. We might say that rather than climbing the ladder, we become the ladder. Our epiphany bursts forth when we realize that there is no single privileged position from which to observe truth; all rungs of the ladder must be honored, must be inhabited, must be invited patiently to tell their story. In contemplating this ever more deeply, we unite ever more richly and securely with all stages, all historical periods, all perspectives.

And here we come to his exegetical coda just before the end of the piece: "'Positioning' [*simah*] is synonymous with 'arranging' [*siddur*], as in the verse 'And they shall arrange [*ve-samu*] the staves' [of the Ark of the Covenant] (Numbers 4:6)." By "positioning the staves" we understand slipping them into their rings straight and true, aligning them properly. This is "true" in the structural, architectural sense: true as rectilinear, at right angles to the Ark and the Tablets. This is the truth that Jacob represents and that Sefat Emet demonstrates for us on every page of his commentary. This is truth that cannot be captured in simple propositions or creedal affirmations. We feel this truth in our bodies, in the gentle pressure of the staves on our shoulders, knowing only that we have arranged the words of the covenant with all the

integrity we can bring to the task at this time and this place, so that, like Jacob, our feet move lightly as we step forward, greeting the future with faith and hope.

Notes

1. Thanks to the research of Rabbi Arthur Green and others, we have a better understanding of the teachings of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (d. 1905), known by the title of his work *Sefat Emet*. This includes the Gerer Rebbe's teachings on the *nekudah ha-penimi* (the inner point) and the phenomenological categories of *Olam/Shanah/Nefesh* (Space/Time/Spirit) and their confluence in the experience of Shabbat. We owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Green for being among the first in the academic community to draw attention to Sefat Emet and to highlight this master's power as a spiritual teacher and guide for our contemporary world. See Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).
2. *Sefat Emet, Parashat Va-yetzei*, s.vv. *Ya'akov tikken tefilat Arvit*. I consulted and adapted the translation of my colleague Rabbi Or N. Rose, prepared for the evening of study in celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Sefat Emet*, March 26, 2005.
3. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974; New York: Meridian, 1978), p. 140.
4. Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 167–86.
5. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 197.

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