

SHABBAT SERMON

Robyn Ashworth-Stein

It is 2050 and I'd like to invite you into a synagogue in the heart of a vibrant city. We step in and pause to collect our virtual reality sets as we are taken into the foyer and the sounds of people talking and greeting each other fills our ears with the tinny noise of an old recording. We enter a dark, wood paneled sanctuary and marvel at the stained glass windows, the wooden pews, the high bimah. We walk up to the *Aron Hakodesh* where a scroll is rolled out on display, behind glass. We are told, through the headphones that there used to be people skilled in reading from such scrolls. A project was going on to try and reconstruct those sounds so it is not all lost ...

As we wind our way back in time from the shell of the synagogue in 2050, we arrive here to Shabbat. Yet the question lingers – how likely is it that our synagogues will become relegated to history, as the Temples beforehand, and we are left only with the stories?

With membership of religious institutions dwindling and the changing global landscape, it may seem bleak and I am sure that we cannot continue as we are. Yet, whilst I think some of what we practise and profess can be consigned to a museum, there is much that I want to lift up and place front and centre in order to transform our religious gatherings. And surprisingly for us, here on Bible Week, I think the psalms can help us create a vibrant, sustainable Jewish future.

In a recent interview, a former president of the Reform Jewish movement in the UK, Neville Sassi-enie (*zichrono livracha*) rightly critiqued the routine Shabbat services we often attend.¹ He compared them to primary schools – stuck at a certain developmental age – with the teacher holding all of the knowledge up front and above preaching to the bored, distracted students below.

As I reflected on this scene, I realised that I am not even sure we always do justice to a primary school setting as such an education demands mess, interactive play, fun, joy, embodied practice. Our synagogue services, at their worst, are the driest kind of secondary school lesson – dull and hierarchal and, in the wake of the pandemic, we find many have chosen to remain outside of the synagogue building.

The Psalms represent a time when communal movement, dance, song, call and response liturgy, fluidity, lament, praise were all present. These poems invite us in a world of holy creativity. A world that uses human, real, language to express our deepest of human emotions as we can hear using the translations of Robert Alter:²

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=IlfoX-FrdSU&feature=youtu.be>

² Translations found in 'The Book of Psalms' by Robert Alter except I've inserted the word Adonai where he uses Lord.

When we feel anger we shout: 'May the mischief of their own lips / cover the heads of those who come round me. May He rain coals of fire upon them, / make them fall into ravines never to rise again.' [Psalm 140:10-11] When we experience joy: 'Praise Yah' we shout 'for Adonai is good; / hymn His name, for it is sweet.' [Psalm 135:3] Despair: 'Look on the right and see – / there is no one who knows me, / Escape is gone for me, / no one inquires for me.' [Psalm 142:5] Awe: 'On the day I called You answered me, / You made strength well up within me.' [Psalm 138:3]

Now, we are no longer in a space where we are passive beings stuck in the intellect but in our bodies, fully engaged as creative beings, expressing the full range of human emotion. Walter Brueggeman, the Christian American theologian talks to the liberative potential of the psalms available in its abrasive, revolutionary and dangerous language. He understands that the 'Psalms requires a real change of pace' as they 'move with our experience'.³

My first challenge to us is to re-energise our collective prayer, using the Psalms as our guide. Yet, I also want us to go further, to delve deeper, to demand more. So deep that we find ourselves in the pit – Sheol – the image so well used by the Psalms. The deepest darkest of spaces – unreachable isolation. Brueggeman describes the pit as 'a place in which to put people to render them null and void. In the pit, people are effectively removed from life.'⁴ The pit is a symbol of death and 'reduces one to powerlessness.'⁵ 'Do not hide Your face from me, / lest I be like those gone down to the Pit.' [Psalm 143:7]

Here is my second challenge. A pit is a place that wo/men, and all those oppressed, know so well – cut off, demeaned, objectified and humiliated. If we understand that something must change in order to invite our full selves into prayer spaces, using the Psalms as our inspiration, we cannot afford to ignore the wo/men⁶ still hidden in the pit, out of sight within the collection of Psalms itself. For this poetry anthology is, in name, tradition and references, male. Of course, the images and emotions are universal but the framing is anything but. Psalms 'for David' or 'by David'. Psalms 'for' or 'by Korach'. A male God. What about the woman's voice and experience?

Audre Lorde (writer, womanist, radical feminist), chimes with Brueggeman when she describes the power of poetry as 'the way we help give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless.'⁷ Lorde then talks to, what we would understand to be another analogy for the pit, as she talks of dark places within.⁸ She encourages women and black women, to re-connect with those ancient, dark, hidden places within in order to create poetry for they are 'an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling'.⁹ 'For women,' she writes, 'poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.'¹⁰

How can we answer Audre Lorde's invitation to explore our deep, dark, ancient places within if the only framework we currently have does not reflect the reality of the fullness and diversity of our lived realities? Where are the psalms reflecting the trauma of infertility, of labour, of miscarriage? Where are the psalms talking to the pain of abuse, of being overlooked and underestimated?

³ 'Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit' by Walter Brueggemann, Paternoster, 2008, p.8.

⁴ Ibid., p.32.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See 'Wo/men, Scripture, and Politics: Exploring the Cultural Imprint of the Bible' by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Cascade Books, 2021. Here Schussler Fiorenza using the term 'wo/men' to mirror the diverse experiences of what it is to be a woman and mark the many men who are also oppressed. I choose it here as it is an expansive, generous term able to unite all those who are marginalised.

⁷ 'Poetry is Not a Luxury', in 'The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House,' by Audre Lorde, Penguin, 2018, p.1.

⁸ Lorde, *ibid.*, p.1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

What if the Psalms were not written by King David as he sits astride his throne having assaulted Batsheva and manipulated the situation for his own satisfaction? What if the Psalms were *le-Batsheva* – ‘for’ or ‘of’ or ‘by’ Batsheva? What if they were written not from the king’s rooftop but the one below? The gaze going upwards as she realising who is watching her and how she has nowhere to hide? The words expressing the fear of being called to David’s chamber, of carrying his baby, of losing her husband, of demanding protection and some kind of justice. Such poetry remains unnamed.

Would those psalms not allow us *all* to truly be free? Poetry and creative acts that come into our collective prayer spaces and break open the dust of the pages of our Siddurim. Psalms which add to those before but bring in voices from all corners of the pit, reflecting the entirety of who we are and who we want to be. Those are poems I would want to sing and move with. Those are spaces that could never be consigned to a museum tour because they demand to be lived and heard. Rather than turn into the rigidity of the idols of ritual and routine we instead fashion them into something that gives life and can breathe. From each of our pains, our isolation, our narrow places, from deep within – with dance, movement, the support of others – we do so in order that we live, that the Torah thrives, that we may be free.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God’s will. Amen.

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