

## D'Var T'fillah Avot March 18, 2017 (Shabbat Parah) Marc Lieber

Shabbat Shalom. I am giving a d'var t'fillah, a short talk on one of the prayers in our blue siddur prayerbook. The prayer is on p. 115b in the blue siddur prayer book, you may want to turn to this page, we'll read it in a moment. And to make things more complicated, I'll also refer to p. 64, so you may want to get your siddurim ready and put a finger at p. 115b and p. 64.

Pesah, Passover, is coming up in just a few weeks, 3 ½ weeks to be exact. Today is Shabbat Parah, the first of several special Shabbatot when we read special maftir Torah portions in preparation for Pesah. Shabbat Parah: a Parah is a cow, so we read today about the Parah Adumah, the special red heifer whose ashes are used for ritual purification. More on Shabbat Parah in a moment.

Annette's mother is 94 years old and lives in Sarasota Florida. Up until a few years ago, we always celebrated Passover here in Rockville, and my in-laws would join us and it was so wonderful to have the whole family together at our home and to celebrate a seder. Now we travel to Sarasota and make the seder in the elder complex where my mother in law lives. I used to grouse about how I couldn't cook and serve the foods I like to cook and serve, and how I have to miss being at Kol Shalom for the first day Pesah services. But now I don't. I'm so thankful to have our family all together and to celebrate with my mother in law. And being in warm weather sure doesn't hurt.

One thing I've started to do each year is tell dumb Passover jokes at the seder. My family doesn't like them but they tolerate them, but somehow they keep coming back. Here's one:

George W. Bush is at Houston airport. He sees a guy with a white beard in the airport, carrying a long staff, like a shepherd. Bush is convinced that this is Moses. Bush approaches the man and says, Hey, aren't you Moses? The bearded man shakes his head and walks away. Bush keeps looking and wondering. Bush approaches the bearded man near the Cinnabon counter and says "Hey, you really look like Moses, are you sure you're not Moses?" Again, the bearded man shakes his head and silently walks away. As Bush is getting ready to board his flight, he corners the bearded man. "Sir, I really think you are Moses, why won't you admit it?" The bearded man sighs and replies, "because the last time I talked with a bush, I wound up wandering for 40 years in the desert, and I really need to get on this flight to Cleveland."

OK you can use this at your seder.

It's a joke, but I think that all of us can agree that the scene of Moses at the Burning Bush in the Torah, book of Exodus, is dramatic and spiritual, and a turning point in the history of Israel and the Jewish people. Moses, a baby thrown into the Nile, raised by a Princess, with a strong sense of justice as seen when he kills the Egyptian taskmaster, now a lonely shepherd in the desert.

And suddenly a commanding presence calls out to him from a bush that seems on fire, yet not consumed. And how does God speak to Moses? How does God identify Himself?

In Exodus 3:6: Take your shoes off your feet, for the ground you are standing upon is holy ground. I am the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzḥaq, and the God of Ya'akov. And in the burning bush story, God identifies himself using this phrase not once, not twice, but four times.

Sound familiar? This is the prayer I want to discuss this morning. If you open your blue siddur to p. 115b, you will find the avot prayer. Read the first lines, which unfortunately are not translated accurately in our Siddur Sim Shalom. The Hebrew clearly says Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzḥaq, v'Elohei Ya'akov. the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzḥaq, and the God of Ya'akov. Not just God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This prayer, the Avot, opens the Amidah. The Amidah/or Shmoneh Esrei during the weekdays, is considered HA-t'fillah, THE prayer, the central prayer of the entire service, whether it's morning, afternoon or evening, weekday or holiday. And the opening prayer Avot recalls the moment of Moses and the burning bush. Supremely spiritual, God and humans communicating directly.

Our sages comment that we are to understand this phrase to mean that God interacted with each of our avot, each of our ancestors, in a unique way. Not a single way applied to everyone, but a unique way to each one. And then again in a unique way to Moses. And the message for us, of course, is that each of us has a unique way of experiencing God and communicating with God. It's our job to discover our own way.

For this d'var t'fillah, I am going to focus on just one phrase and one word, a word that occurs twice in the first Avot paragraph. That word is Hesed, Het-Sameḥ-Dalet. You see it on the fourth line, two times.

Gomel hasadim tovim v'koneh hakol. God who bestows lovingkindness, Creator of all.

And then in the same line, v'zokher hasdei avot, You remember the pious deeds of our ancestors.

So the same Hebrew word, hesed, used twice in the same sentence, gets a different translation in each instance. Lovingkindness in the first instance, pious deeds in the second instance.

I want to focus on this phrase gomel hasadim, or g'milut hasadim, and especially the word hesed.

So what's up with hesed, why is this word important, how should we understand it? How to understand it in this specific prayer, and more generally, how to understand hesed?

Gomel hasadim, so two Hebrew roots, gml and hsd. Gimel-mem-lamed, gamal, and het-sameḥ-dalet, hesed.

This phrase is translated here as bestows lovingkindness, other translations are Who acts most piously, who remembers the piety of our ancestors. It can also be translated as imparting deeds of kindness. Gml and hesed. Taken separately they mean, respectively, something like reward and pious deeds.

I'll ask you now to turn to the other place in the siddur, p. 64. Many of us have probably never read this page before. It is one of several prayers said right at the beginning of the service, in fact at Kol Shalom we would say it before starting services because we kinda skip over it. But when I have time and concentration, I read this prayer as services are about to start, I really like it. This is from a set of daily Torah study verses found at the start of services in the siddur. So if you are like me and don't really set aside time each day to study Torah, this set of passages gives you a bit from Torah, a bit from Mishna, and a bit from Gemara to start your day.

Take a look at the middle passage from the Mishna. Eilu d'varim sh'ein lahem shi'ur: hapei'ah v'habikurim v'harei'ayon ug'milut hasadim v'talmud Torah. These are the deeds for which there is no prescribed measure: leaving crops at the corner of a field for the poor, offering first fruits as a gift to the Temple, bringing special offerings to the Temple on the three festivals. Doing deeds of lovingkindness, g'milut hasadim, there's our phrase again, and studying Torah.

What's the point here? For some mitzvot, there are boundaries, minimums or maximums. Pesah is coming up. We serve four cups of wine, right? In our family, people sip a bit of the first cup, and then grudgingly take a drop more wine for each of the succeeding cups. You may ask, is there a minimum amount of wine you must drink to fulfill the mitzvah of arba kosot, four cups of wine?

Of course, there are. According to our tradition, each cup should hold 3-5 ounces of wine, for each cup you should drink the majority of the wine after each of the four blessings, and if you can't drink it all in one or two gulps, you should drink at least half of the wine within 4 minutes, not nurse it until the next cup. Why? It's a tradition!

Obviously, each of the four cups reminds us of the four expressions of freedom in the Torah, Exodus chapter 6 verses 6 and 7. But...if you drink more wine, are you doing a better job of fulfilling the mitzvah? No. There is a minimum, but doing the maximum doesn't get you any more credit, as it were. If you drink an entire bottle of wine, you don't get bigger credit for saying borei p'ri hagafen four times. Just pass the minimum and you're good.

Similarly for these mitzvot listed here, there may be a minimum, but our tradition encourages us to do more and more. Leave more food for the poor at the corners of your field, or in our case, give more tzedakah to the poor. Bring generous offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. Study Torah more and more. And do g'milut hasadim as much as you can.

It turns out, g'milut hasadim is one of the central tenets of our religion and our people. Some say that g'milut hasadim is the entire reason that God created the Jewish people, that God has

a brit, a covenant, making the Jewish people His special people. Not better than others, but special, assigned a special mission: to do g'milut hasadim, deeds of lovingkindness to others, and to be a light to all nations, to show the entire world that being gentle, generous, humble is what God wants. Right? Do justice, love mercy, and be holy to your God, those are the words from the prophet Micah.

And from Pirkei Avot: Al shloscha d'varim ha'olam omed, right, you know the song, [sing above] the world stands on three things: al haTorah, on the Torah, al ha'avodah, on worship, v'al g'milut hasadim, on g'milut hasadim, on deeds of lovingkindness.

Here's a beautiful [commentary](#) by Rabbi Yisrael Bankier, who writes daily Mishna commentaries and is based in Australia. So recall the four examples given in the Mishna: pe'ah or leaving the corners of the field for the poor, bikurim, the offering of first fruits at the Temple, rey'ayon, Festival offerings at the Temple, and g'milut hasadim, deeds of lovingkindness.

The Tifferet Yisrael, Rabbi Israel Lipschitz, explains that the mitzvah of Peah, leaving the corners of the field for the poor, should ideally be performed at the end of harvesting, while Bikkurim, the offering of first fruits at the Temple, is performed at the beginning. Pe'ah at the end of harvesting, bikurim at the beginning of harvesting. They are polar opposites and present boundaries of time and space. The mitzvah of Re'ayon, Temple offerings, a ritual worship of God with no impact on other people, is the opposite quality of the mitzvah of Gemilut Hasadim, which is physical and practical, it has an impact on others. These mitzvot therefore present the boundaries of both quantity and quality, spirit and material, time and space. Boundary points. Since boundary points are just that, points, it makes sense that these mitzvot have no measure.

So to me the Mishna is telling us that we have the opportunity of doing g'milut hasadim in any way we can, any way that is meaningful to us. Any time. Anywhere. In whatever form we choose. The point is that as Jews, it is a mitzvah, in fact it's more, it's the core of our mission as Jews. As Nike used to say, just do it.

And by the way, what does any of this have to do with Shabbat Parah and today's special maftir reading? The maftir reading today is about the parah adumah, the red heifer. The Torah describes how to burn the heifer's body to ashes, and then to use the ashes to purify anything or anyone who has become ritually impure. So now you know to ask: how much ashes do you need? In the case of the red heifer's ashes, there is no minimum specified. No quantity, just like g'milut hasadim. Just do it.

Oh and by the way another example? Telling the story of yetzi'at mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt, that we tell at the Passover seder. No minimum and no maximum. Tell it as deeply as you want, and if you only have time for the briefest of recitations, for example if you have young children or impatient guests, that's ok too.

So back to our Avot prayer that kicks off the Amidah. We list positive attributes of God: He is great, he is mighty, he is awesome, he is exalted. He is gomel hasadim tovim, he does good deeds of lovingkindness. And he remembers the hasdei avot, the pious deeds of our ancestors.

What is this prayer telling us? For me, it's saying that we must model ourselves after God, to do as God does. As God does g'milut hasadim, we should do g'milut hasadim. As God heals the sick, we should heal the sick. As God helps the poor, we should help the poor. Each of us has our unique relationship with God, and our own unique approach to doing g'milut hasadim. Any time, anywhere, any form. Just do it.

For me, the message of the avot prayer and of g'milut hasadim is quite strong and meaningful. I am a Jew. I am part of the Jewish people. I am part of a people chosen by God to do g'milut hasadim, deeds of lovingkindness, and to be a light to all nations. When God blessed Abraham, He said "You will be a blessing". We sing this every Shabbat, you will be a blessing. I am part of a people that will be a blessing to all. And when I do g'milut hasadim, I can become part of that blessing for the world.

When we say the Avot prayer to kick off the Amidah, we are reminded of God in relationship with Abraham, with Isaac, with Jacob, each in a unique way. We are reminded of God in relationship with Moses, and of God's command to us to do g'milut hasadim, and that when we do we suddenly are standing on holy ground, right where we are.

I am proud to be part of God's chosen people. I am honored to accept the challenge of doing g'milut hasadim. May all of us, when we pray the Avot and Amidah, endeavor to fulfill what we are asked to do today and during each week. Shabbat Shalom.