

Torah Thoughts Beha'alotkha

5778:

The problem with praying from a Hebrew prayer book is that most Jews do not understand Hebrew. The problem with a translation into English is that they do. That is, a good translation allows us to understand prayer's content, and what we sometimes find is that the ancient prayers represent ideas that we are no longer comfortable with.

One illustration is the reference to God as the God of war. There are two ways that sidduring render this phrase into English. One is to use an ambiguous translation, such as 'Lord of Hosts,' in which the word 'Hosts' can mean a variety of things. Another is to transliterate the phrase into English letters rather than translate into English, avoiding dealing with the issue entirely. Instead, we should understand the image in context. The idea of God as a participant in battle was not restricted to the ancient Israelites; every ethnic group had a national god to whom they would call out for help in war. And in modern times, a belief in God is still a source of comfort to many soldiers in battle, though I doubt that they pray for God to scatter their enemies. But that is exactly what we have in this week's parshah: "When the ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You! And when it halted, he would say: Return O Lord, You who are Israel's myriad of thousands!" The ark was the vanguard of the camp, and Moses prayed that its power, meaning God's power, would help to vanquish any potential enemies.

In our time, we retain that language in the Torah service. We break that section in half and sing it before the Torah is taken out of the ark and after it is returned. In that way we link ourselves to the power of the ancient ark and its contents, the Ten Commandments, by singing the same words that Moses used before carrying the ark into battle. Just as the ancient ark was invoked as protection in war, the Torah in a modern ark is a protection against modern foes of Judaism: it teaches us peace to gird against those who wish us ill; it teaches us distinctive beliefs and practices; to guard against our own assimilation; it teaches us that every Jew is responsible for the other, warning us against senseless bickering among ourselves. The Torah protects us, no less than the ancient ark protected our ancestors in the wilderness, no longer by praying for the destruction of enemies, but rather by instructing us in the paths of peace.

Shabbat shalom