

GENERAL RESOURCES

Praying for an End to Mass Incarceration⁴⁸⁴

Traditional Jewish services are full of lines—sometimes whole paragraphs—about freedom and redemption. When read with an eye towards mass incarceration, many hitherto unremarkable lines jump out at us, clamoring for attention. We offer the following selection from the morning service as an invitation for meditation and contemplation, study and preaching, or song and chanting. We hope these—and others like them—find a use in the synagogue, the classroom, and out on the streets.

These lines from *birkot hashachar* take on new meaning when imagined in the mouth of a returning citizen:

Blessed are you ETERNAL, Master of
time and space:
...who made me free.
...who releases the imprisoned.
...who lifts up the bent-over.
...who provides for all my needs.
...who supports a person's steps.
...who gives strength to the weary.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ
מְלֶכֶד הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁשָּׂנִי בֶן-חֹרִין:
מִתִּיר אֲסוּרִים...
זוֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים:
שֶׁשָּׂשָׂה לִי כָּל צְרָכֵי:
הַמַּכִּין מִצְעָדֵי גִבֹּר:
הַנוֹתֵן לַיָּעֵף כֹּחַ:

Psalm 30, said at the transition from *birkot hashachar* to *pesukei dezimra*, uses the same word (*bor*, pit) that the Torah uses twice about Joseph—when his brothers throw him in a literal pit (Gen. 37:24) and when his Egyptian master imprisons him (Gen. 40:15). There is hope both for the currently incarcerated and for our society as a whole:

ETERNAL, you lifted my soul up from the depths,
made me live from out of the pit...tears may linger
for a night, but joy comes with the dawn. (v. 4, 6b)

ה' הֶעֱלִיתָ מִן שְׂאוֹל נַפְשִׁי,
חַיֵּיתָנִי מִיַּרְדֵי בּוֹר:
בְּעָרֵב יָלִין בְּכִי וְלִבְקָר רָנָה:

From the paragraph immediately preceding *Mi Chamocha*:

Exalted and High, Mighty and Awesome, You
bring low the proud and lift up the fallen; You
free the imprisoned, redeem the humble, and
help the poor.

רָם וְנִשְׂאָ, גָּדוֹל וְנוֹרָא, מִשְׁפִּיל
גָּאִים וּמִגְבִּיָּה שְׁפָלִים, מוֹצִיא
אֲסוּרִים וּפּוֹדֵה עֲנוּיִם וְעוֹזֵר דָּלִים.

⁴⁸⁴ Thanks to Rabbi Roni Handler and Cantor Lauren Levy for their help compiling these texts.

We sometimes speak of “civil death” for returning citizens, who are barred from voting, serving on juries, and receiving many government benefits. What does it mean for God to help us return them to civil life? Alternatively, *Mechaye hametim* is the blessing one says upon seeing a dear friend or family member that one has not seen in over a year (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 225:1, Talmud Berachot 58b*). How else might these lines from the second paragraph of the Amidah be applicable?

[God] supports those who fall, heals the ill, frees the imprisoned, and keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust... Blessed are You ETERNAL, who restores the dead to life.

סוּמָךְ נוֹפְלִים וְרוֹפֵא חוֹלִים וּמְתִיר
 אֲסוּרִים וּמְקִים
 אַמּוּנָתוֹ לִישְׁנֵי עֶפְרָא...
 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים:

Several blessings from the middle of the weekday Amidah take on new significance in the context of mass incarceration. Consider those for *teshuvah*, redemption, the blessing of the year, and justice. In *Mishkan Tefilah*, the Reform siddur, the following line from Psalm 85 (verse 12) appears as part of the blessing for hastening of the messianic age:

May truth spring up from the ground; may justice look down from heaven.

אַמֶּת מֵאָרֶץ תִּצְמַח וְצֶדֶק
 מִשָּׁמַיִם נִשְׁקֶף.

The last paragraph of Tachanun speaks to us as a society:

[God] who delights in mercy and is moved by our pleas, delight in and be moved by this poor generation, for we have no one else to help. Our Parent, our Sovereign, have mercy and answer us, for we have no [good] deeds [on our record]. Deal with us in righteousness and love, and redeem us. For we do not know what to do. Remember Your mercy, ETERNAL, and your love, for they are eternal. May Your love be upon us, for we put our hope in You. Do not recall for us our earlier sins; meet us quickly with Your mercy, for we are very low.

מִתְרַצָּה בְּרַחֲמִים וּמִתְפִּיֵס בְּתַחֲנוּנִים, הַתְרַצָּה
 וְהִתְפִּיֵס לְדוֹר עָנִי, כִּי אֵין עוֹזֵר:
 אֲבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ, חֲנֻנוּ וְעֲנֻנוּ, כִּי אֵין בְּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים:
 עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ:
 וְאִנְחָנוּ לֹא נִדַע מָה נַעֲשֶׂה כִּי עָלֶיךָ עֵינֵינוּ:
 זְכֹר רַחֲמֶיךָ ה' וְחֶסְדֶיךָ כִּי מֵעוֹלָם הֵמָּה:
 יְהִי חֶסְדֶיךָ ה' עֲלֵינוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִחַלְנוּ לָךְ:
 אַל תִּזְכֹּר לָנוּ עֲוֹנוֹת רֵאשׁוֹנֵינוּ, מִהֵרָ יִקְדָּמוּנוּ
 רַחֲמֶיךָ כִּי דְלוּנוּ מְאֹד:

Psalm 130 (*MiMa'amakim kraticha...*), which is part of *Tachanun*, can be imagined in the mouths of returning citizens and of society at large.