

אנו קהלך
COMMUNITY
& RELATIONSHIP

HIGH HOLIDAYS 5783
ימים נוראים תשפ"ג

אָנוּ קהֵלךְ COMMUNITY & RELATIONSHIP

Prayers can come in two kinds. Some talk *about* God (“God is great/mighty/awesome...”), while others talk *to* God (“You are...”), placing us in direct relationship with the Almighty: subject to Master, child to Parent, face to Face. This happens so poignantly in a poem that appears, according to many traditions, several times in the Yom Kippur tefillah, where we say directly to God,

וְאַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ	כִּי אָנוּ עַמְּךָ	For we are Your nation, and You are our God;
וְאַתָּה אָבִינוּ	אָנוּ בְנֵיךָ	We are Your children, and You are our Father;
וְאַתָּה אֲדוֹנֵנוּ	אָנוּ עַבְדֶיךָ	We are Your servants, and You are our Master;
וְאַתָּה חֵלְקֵנוּ...	אָנוּ קהֵלךָ	We are Your community, and You are our Portion...

The Torah tells us, after all, that “it is on this very day that God will atone for you to purify you from all your sins; before God, you shall be purified” (Vayikra 16:30). Yom Kippur is a day of atonement from sins, a day of being purified, and, all importantly, a day of being “before God.” In this time, above all others, we must push ourselves to stand in direct relationship with God and say, “We are Yours... and You are ours.”

But this alone fails to reflect the totality of our relational bonds. In Mishnah Yoma 8:9, we learn from this same verse that Yom Kippur only atones for ritual sins, ones that have to do with being “before God,” but not for moral sins, which derive from our being in relationship with other people. We need to appreciate and improve our relationships - all of them - in order to have a meaningful and successful High Holiday period.

“אָנוּ קהֵלךְ” means “we are Your community,” which captures this idea perfectly. We wrap our arms around each other’s shoulders and sing out loud that we are a single, united community; we have come together. And, at the same time, we turn to God and say directly, face to Face, “we are Yours.”

In this reader, you will find teachings and activities to help you explore our relationships with each other and with God as we make our way through the Days of Awe. May this learning help us achieve our atonement and purification - together, and before God.



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This reader contains words of Torah, so please treat it with appropriate reverence.

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ELUL & ROSH HASHANAH



SEEKING YOUR FACE

Imagining God in Elul

R. Micha'el Rosenberg



With the onset of Elul, we begin to recite Psalm 27 twice daily.¹ The regularity of this recitation can obscure how unexpected this choice is as the opening salvo of the High Holidays. I would have expected the season's liturgy to deal with transgression and regret, with the desire for transformation, for renewal, for moral rebirth. I know I'm not alone in having grown up thinking of these days as, first and foremost, a time to reconsider our actions and engage in *teshuvah*. We beat our chests and recite a litany of personal and communal failings, hoping that our sincere repentance, prayer, and renewed commitment to justice can avert the negative decree. If so, then, during the period leading up to and culminating with Yom Kippur, we should say something like Psalm 130 (which we do recite from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur), with its expression of our moral inadequacy before God: "If You remember sins, who can survive?" (v. 3).

Psalm 27, the psalm that marks the beginning of this season, mentions neither sin nor transgression, neither repentance nor hope for forgiveness. It is about God—finding God and seeing God. The psalm's most famous line, made familiar through numerous melodies, relates simply: only, "One thing I asked of the Lord... to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in God's temple" (v. 4).² The psalmist is desperately afraid of alienation from God, and this fear is expressed

in the most personal of terms: I want "to live in the house of the Lord... to behold the beauty of the Lord" (v. 4). And lest the reader miss the level of intimacy and immanence of this God, the psalmist goes on even more boldly; "Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide Your face from me" (vv. 8-9).

Relationship to God, and not repentance, then, is the foundation of the liturgy for these High Holidays. "It is Your face that I seek."

For the psalmist, God is not an abstract quality, nor a metaphor to encourage moral behavior. Rather, God is real, a true love. And despite the doubts that the psalm expresses, that love is returned—"If my mother and father forsake me," the psalm goes on, "the Lord will gather me up" (v. 10). God is not an intellectualized, Aristotelian "unmoved mover"; rather, God is the "most moved mover."³ God is not a model of static perfection, utterly Other than us; God is the Being in the world for Whom emotions are more powerful, more real, than for any other.

Such vivid and emotional depictions of God have a contested history in Jewish life. The Rambam,⁴ especially, tried to weed out of Judaism the notion that God was overly personal. In his book, *Moreh Nevukhim* (Guide of the Perplexed), the Rambam actively undermines the belief that we can, even in a rudimentary way, know something, or say anything, about God.

According to the Rambam, God

*is not affected by external influences, and therefore does not possess any quality resulting from emotion. [God] is not subject to physical conditions, and therefore does not possess strength or similar qualities; [God] is not an animate being, that [God] should have a certain disposition of the soul, or acquire certain properties, as meekness, modesty, etc., or be in a state to which animate beings as such are subject, as, e.g., in that of health or of illness. Hence it follows that no attribute coming under the head of quality in its widest sense, can be predicated of God.*⁵

The Rambam's philosophical commitment to a God devoid of both body and personality finds legal expression in his Laws of Repentance, where he lists five categories of people who are considered heretics.⁶ Alongside someone who denies the existence of God or who believes in multiple deities, the Rambam includes someone who recognizes that there is one and only one God, but who thinks that God has a physical body. For the Rambam, imagining God as corporeal—perceiving God in the terms we normally use for hu-

1 The earliest reference to this practice appears in the *Siddur Beit Yaakov* of R. Yaakov Emden.

2 Translation of this psalm comes from the NRSV, with minor modifications, unless otherwise noted.

3 The formulation is often attributed to R. Abraham Joshua Heschel—and it is indeed an accurate portrayal of his theology—but this particular articulation comes from Fritz Rothschild, *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism, from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel* (Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 24. My thanks to Gabriel Citron for the reference.

4 R. Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides (12th c., Egypt and Eretz Yisrael).

5 Rambam, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.52, trans. M. Friedländer. The original work is in Arabic.

6 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:7.

man beings—is a supreme act of heresy; imagining God with human emotions only slightly less so. God does not experience anger or regret; the Bible merely tells the story that way so that our limited human minds can understand it.

The Rambam, naturally, had his critics. The Ra'avad⁷ derides the view that God cannot be imagined in a corporeal way, the notion that we cannot relate to God in so personal a way. “Greater and better people than we,” writes the Ra'avad, have come to other conclusions based on biblical and rabbinic texts.⁸ It is not outrageous, and certainly not heretical, says the Ra'avad, to imagine God in a body.

We can trace this theological tension back even further, all the way to the text of the Torah itself. The Torah commands us to be seen by God: “Three times a year, all your men will be seen by God” (Deuteronomy 16:16).⁹ The Hebrew here is problematic, because the word preceding the word for God, the word “et,” is a direct object marker. That means that it comes before the object of the verb in the sentence. But a direct object is entirely irrelevant when the verb at hand is a passive one, as is *yeira'eh* (“to be seen”). You would have to translate it into English as something like “they will be seen the face of God,” which makes little sense. Because of this, some scholars have suggested that, back when the letters of the Torah were fixed but the vowels were not yet included in the text, there was ambiguity here, and the word perhaps was not meant to be read as *yeira'eh* (“be seen”), but rather, as *yir'eh* (“see”).¹⁰ The verse would have intended: Three times a year, you will see the face of God. Only later did interpreters uncomfortable with that idea—interpreters who were themselves theological forerunners to the Rambam—vocal-

ize the word to read *yeira'eh*, shifting its meaning from human beings’ actively seeing God to their passively appearing before—that is, being seen by—the Divine.¹¹

To see God or to be seen by God, the Ra'avad and the Rambam. We have always struggled with how real we want our God to be, with wheth-

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er to relate to God as personal and emotional, a protector and parent, or as a rationalized and intellectualized ideal, a philosophical concept to spur us on to better action.

Most of us find ourselves in different camps at different points in our lives. We wend and weave between being in relationship with a God with personality, and intellectually holding a conception of God-as-abstraction. The poles of the Rambam and the Ra'avad are both recorded on the pages of canonical Jewish texts, because both respond to real human needs. A God so immanent that we can imagine God’s physical appearance, so present that the Torah can reasonably command us to ascend

to Jerusalem in order to see God, reflects our desire for intimacy. At the same time, the philosophers’ God, transcendent to the point of incomprehensibility, reminds us to maintain the humility of realizing that, in some deep sense, we can’t even begin to comprehend God.

During this season of repentance, starting with the onset of Elul and continuing through Shemini Atzeret, we turn to Psalm 27, articulating our longing for God’s love, for God’s presence, in the most direct, physical, and emotional terms. A full Jewish theology must incorporate both the Rambam and the Ra'avad; the High Holidays, however, are a time when we turn our focus to a God who not only emotes, but who has a face that we can seek.

Why? Because forgiveness is an act of love. By definition, forgiveness is not earned; forgiveness is needed only in the wake of sin, violation, and transgression. And, therefore, when you forgive me for something I have done to you, you tell me, even if obliquely, that you love me.

What about those violations that didn’t affect anyone, those things I did that were wrong, but were, in a sense, victimless crimes? Or where the victims were too many, or too ill-defined, for me to ask their forgiveness? Who will forgive me? Whose love do I seek?

It is not a new problem. The Talmud (Yoma 87a) wants to know how I seek forgiveness when the person whom I have wronged has died. We are told that one should bring ten people to the graveside, and say there, in their presence: “I have sinned against Hashem, Israel’s God, and against this person whom I have injured.” Cold comfort, perhaps, for the injured party, who may or may not be aware of what’s being said at her graveside.¹² But perhaps the most striking thing about the

7 R. Avraham ben David (12th c., Provence).

8 See his comments on the Rambam’s *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:7. The Ra'avad’s phrase here is actually a bit ambiguous, since the Hebrew could be translated in two ways, yielding either the translation “Greater and better people than we,” as I have translated it, or the even more biting possibility of “Greater and better people than *he*,” i.e. than the Rambam!

9 שלוש פעמים בשנה יראה כל זכורך את פני ה'

10 See, for example, Rachel Rafe Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 44–45, and the literature cited there.

11 Classical Rabbinic literature alludes to the ambiguity of the word as well; see Talmud Bavli *Hagigah* 2a (and Rashi there), where Yohanan b. Dahavai deploys the bivocality of the word to legal effect. My thanks to R. Ethan Tucker for reminding me of this text.

12 On the question of whether the dead are aware of what goes on in this world, see Talmud Bavli *Berakhot* 18a-19a.

Talmud's prescription is the addressee of the apology: "I've sinned against God"; and then, almost as an afterthought, "and against this human being." God's presence is essential to this process. We know—or at least fear—that apologies cannot be heard, nor forgiveness granted, from beyond the veil. But God can hear us.

Sometimes, when we envision

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God as a party to our own disputes and harms, we may find ourselves using God as a sort of all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful scare tactic to enforce society's morality, a panopticon that sees all and thus scares us into submission. This text in Yoma, however, offers an alternative: God can also be the expression of forgiveness where no one exists to grant it. Rabbinic notions of *teshuvah* and forgiveness present God as the always-accessible forgiver. Even when the person I've hurt is no longer in this world and therefore can neither hear my apology nor re-

spond to it, God is present to stand in that gap.

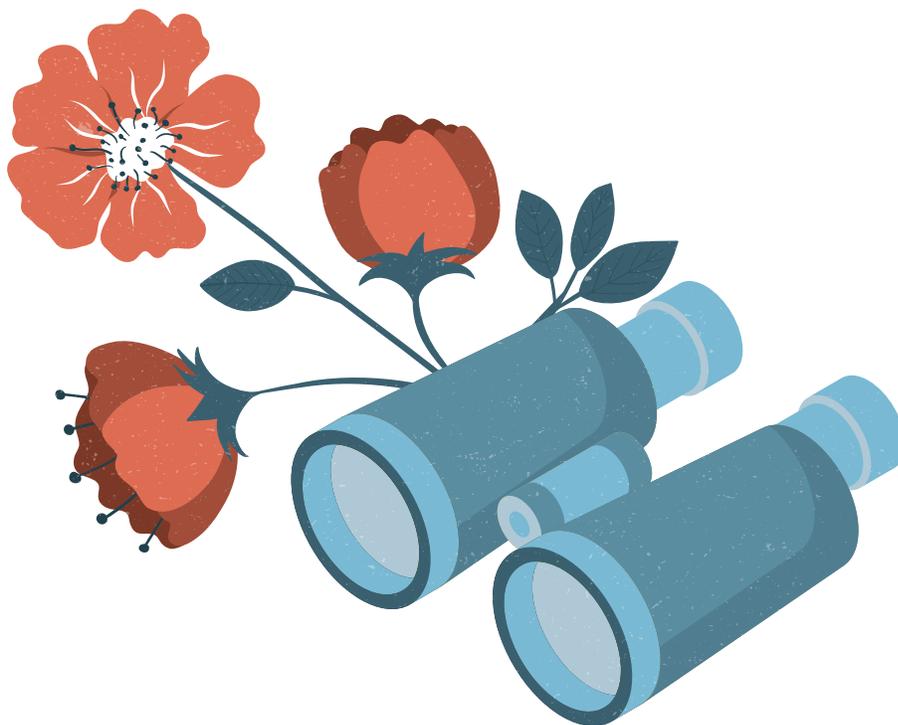
Therefore, before we can seek forgiveness, we must seek God. We stand in prayer for hours. Perhaps uncomfortably, perhaps awkwardly, we search for God's face (את פניך ה' אבקש). And the more disconnected, the more alienated we've become, the more challenging it will be for us to say that we seek only to dwell in God's presence (שבתי בבית ה' כל ימי חיי). A philosophized God may well make sense to some intellectually, but such a God cannot allay the fear that my failures are so great, so vast, that they might be unforgivable. The God of the philosophers cannot actually speak the words, "I forgive you as you have asked—*salahti kidvarekha*" (Numbers 14:20).

Imagining instead such a personal, emotive God can be excruciatingly difficult for many of us. The Piaseczner Rebbe,¹³ best known as the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, therefore built on the Ra'avad's criticism of the Rambam. The Ra'avad said only that it is not heretical to imagine God with a body. The Piaseczner goes beyond this, not merely defending from the

accusation of heresy those who think that God has physical form, but actively advising students struggling with their prayer lives to picture God as they *daven*, as a way of making more real what it is we're trying to do when we pray.¹⁴

There are many problems with such a suggestion. We run the risk that we will make God in our own image, or, worse, in images we've been taught to conceive of as authoritative. If we all picture God as an old white man, then we're not engaging in real prayer; we're committing idolatry. Psalm 27 reminds us, however, of the reciprocal risk, that we may settle into sterile, impersonal prayer, to a High Holidays so intellectualized that we can't honestly say, "Your face, God, I seek."

By the time we reach Yom Kippur, we have been reciting Psalm 27 and its pleading for God's face twice a day for forty days. We are finally ready to enter a day *shekulo tefillah*, a day of non-stop prayer. We shouldn't waste those precious hours by spending them inside our own heads. Rather, we should talk with God, and maybe, just maybe, God will say back to us: *salahti kidvarekha*. ♦



¹³ R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (1889-1943), also known by the name of his book, the Eish Kodesh.

¹⁴ Benei Maḥshavah Tovah 2:7. Even the Piaseczner Rebbe does not view this as an ideal; he describes picturing God during prayer as a transitional phase to help move initiates from a place of needing such vivid depictions of God to a spiritual level where they can pray passionately without such images.

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tunity to torment the wife she knows her husband loves more; Hannah, silent, unable to defend herself against her rival wife or her husband's inadequate comfort. The story, while foreign in its setting of the *mishkan* and its particulars of rival wives, is familiar to anyone who has ever found herself in a cycle of misery, who has ever felt powerless in the face of a dreaded dynamic that feels like it will continue for the rest of her life.

One day, however, everything changes—and not because Elkanah has an epiphany or because Peninah decides to change her attitude towards Hannah. Instead, everything changes because Hannah stands up, and she begins to speak:

שְׂמוּאֵל אֵת-ט:י"א
 וַתִּקַּח חַגְוָה אַחֲרַי אֲכֹלָה בְּשֵׁלָה
 וְאַחֲרַי שֹׁתָה וְעָלִי הַבֵּהוּ יֹשֵׁב עַל-
 הַכִּסֵּא עַל-מִזְבְּחַת הַיְכָל ה':
 וְהָיָא מְרֵת נִקְשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל-ה'
 וַיִּבְכֶּה תְּבֻכָה: "וַיִּתְדַר נֶדֶר וַתֹּאמֶר
 ה' צְבָאוֹת אֱ-מֵי-רָאָה תִרְאֶה בְּעֵינַי
 אֲמַתְךָ וְזָכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא-תִשְׁכַּח אֶת-
 אֲמַתְךָ וְנִתְתָּה לְאֲמַתְךָ זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים
 וְנִתְתָּיו לָהּ כְּלִי-יָמֵי חַיָּיו וּמִזְבֵּחַ
 לֹא-יֵעָלֶה עָלָיָא: "

I Shmuel 1:9-11

⁹Hannah stood after they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, and Eli the priest was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of God.

¹⁰In her wretchedness, she prayed to God, weeping all the while. "And she made this vow: "O God of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to God for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head."

Hannah's initiative in changing her life is symbolized by her motions: where she was once passive, she is now active. The verb, "she stood (וַתִּקַּח)," is symbolic as well as literal: Hannah moves from sitting on the sidelines of her own life to standing and taking control. Now, she literally takes a stand, and, in so doing, pours out her heart before God. Where she was once silent in the face of her tormentors, Hannah now articulates

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what she desperately wants. In this moment, Hannah dares to dream of—and to demand—a different life for herself, a life different from the endless cycle of inevitability she has lived until now.

Hannah's prayer, however, is not only about her needs. Hannah's promise to give her child to God is informed by what the reader will only later learn about the *mishkan*: far from being a place of holiness, the tabernacle has become a place of corruption in which worshippers are abused by Eli's sons (I Shmuel 2:22). Hannah does not simply ask for what she needs. She looks around her, at a *mishkan* controlled by wayward priests, and intuits what God needs as well. "Give me a child," she says, "and I will give You that child in return. Give me a child, and I will give You a servant worthy of the name. Give me a child and, together, You and I will create a new world."

Everything in the book of Shmuel—the prophet's birth, his religious revolution, his struggles with Sha'ul, and his anointing of David—all stem from the moment Hannah stands up and refuses to accept her life as it is. In this moment in which a woman desperate to be a mother dares to dream of a different life, the fate of the Jewish people is changed forever.

Why do we read Hannah's story on the first day of Rosh Hashanah? Perhaps because it offers a vision of what a true new year, one in which we do not simply reenact the same cycles of the past, could look like. It offers a vision in which we refuse to maintain the same dynamics, to accept the ways in which we are stuck. Most of all, it offers the possibility that, in this new year, the beginning of a new world might be possible—if only we have the courage to stand. ♦

"ויתנו לך כתר מלוכה" הכתרה, חיבוק ומחילה

הרב אבי קיליפ (עברית: עליזה רז-מלצר)

לכן לפני שנכתיר אותו למלך בראש השנה עלינו למחול לו.

הדרישה למחול לאלוקים היא הצהרה תיאולוגית מעמיקה ואקט אישי שיש בו עומק רב. עבור רבים, מחילה לאלוקים היא אתגר גדול יותר ממחילה לעצמם. בשנים בהן חטאינו נדמים לנו קטנים, אולי אפילו קטנוניים, חטאיו של אלוקים הם עצומי ממדים. האם ניתן למחול לאלוקים שמאפשר חטיפה וסחר בנערות צעירות שכל חטאן הוא שאיפה לרכוש השכלה? איך מוחלים לא-ל שמניח לילדים למות במלחמות בלתי פוסקות? שמניח לנו לסבול ממחלות? האם אפשר בכלל למחול לבורא שיצר עולם שבו כל כך?

מחילה לאלוקים והכתרתו מחדש הן מעשים הדורשים אומץ. בראש השנה, אנו מסרבים לוותר על הא-ל, ובתמורה, מתפללים שביום כיפור הוא יסרב לוותר עלינו.

האם זה שווה לנו? האם מערכת יחסים מתמשכת עם הא-ל שווה את הנפילות הצפויות? מדוע אנו סולחים לאלוקים פעם אחר פעם כשאנו יודעים שהוא ממילא יאכזב אותנו?

מדי שנה, אני משלבת את השאלות הללו בתפילותיי.

יחד נישא תפילה:

אלוקים, הגן עלינו מפני הקצוות המשוננים של עולמנו. עזור לנו לחוות את ממלכתך כמתוך מעטפת של חיבוק אמיץ ומקודש. ובשעה שאנו מוחלים לך בראש השנה - יום הכתרתך למלך, אנו מתפללים שתסלח אתה לנו ביום הכיפורים.

ה' מלך. ה' מלך. ה' מלך. ה' מלך לעולם ועד. ❖

שערי מלכות שמים נפתחים בפנינו, ואנו מוזמנים לפסוע פנימה - אל תוך המקדש - כשהא-ל מקיף אותנו, שומר ומגן עלינו מבחוץ.

בקטקס הכתרה בראש השנה אנו מרשים לעצמנו להתעטף בהגנתו של הא-ל. אנו מתמסרים לחיבוקו, ומפקידים בידיו חלקים של עצמנו כשאנו מפצירים בו לשמור עלינו. בהכתרת הא-ל אנו

אני מרשים לעצמנו להתעטף בהגנתו של הא-ל. אנו מתמסרים לחיבוקו

מבטאים הכרה בכך שהשליטה האנושית מוגבלת ומודים שיש בעולם משהו הרבה יותר גדול ועוצמתי מאיתנו.

כשאנו מכתירים את אלוקים למלך בראש השנה, אנו מתמסרים לכוח שהוא גדול וחזק מאיתנו. אך מדוע אנו בוחרים דווקא ברגע הזה כדי להכתיר את אלוקים? מדוע המלכת הא-ל היא תימה מרכזית כל כך בראש השנה?

התלמוד הירושלמי (ביכורים ג, ג) מספק את אחת התשובות, בציון שלוש סיטואציות בהן אדם נמחל על כל עוונותיו: חתן ביום חתונתו, אדם העומד בפני מינוי חשוב ומלך ביום הכתרתו.

עוונות המלך נמחלים ביום שהוא עולה למלוכה, וראש השנה הוא היום שבו אלוקים מוכתר למלך. מכאן ניתן להסיק שבראש השנה אלוקים הוא הנמחל, ואילו ביום כיפור - אשר חל בשבוע שאחריו - התפקידים מתהפכים ואלוקים הוא המוחל.

יחסינו עם אלוקים מובעים באמצעים מטאפוריים: הא-ל הוא אב רחום וחנון, שאוהב אותנו ללא תנאי. הוא רועה אותנו בנאות דשא כשאנו אבודים וחלשים. כאשר אנו זקוקים לעצה, אלוקים מורה את הדרך. ברגעים של יופי ואינטימיות, הוא יכול גם להיות מאהב.

ובראש השנה, אנו מכתירים את אלוקים למלך.

ישנו פיוט מתפילת מוסף לראש השנה שצבר בשנים האחרונות פופולריות רבה בקרב קהילות יהודיות בעולם, ופזמונו הקלטי מייצג את התימה המרכזית של החג:

ויתנו לך כתר מלוכה

הפיוט אינו משמש רק בתפקיד תפילה, אלא זוכה למעמד של טקס הכתרה. שוב ושוב חוזרת הקהילה פה אחד על שורה זאת. מדי שנה אנו בוחרים במערכת היחסים הזו באופן אקטיבי, ובמקום להכיר שהאלוקים הוא מלכנו מכבר, אנו ממליכים את הא-ל, בהתלהבות ובשמחה, ממנים אותו למלוך עלינו מחדש.

אך מדוע אנו רוצים שהא-ל יהיה לנו למלך?

בחברה הדמוקרטית שאנו חיים בה, רובנו לא חשים צורך במלוכה. מערכת יחסים עם מלך נדמית לנו מרוחקת, מנוכרת כמעט. במרבית המקרים, הדימוי של מלך נקשר בנוקשות, ניצול כוח, אגו, שליטה וחדמנות. המלך הוא מושא ליראה שחובה לציית לו, והוא תמיד זכר - אין במטאפורה כל מקום לגמישות בנוגע למגדר של הא-ל. לא אלו התכונות שרובנו מחפשים במערכת יחסים עם הא-ל. אלו מלכים שאנו שואפים להדיח ממלוכתם, לא להכתיר למלוכה.

התלמוד במסכת עבודה זרה (יא, ע"א) משנה את האופן שבו אנו מדמיינים את הא-ל כשליט, כשהוא מזכיר שהמלכים שאנו מכירים, אותם אלה המתאפיינים בשחיתות ובחמדנות, הם מלכים **בשר ודם**, ואילו הא-ל הוא מושל מסוג אחר: "מלך בשר ודם יושב מבפנים, ועבדיו משמרים אותו מבחוץ, ואילו הקדוש ברוך הוא, עבדיו מבפנים והוא משמרן מבחוץ..." "על פי תיאור קצר זה, הא-ל אינו עומד במרכז החדר וממתין להכתרה; הוא לא נח על זרי ההלל והתשבחות, בטוח בהערצת נתיניו ומוגן הדימוי הפוך. כאשר אנו מתקבצים כקהילה בראש השנה,

"READING" THE SHOFAR



Some of the most inspiring "texts" to study are not literal texts at all, but rather meaningful objects. Just like different layers of meaning arise from noticing and exploring different aspects of a written text, so too do they arise from doing the same with these objects. The *shofar*, as a main symbol for the High Holiday season, is precisely one of these texts. Our hope is that, by engaging and investigating the following interpretations of the *shofar*, you will be able to look closely at the *shofar* itself, hearing more clearly the meaning and messages it brings into our lives.

IF YOU ARE STUDYING WITH A *HAVRUTA* (study partner):

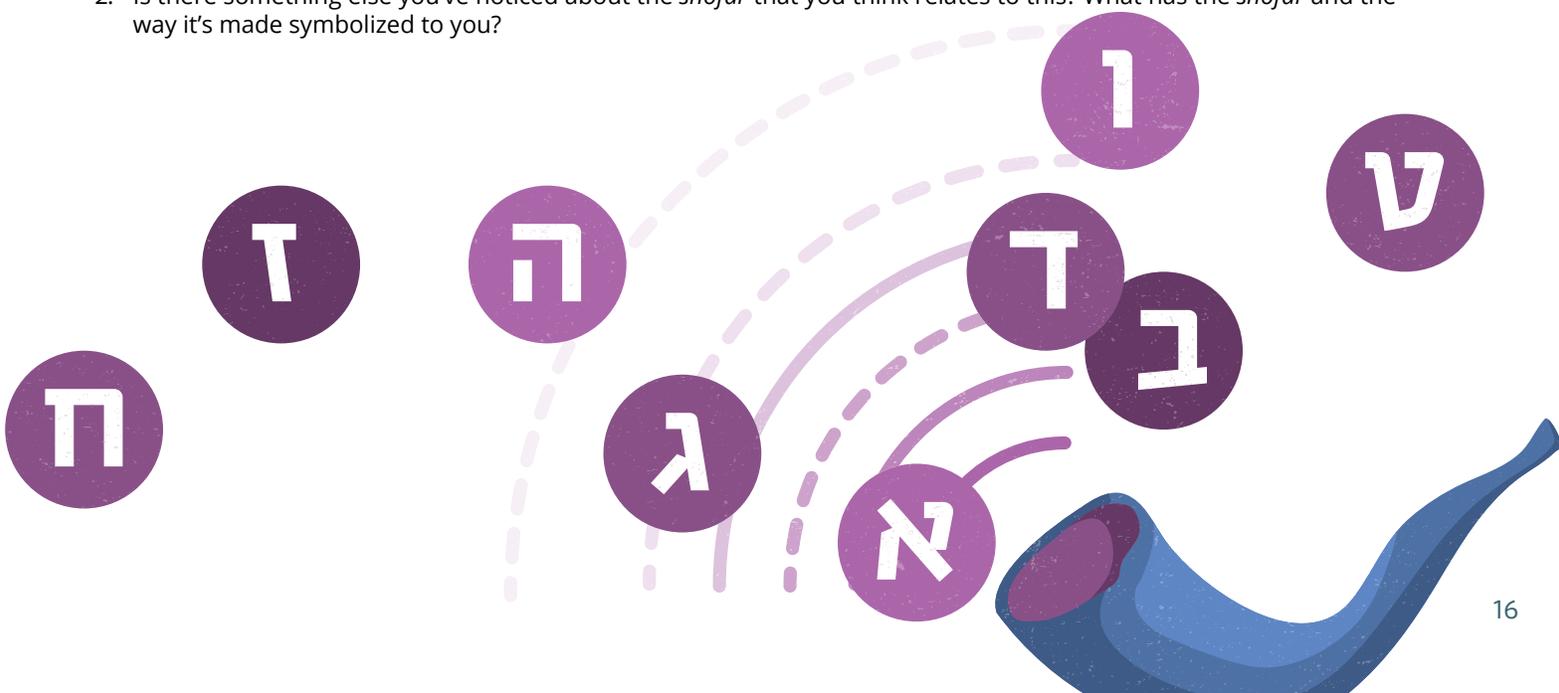
- » Greet each other.
- » Brainstorm together any details you can about the shofar: *What notes does the shofar make, and how do they sound? What does it look like? What is it made from, and how is it made? How big is it?*
- » Continue now to the sources. As you study, read each source aloud, and discuss the guiding questions.
- » Take a moment to think about the interpretations you have read, and choose the one that speaks to you most. Share with your *havruta* why that source speaks to you.

1 TALMUD BAVLI ROSH HASHANAH 16A

אמר רבי אבהו: למה תוקעין בשופר של
איל? אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: תקעו לפני
בשופר של איל, כדי שאזכור לכם עמידת
יצחק בן אברהם, ומעלה אני עליכם כאילו
עזדתם עצמכם לפני.

*Rabbi Abahu said: Why do we blow a shofar made from a ram?
The Holy Blessed One said: Blow before Me with a shofar made
from a ram, so that I will remember for you the binding of Isaac,
son of Abraham (in whose stead a ram was sacrificed), and I will
count it for you as if you had bound yourselves before Me.*

1. A *shofar* can be made of the horn of a ram, antelope, gazelle, or goat, and is usually curved. How do you think this relates to Rabbi Abahu's interpretation? What does Rabbi Abahu's thinking add to our understanding?
2. Is there something else you've noticed about the *shofar* that you think relates to this? What has the *shofar* and the way it's made symbolized to you?

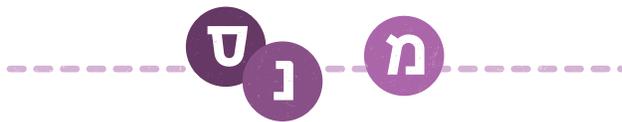


2 RAMBAM MISHNEH TORAH HILKHOT TESHUVA 3:4

אִף עַל פִּי שְׁתַּקִּיעַת שׁוֹפָר בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה
 גְּזַרְתָּ הַכְּתוּב רָמַז יֵשׁ בּוֹ כְּלוּמֵר עוֹרוּ יְשָׁנִים
 מִשְׁנֵתְכֶם וְנִרְדְּמִים הַקִּיצוּ מִתְרַדְּמֵתְכֶם
 וְחַפְּשׂוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂיכֶם וְחִזְרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה וְזָכְרוּ
 בּוֹרְאֵכֶם. אֱלֹהֵי הַשׁוֹכְחִים אֶת הָאֱמֶת בְּהַבְלֵי
 הַזְּמַן וְשׁוֹגִים כָּל שְׁנֵתָם בְּהַבֵּל וְרִיק אֲשֶׁר לֹא
 יוֹעִיל וְלֹא יִצִּיל, הַבֵּיטוּ לְנַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם וְהִיטִיבוּ
 דַּרְכֵיכֶם וּמַעַלְלֵיכֶם וְיַעֲזֹב כָּל אֶחָד מִכֶּם דַּרְכּוֹ
 הַרְעָה וּמַחְשְׁבֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר לֹא טוֹבָה.

Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a decree, it also contains a hint of meaning. It is as if the shofar's call is telling us, "You who sleep, bestir yourselves from your sleep, and you who slumber, emerge from your slumber. Examine your actions, return, and remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and waste all their years with vanity and emptiness, which is not effective and does not save, look inside yourselves. Improve your ways and your actions, let each one of you abandon their evil path and their thoughts that are not good!"

1. Think about the notes the *shofar* makes, and what they sound like. How do you feel when you hear those sounds? What do you observe that supports the Rambam's interpretation?
2. What does this Rambam add to your understanding of *shofar* or of Rosh Hashanah?



3 ZOHAR III 99B

וְכַד אֲתַעֵר הָאִי שׁוֹפָר וְכַד בְּנֵי נֶשְׁמָה תִּיַּיְבִין
 מִחֶטְאֵיהוֹן, בְּעֵינֵינוּ לְנִגְדָה קוֹל שׁוֹפָר מִתַּתָּא,
 זֶה הוּא קוֹלָא סְלִיחַ לְעִילָא, בְּדִין אֲתַעֵר שׁוֹפָרָא
 אֲחֶרָא עֲלֵיָהּ, וְאֲתַעֵר רַחֲמֵי, וְאֲסִתְלַק דִּינָא.

When this shofar awakens and when people turn away from their wrongdoings, we must sound the voice of the shofar below (on earth). That voice of the shofar rises above in order that the other shofar above awakens. And thus, Compassion awakens and Judgment is removed.

1. What do you notice about how the Zohar compares to the Rambam above? How are they similar, and how are they different? Is there something about the sounds of the *shofar* and how they make you feel that supports what the Zohar is saying?
2. What does the Zohar add to your understanding of *shofar* or of Rosh Hashanah?



4 SEFER HAMINHAGOT (THE BOOK OF CUSTOMS) 18B, R. ASHER OF LUNEL

למה תוקעין בשופר של איל? ומדרש אגדה,
 בראש השנה נעקד יצחק על גבי המזבח
 ואותו היום שמעה שרה אמו ותזעק ותיבב
 ותילל. ועל כן אמר הכתוב יום תרועה יהיה
 לכם ומתרגמינו יום יבא יהא לכוון, כדי
 שתזכור יללת שרה אמנו, ותכפר לנו.

Why do we blast a shofar made of a ram? Rabbinic legend states that Isaac was bound on the altar on Rosh Hashanah, and that on that day Sarah his mother heard and screamed and moaned and cried with a yevavah (a trembling voice, lamenting, or sounding an alarm). Therefore, the text says "it shall be a day of teru'ah for you," and we translate [in Targum Onkelos], "a day of yevavah it shall be for you," to remember the cry of Sarah our foremother, that she may atone for us.

1. What does the *shofar* sound like to you? Could the way it sounds match up with what the Sefer HaMinhagot is saying?
2. What does the Sefer HaMinhagot add to your understanding of *shofar* or of Rosh Hashanah?
3. Is there something else you've noticed about the *shofar* that you think relates to the last three sources? What have the *shofar* sounds symbolized to you in the past?

5 "THE SHAPE OF THE SHOFAR," BY DEVON SPIER¹

*it is a wonder
the shofar
is shaped
like the inside
of an ear
because at the moment
we are blasted with sound
and our whole world becomes the ancient voice,
longing
calling
demanding
we are meant to listen to whom is below noise
and there, underneath the usual commands
and allegiances
is Torah
listening and weeping
in all the invisible, eternal ink*



1. When you think of the *shofar*, what do you notice that supports Devon Spier's interpretation?
2. What does Devon Spier's poem add to your understanding of *shofar* or of Rosh Hashanah?

PERSONAL GLEANINGS

1. Which interpretation(s) felt most meaningful to you, and why?
2. What other details, thoughts, or meanings of the *shofar* are on your mind?
3. What would you want to bring from your learning into your experience of listening to the *shofar* this year?

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I AM (NOT) AFRAID

R. Avi Strausberg



Two snapshots:

I'm hiking up a small mountain by myself in New Zealand—or a large hill depending on one's perspective. I get up to the plateau at the top and look out over the beautiful expanse. When it's time to head back, I decide to challenge myself by trying a different path down. I look around and spot what looks like another path, perhaps a steeper path, leading back to the bottom. I'm nervous because I'm not a confident hiker, and I'm very afraid of heights, but I tell myself, "Don't be afraid. You can do this." I begin to walk down the path and soon realize it's too steep on foot. I'm afraid of falling, but I don't want to give up. So, I try to scoot down on my backside; at least this way I won't fall. After several scoots, I'm better able to see the rest of the way down—and I realize something. I am not bravely and carefully making my way down a path; in fact, this is no path at all. Rather, in my attempt to be brave and to overcome my fear, I am carelessly forcing myself closer and closer to the side of the mountain from which I am about to fall.

Snapshot two. Another hike in New Zealand. This time, I'm with a group, and I'm hiking up and all around a mountainous glacier. Again, I am terrified. Besides that I'm on the top of an icy mountain, I have to jump over enormous cracks in the glacier that go down to the center of the glacier itself. What if I fall? What if I don't leap far enough? Despite the two guides looking out for us, despite that I'm following behind a group of ten others (I am the straggler at the back), I'm convinced the entire time that this was a horrible, dangerous mistake, and I will be the one to literally fall through the cracks.

For the past two years, I've wrestled with these questions: when is fear necessary and healthy, and when does it stop us from living? When should we conquer our fears, and when should we listen to them? What is the right way to be in relationship to fear?

The days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days that are filled with fear. Over and over again in the liturgy, we find the root נ-ג-י, meaning "awe" or "fear." In the prayer, *Unetaneh Tokef*, one of the central prayers of the Musaf liturgy on both holidays, we tremble before God and acknowledge the awesome power and fear-instilling nature of these days that determine our fate for the coming year.¹ We even call these days *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe or Fear.

So, as we cultivate this stance of trembling before God, fearful of God's awesome power and what the year may bring, we are challenged to ask ourselves, is cultivating a posture of fear helpful, or is it harmful? What is the correct place of fear in our lives?

The Book of Proverbs (28:14) offers a straightforward approach to fear, teaching, "Fortunate is the person who is fearful always." When it comes to fear, we should lean into it—all the time. And this posture of fear, perhaps counterintuitively, will lead us to fortune. If Proverbs is the guide, then I, with all of my fears, am golden.

The Talmud, however, complicates this. We learn in *Bavli Berakhot* (60a) that Rabbi Yishmael once noticed that a student was afraid. Rabbi Yishmael seizes on this fear and criticizes the student, quoting a verse from Isaiah (33:14): "The transgressors in Zion are afraid, trembling has

seized the ungodly." The implication left unstated in this text is that fear and sin go hand in hand, so fear is the mark of someone who is ungodly. The student, however, is no stranger to the Book of Proverbs, and quotes back to Rabbi Yishmael, "Fortunate is the person who is fearful always." Are we not taught that we should be in a posture of fear always? Rabbi Yishmael responds. That verse is referring to one who is fearful of losing their Torah. Fear of forgetting Torah is an acceptable reason to be afraid. Any other fear, however, is the fear of sinners.

Immediately following this story, we learn of another interaction in which a rabbi criticizes a scholar for being afraid. Rav Hamnuna catches Yehudah bar Natan sighing and warns him, "Do you wish to bring suffering upon yourself?" He quotes Job (3:25), "For what I feared has come upon me, and what I was afraid of has overtaken me." Rav Hamnuna warns him that when we are afraid of a particular outcome, we are more likely to make that fear a reality. We see our fears become reality in another story found in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 60a). The Mishnah (*Shabbat* 6:2) teaches that one is forbidden from going out in a spiked sandal on Shabbat. The Talmud asks why, and offers several short stories in which a group of people, upon hearing the sound of a spiked sandal or seeing its footprints, mistake it for an oncoming attack of their enemy. Fearful that an enemy is approaching, they turn on each other in an attempt to flee, killing each other in greater numbers than if an enemy had actually attacked. They were afraid of being killed by an advancing enemy, and, as a result of their unfounded fears, they brought their fears to life.

¹ "We lend power to the holiness of this day. For it is tremendous (*nora*) and awe filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted, your throne will be established in loving-kindness, and you will sit on that throne in truth."

In our passage in Berakhot, Yehudah bar Natan is familiar with Proverbs and responds, "Fortunate is the person who is fearful always." To which Rav Hamnuna, following in the footsteps of Rabbi Yishmael, similarly answers that the verse is referring to fear of losing Torah. All other fear serves to harm us, rather than help us.

In addition to the warnings of Rabbi Yishmael and Rav Hamnuna that fear is often not a good thing, we see much evidence in the Torah—and likely our own lives—that fear can prevent us from living life to the fullest. This is one of my biggest wrestlings with fear. When do I allow my fear to guide me and prevent me from placing myself in a dangerous situation, and when, by giving into fear, do I actually stop living? After watching the near destruction of the world, shut away in his ark, Noah spends months watching the waters recede. Even when the rains have long since stopped and the ground has dried, he still hesitates to leave the security of his shelter. He has been afraid for so long, he doesn't know how or when it will feel safe to step back out in the world. According to a *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah (34:4), it is only when God commands him to leave the ark that Noah finally takes that first step. Fear can hold us back; in an attempt to keep ourselves safe, we stop moving forward. Should I have listened to my fear and stayed far away from that glacier? Or did I do the right thing by overcoming my fear, allowing myself to have a once-in-a-lifetime—albeit terrifying—experience?

Unlike me, the 3rd century rabbi Rav was not afraid. Massekhet Ta'anit (20b) teaches that there was a crumbling wall in danger of collapsing. Every day, Rav and Shmuel would walk around that wall, steering clear of danger. One day, however, while they were passing by with the great Rav Adda bar Ahavah, Rav surprises Shmuel by walking right beneath the wall. Shmuel reacts with surprise and says, "Master, let us go around!" But Rav, trusting that the merit of Rav Adda bar Ahavah would protect them, plainly says that, as long as Rav

Adda bar Ahavah is with him, "I am not afraid."

I am struck by the boldness of Rav's response—but I also wonder if he isn't being a bit foolhardy. Is it admirable that Rav is unafraid to pass by the crumbling wall, so sure that Rav Adda bar Ahavah's merit will protect them, or is it irresponsible? In a similar story (later on the same page, Ta'anit 20b) in which Rav Huna places both Rav Adda bar Ahavah and himself in a dangerous situation, relying on Rav Adda's merit to protect them, Rav Adda bar Ahavah is outraged when he realizes what Rav Huna has done. To explain his anger, the Talmud teaches that Rav Adda holds with his own statement: "A person should never stand in a place of danger and say, 'A miracle will be performed for me!'" Even Rav Adda bar Ahavah doesn't assume that God will protect him because of his merit.

While Rav Hamnuna and Rabbi Yishmael in Massekhet Berakhot warn their students that fear isn't a good thing, teaching that it reveals a lack of faith in God and serves to manifest the very thing from which we are afraid, these stories in Massekhet Ta'anit lead us in another direction. Perhaps fear is sometimes a necessary and important teacher. Fear can keep us safe; fear can prevent us from placing ourselves unnecessarily in dangerous situations. Perhaps it is not, in fact, a good thing to boldly say, "I am unafraid," when there is good reason to be fearful.

When it comes to entering into relationship with God, we are taught that a bit of fear and a lot of caution may be a good thing. With the giving of the Torah imminent and Mount Sinai surrounded in smoke and fire, God tells Moshe to warn the people not to come near for a closer look (Exodus 19:21). The people wisely heed God's message. Just after the giving of the Ten Commandments, they say to Moshe, "You speak to us, and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." God told the people to stay away and the people rightly are afraid. They hear God's warning, they see a mountain consumed by fire and smoke, and they keep their distance.

Curiously, Moshe responds by telling the people to "be not afraid" (20:16-17). Don't be afraid!? Of course they're afraid! God told them to be afraid. Certainly, Moshe isn't suggesting that the people disregard God's warning and run up the mountain! So what does Moshe mean when he instructs them to not be afraid?

Perhaps Moshe is instead saying this: do heed God's warning not to charge up the mountain and do keep your distance. But as long as you keep your distance, as long as you take the necessary precautions and act safely, you can let go of your fear. Your fear in that situation isn't serving you.

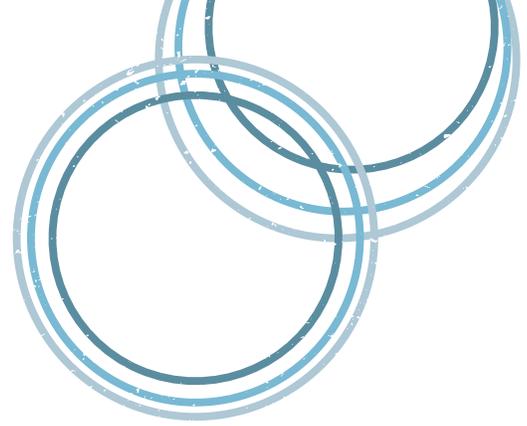
If we return to my snapshots in which I find myself terrified atop two different mountains in New Zealand, I am caught between Proverbs' admonition to always be fearful and Rav's insistence that he is not afraid. And I think about Moshe's response to the Israelites: take care, keep back, and let go of fear. Perhaps that's what healthy fear looks like. Perhaps that's how we should be in relationship to our fears. Fear should move us toward caution. Fear should advise us to take care to keep safe while still living our lives. Fear should encourage us to go hiking with a friend rather than setting out alone. Fear should counsel us to steer clear of crumbling walls rather than knowingly walking beneath them. Similarly, we should have an appropriate fear of God, but not so much so that we cannot have a relationship. Perhaps we should stay off the mountain, but we should not back away from revelation.

But once fear does its job, once it moves us toward caution, we then have to follow Moshe's advice. As we stand back from a mountain swallowed in smoke and fire, we have to let go of fear. We've done what we can to be safe.

As we approach this new year, unsure of what joys and what obstacles lie before us, let's use our fear to strike the balance. May we allow our fear to keep us safe so that we too can stand at the foot of the mountain and say, "We are not afraid."

THE DANGER OF DISTANCE

Dena Weiss



When Hagar and Yishmael start out on their journey from the safety of Avraham's tent, we don't know what will become of them. We don't know whether they will make it to their destination; we don't even know if they even *have* a destination. And, unfortunately, we see that they are confronted by the threat of extreme thirst and dehydration at the very outset of their journey, which is particularly dangerous for young Yishmael. Hagar's reaction to this stressful moment illustrates to us how difficult it can be to be present with other people and with them in their distress. But it also teaches us that it is necessary and essential:

בראשית כא:טו-יט

וַיִּכְלוּ הַמַּיִם מִן הַחֶמְתּוֹ וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים: ¹⁶וַתִּלָּךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנְגַד הַרְחֵק בְּמִטְחָוֵי קֹשֶׁת בִּי אִמְרָה אֵל אֲרָאָה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְגַד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְכֶּ: ¹⁷וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת קוֹל הַנְּעָר וַיִּקְרָא מִלֶּאדָּה אֱלֹהִים אֶל הַגֵּר. וְהַשְּׂמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶה לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי בִּי שְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעָר בְּאַשְׁרֵר הוּא שָׁם: ¹⁸יְקוּמִי שָׂאִי אֶת הַנְּעָר וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֹת יָדָךְ בּוֹ בִּי לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשֵׁימְנֶנּוּ: ¹⁹וַיּוֹפִקֶח אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּבְרָא בְּאָר מַיִם וַתִּלָּךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת הַחֶמְתּוֹ מַיִם וַתִּשְׁקֶן אֶת הַנְּעָר:

Bereishit 21:15-19

¹⁵The water in the flask ran out and [Hagar] cast the child under one of the shrubs. ¹⁶She walked away and she sat far from him, at an arrow's distance, since she said, "So I won't see the death of the child." She sat far away and she raised her voice and she cried. ¹⁷God heard the voice of the child and

an angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is bothering you, Hagar? Do not fear. Because God has heard the voice of the boy as he was over there. ¹⁸Get up and carry the boy and take hold of his hand with yours, because I will make him a great nation." ¹⁹God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went, and she filled the flask with water and she gave the boy something to drink.

Hagar's reaction to the possibility that her son might pass away is very human and very understandable: she's afraid. She's afraid of what will happen, and perhaps even more so, she is afraid of how it would feel for her to be there and witness the passing of her only child, God forbid. Hagar chooses her own psychological self-preservation in this moment.¹ She leaves her son at a distance so that she can mentally dissociate from what is about to happen to him. The verse describes this as an arrow's distance—as far as she needs to go to be out of the range of death. However, the angel gently criticizes Hagar for this approach. He tells her to carry her son and to hold his hand. He points out to her that God has heard her son's crying, not on account of his thirst or fear, but rather בְּאַשְׁרֵר הוּא שָׁם, insofar as he is "there," cast aside by his mother. Insofar as he is alone. Hagar's approach might be good for Hagar, but it's devastating for Yishmael. He is also afraid, and he needs his mother. He needs to be with someone who can support him and hold his hand as he confronts his extreme thirst and, possibly, his own death.

Hagar's choice is a product of her despair. Because she does not have any hope for her son's survival, she can only focus on what she can do in the event of his death. But after she reunites with her son, the water of the well becomes visible to her. When she allows herself to have hope, not only is she able to be there with—and for—her son, she is also able to save him, to see that there is water available, to put it into her own flask, and to bring her son back to safety.

It is important to understand that Hagar's need to push Yishmael away when he is suffering is not an act of callousness. On the contrary, it comes from her love for him. Because she is so attached to him, because she cares for him so much, witnessing his death would have been too hard for her to bear. This is what love does—we become so enmeshed in the life of someone else that what is hard for them becomes hard for us. We can become so close to others, so identified with others, that their pain can become our pain—so strong and so real to us, that it can eclipse the actual reality of who is at risk, who is experiencing non-vicarious pain, where the need actually lies.

This close identification, this emotional entanglement, can lead us to want to put up barriers between us and other people. If I want to spare myself pain, I also need to keep myself at a distance from other people. This is true both of the type of "your pain is my pain" experience that Hagar was dealing with, and also true about the kind of pain that others can cause to us directly. The closer someone is to us, the more they can hurt us. True closeness en-

¹ I would like to acknowledge that my colleague, R. Tali Adler, offers an opposite reading to mine. She sees in Hagar a model of permission for the overburdened mother to separate herself. See her essay, "The God of Hagar," in *Zokhreinu Le-Hayyim: Memory and Promise* (Hadar High Holiday Reader, 5782), available [here](#).

tails vulnerability. When I love you, and I feel that you understand me, what you say to me has weight and can therefore cut and sting, or affirm and elevate. Strangers and people at a distance are easier to ignore. Because they aren't near us, we can dismiss them. It is the people whom we love, whom we care about enough, who can wound us so deeply.

The truth of the danger of proximity is beautifully expressed by a statement of Shmuel to Rav Yehudah:

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין ז.
 כי רחמתין הוה עזיזא אפותיא
 דספסירא שכיבן השתא דלא
 עזיזא רחמתין פוריא בר שיתין
 גרמידי לא טגי לן.

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 7a
*When our love was strong,
 we would lie on the face of a
 sword. Now that our love is
 not strong, a bed of sixty amot
 would not be sufficient for us.²*

The image of the extreme closeness of the people who are in love here is both sweet and threatening. On the one hand, they are so in love, so happy together, that there is no space between them—and they feel that they don't need any space. However, the image is also threatening. This couple is not snuggling on a single feather; they are lying on the face of a sword. If either of them moves the smallest amount or pushes the other a bit too far, the results will be tragic. The sword is sharp; the intimacy of the sword is fraught and foreboding. It is fierce, not placid; it is difficult, not easy. The strength of this love is also its danger. Because they love each other, they want to be close, but because they love each other, that closeness is often tense and threatening.

The love of the king-sized bed is a comfortable love. We have plenty of space and plenty of autonomy, and my actions don't affect you, don't hurt you. But this love is not

as strong a love; it is a weak and impoverished relationship. It is not as tense, but it is also not as powerful and sustaining.

The months and years of Covid have taught us that being socially distant is the safe position. The farther we are from other people, the less risk we have of them hurting us—of contracting an illness from them that has cost so many people their lives or continued health. However, we also learned that social distance can also be emotionally and psychologically convenient. If there is a family member I don't want to see, a conversation I don't want to have, I can avoid seeing or talking to anyone I don't want to without experiencing any backlash, because a culture of social distance has made avoiding other people socially acceptable. The experience of the pandemic has accustomed us to the ease of separation. We have been given license to insulate ourselves from other people—and it's an arrangement we can get too used to.

The warning of the angel to Hagar is that the distance that she is hiding behind, that she is using to protect herself, seems safe—but it's also dangerous. She is protecting herself at the expense of her son, she is distancing herself from the pain of being close to him, without fully thinking through the pain that her distance is causing her son. And in her quest for self-preservation, she's also depriving herself of the benefits of proximity. This is why the angel tells her, "You need to go there, and you need to hold his hand. You need to be present for him, not loving him from a distance." As difficult as it is, that's how important it is. It is the difference between life and death, being able to see that there actually *is* water available. If she were to remain at an arrow's length, her fear of her son's death would have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.³ Her fear of his demise would have guaranteed it.

This is particularly pressing around the High Holidays because

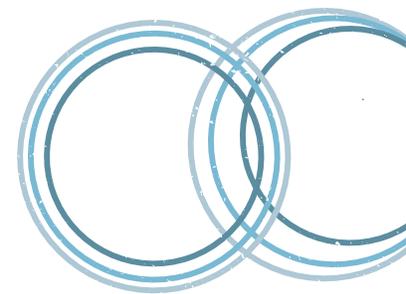
proximity is necessary for reconciliation, as R. Zeira understood:

תלמוד בבלי יומא פז.
 ר' זירא כי הוה ליה מילתא בהדי
 איניש הוה חליף ותני לקמיה
 וממציא ליה כי היכי דניתי וניפוק
 ליה מדעתיה

Talmud Bavli Yoma 87a
*When R. Zeira had an issue
 with someone, he would walk
 back and forth in front of them
 and make himself available, so
 that [the person] could come
 out and change his perspective.*

The closeness that enables someone to hurt your feelings—or enables you to hurt theirs—is also a critical ingredient in the process of reconciliation. If we avoid the people with whom we have tension or a complicated history, we may spare ourselves discomfort and awkwardness or further pain. However, we will also have prevented ourselves from realizing the possibility that the relationship can be salvaged. We need to enable ourselves to have the type of confrontation that is necessary for progress and continued closeness.

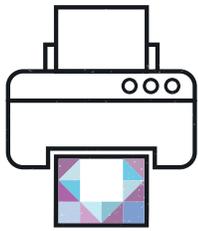
As we are preparing ourselves to confront the changes that we need to make in order to become better people, let us avoid the danger of thinking that this is a process that occurs in isolation. Rather, it occurs through conversation, through the awkwardness and the difficulty and the pain of confronting our own pain and the pain of others. This may be the most emotionally trying path, but it may also promise to be the most fruitful. ♦



² In the continuation of the passage, Rav Huna maps these two experiences of love onto the relationship between the Jewish people and God. The tense intimacy of the sword image corresponds to the closeness that was experienced in the wilderness, where God "lived" in the *mishkan* (tabernacle), in the midst of the people. The comfortable—but distant—relationship of the bed image corresponds to the times when the people were established in the land of Canaan and God resided in the Beit Ha-Mikdash (temple), a transition from a tiny and temporary tent to a large and permanent palace.

³ On tragedy as a self-fulfilling prophecy, see R. Avi Strausberg's essay in this very reader, "I Am (Not) Afraid," on p. 12..

BERAKHAH-TELLER



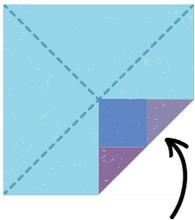
1 BEFORE THE HOLIDAY, PRINT OUT ENOUGH BERAKHAH TELLERS SO THAT THERE ARE AT LEAST ENOUGH FOR EVERY TWO PEOPLE AT YOUR GATHERING



2 CUT ALONG THE BORDER TO MAKE A SQUARE

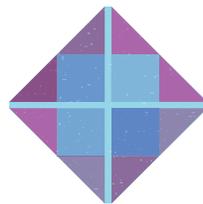


3 WITH THE PRINT SIDE DOWN, FOLD IN HALF BOTH WAYS TO CREATE CREASES



4 FOLD EACH CORNER TO THE CENTER

after this step it will look like this

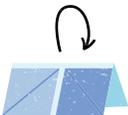


5 TURN OVER, FOLD EACH CORNER TO THE CENTER

after this step it will look like this



6 FOLD IN HALF BOTH WAYS TO MAKE CREASES



7 USE YOUR FINGERS TO OPEN THE FLAPS UNDERNEATH



Tashlikh Guide

Hadar's Children & Families



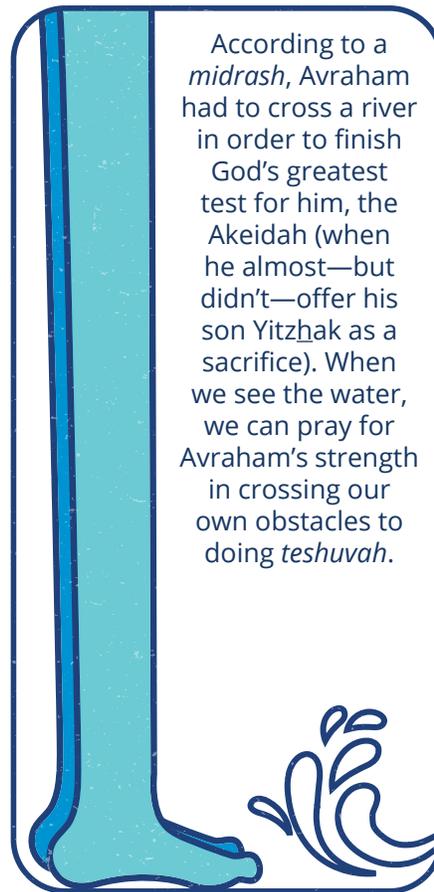
GOING TO THE WATER

The custom of Tashlikh goes back to Germany, about 600 years ago. The Maharil wrote that, after lunch on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, his community would go to the sea or a river. This became a popular custom, especially among Ashkenazim, and the Rema (200 years later) mentions it in his comments to the Shulchan Arukh (Orach Hayyim 583:2).

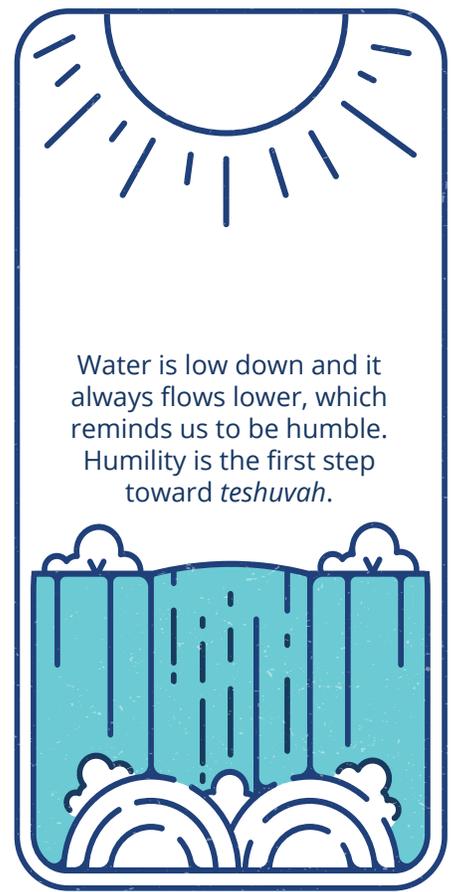




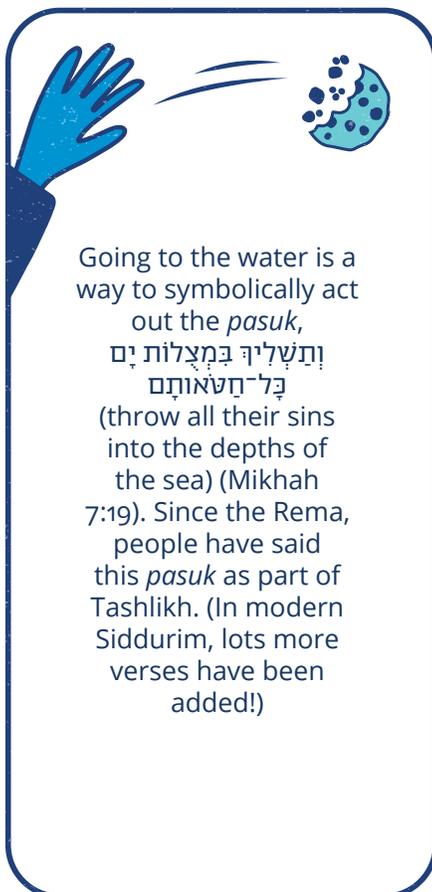
TASHLIKH IS SUPPOSED TO HELP US FOCUS OUR MINDS ON *TESHUVAH* FOR THE COMING YEAR. THERE ARE LOTS OF WAYS IT MIGHT DO THIS, ALL CONNECTED TO WATER:

According to a *midrash*, Avraham had to cross a river in order to finish God's greatest test for him, the Akeidah (when he almost—but didn't—offer his son Yitzhak as a sacrifice). When we see the water, we can pray for Avraham's strength in crossing our own obstacles to doing *teshuvah*.



Water is low down and it always flows lower, which reminds us to be humble. Humility is the first step toward *teshuvah*.



Going to the water is a way to symbolically act out the *pasuk*, וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל-חַטָּאוֹתֶם (throw all their sins into the depths of the sea) (Mikha 7:19). Since the Rema, people have said this *pasuk* as part of Tashlikh. (In modern Siddurim, lots more verses have been added!)

In order to do *teshuvah*, we need to pour out our hearts in prayer, like we might pour water. (This is exactly what happens in Shmuel Alef 7:6, when Benei Yisrael pour out water in order to remind people to do *teshuvah*.)



There's one other connection to water, not specifically about *teshuvah*. A major theme of Rosh Hashanah is God's מְלִכּוּת (malkhut, rulership). The Gemara (Horayot 12a) says that Benei Yisrael used to crown their kings near a spring or other running water. According to Rav Ovadiah Yosef (Yabia Omer 4:47), we go to the water on Rosh Hashanah to remind ourselves of God's continuing *malkhut*.



FEEDING THE FISH?!

It seems that the Maharil's community was already throwing food into the water during Tashlikh in order to really experience the *pasuk* from Mikhah ("throw all their sins into the depths of the sea"). The Maharil thought this was a conflict with the laws of Yom Tov. This is because the only food preparation we are allowed to do on Yom Tov is for ourselves and any animals that depend on us, like pets, but not for wild animals that get their food from elsewhere.

Instead, the Kitzur Shulhan Arukh says that we should just shake the bottoms of our clothes, as a way of saying, "Let's search ourselves for our sins and get rid of them." For us, the equivalent is probably to shake out our pockets.

FAMILY TEXT STUDY FOR TASHLIKH

Here's a text with guiding questions to bring along to Tashlikh. Down by the water, you can learn as a family.

After Benei Yisrael left מצְרַיִם (Mitzrayim, Egypt), they came to a place where the water was too bitter to drink. The people were thirsty. God showed Moshe a piece of wood, Moshe threw it into the water, and the water became sweet (Shemot 15:22-25).

In a *midrash*, some of our Rabbis wondered about the miraculous piece of wood that sweetened the water for Benei Yisrael.

תנחומא בשלח • MIDRASH TANHUMA

ומה היה העץ?

רבי יהושע אומר: של ערבה היה.
רבי נתן אומר: הרדופני מר היה.
רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר: של זית היה.
רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: קרדניו.
ויש אומרים: עקרי התאנה ועקרי רמון.

מכל מקום, מר היה.

רבו שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: בא וראה כמה מפלאין דרכיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא יותר מדרכי בשר ודם. בשר ודם, במתוק מרפא את המר. אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא, במר מרפא את המר. הא כיצד? נותן דבר המחבל בתוך דבר המחבל, לעשות נס בתוך נס...

וכן הצדיקים במה שהם מקנתרין, בו הם מתקנין.

What kind of wood was it?

Rabbi Yehoshua says: It was willow.
Rabbi Natan says: It was bitter ivy.
Rabbi Eliezer Hamoda'i says: It was olive.
Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korhah says: It was cedar.
Some say: Roots of fig and pomegranate trees.

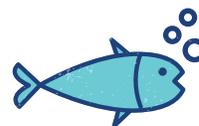
According to all these opinions, it was bitter.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: This shows how amazing the ways of God are, so much more than human beings! Human beings use sweet things to heal bitterness. But God is even able to use bitter things to get rid of bitterness. How does this work? By placing something destructive into something else destructive, creating a miracle within a miracle...

This is how righteous people are, also. When they say negative things, they fix them in the same spirit.



CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE



תדע לך, שְׁבִשְׁעָה שִׁקְנִיתָ מִשָּׁה, בְּ"אֵז" קִנֵּיתָ,
שִׁנְאַמְר: "וּמֵאֵז בְּאֵתִי אֶל פְּרַעֲה לְדַבֵּר בְּשִׁמְךָ..."
(שמות ה:כג)

Moshe is a good example. When he complained, he did it with the word "az," saying "since (az) I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, You still have not delivered Your people."

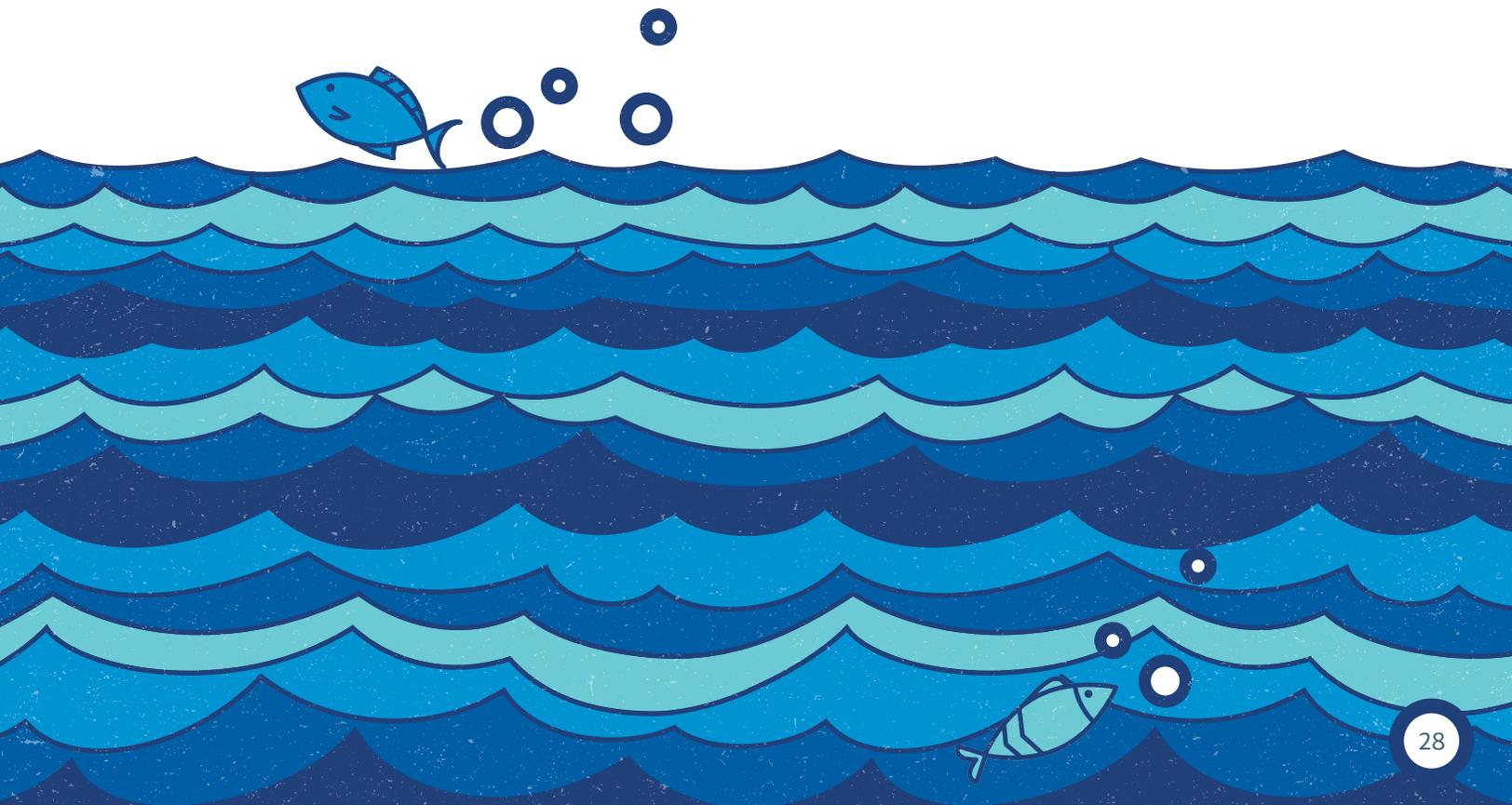
אָמַר מִשָּׁה: בְּ"אֵז" סָרַחְתִּי. בְּ"אֵז" אֲנִי מִתְּקַוֵּן
וְאֹמֵר שִׁירָה. לִכְךָ נֹאמַר "אֵז יִשִּׁיר מִשָּׁה."
וְאֹמֵר שִׁירָה. לִכְךָ נֹאמַר "אֵז יִשִּׁיר מִשָּׁה."

Then Moshe realized: I sinned with the word "az." Now I will repair things with this same word, by singing (at the splitting of the sea), "az yashir - Then Moshe sang."



The story in the Torah and this *midrash* highlight how even bad, undrinkable water can be made into something good. Bitter things can become sweet.

- Think of something from this past year that, like the water here, was "bitter" to you when it happened, but could perhaps be made "sweet" in the future. Maybe there was something you did that you're not proud of, or perhaps you had an experience that wasn't so great. As you look at the water, can you think of ways to turn those things around and make them sweeter?
- Sometimes, there are feelings or experiences we carry around with us even when we don't have to anymore—like feelings of anger or shame from a long time ago. This is a good time of year to let go of behaviors we want to change, but it can also be a good time to "let go" of some of those hurt feelings. Can you think of a situation where it would be helpful for you to let go of these negative feelings and let the water carry them away?
- The *midrash* makes it clear that the wood that was used to sweeten the bitter water was bitter itself. What is surprising or miraculous about that? What do you think it could be telling us about how God acts in the world?
- What do you think is the difference between using sweet to get rid of bitter and using bitter to get rid of bitter?



ZOKHREINU LE-HAYYIM Singing our Pleas and Uncertainties

Rabbi Deborah Sacks Mintz
with a new song from the Rising Song Institute

We all yearn to be remembered. We yearn to be remembered by our loved ones and our communities. We yearn to be remembered for the good we have done, rather than the ways we have fallen short.

This natural human inclination manifests repeatedly in our High Holiday liturgy; Rosh Hashanah is, after all, also termed Yom HaZikaron (“the Day of Remembrance”). Embedded in the texts of our prayers is not only a yearning to be remembered for good by those around us, but a plea to be remembered *le-hayyim*, for life, by God.

Recited in each and every Amidah during the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah (the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), this line, originating in the time of the Geonim, reads as an impassioned, desperate plea:

זָכְרֵנוּ לְחַיִּים מִלֶּךְ חֹפֵץ בְּחַיִּים
וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים לְמַעַן
אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים

*Remember us for life,
Sovereign, Who desires life, and
inscribe us in the Book of Life,
for Your sake, Living God.*

Appealing to the hope that God deeply wants life for each and every one of us, as seen in Ezekiel (18:32), this passage invokes this desire on both the communal and individual level. By situating this line in the

Amidah, we root our own individual, personal stories of both strength and fallibility to that of our ancestors; God remembered the divine promise to Abraham,¹ and we invoke this deeply personal Divine-human relationship as we utter this powerful line. However, we sing this line in the plural, noting that our anguish over the ways we have fallen short are not only on a personal level, but on a communal level as well. The yearning to be remembered *le-hayyim*, for life, extends beyond the self, encompassing those with whom we live our lives.

I offer here a new melody for this plea, seeking to explore the pleading tone of this text more deeply through musical composition. The melody reaches its climax on the word “*le-ma’ankha* - for Your sake,” placing the singer’s emphasis on the aforementioned belief that God does in fact desire for us to be remembered, forgiven, and allowed to live another year. However, a question is embedded in this very plea: for we know that to be remembered, written, and sealed in the Book of Life is never a guarantee. Repeated twice, with the first time remaining musically unresolved, this melody seeks to capture that state of uncertainty.

This is the nature of prayer; for our most heartfelt pleas contain our deepest questions. ♦



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1 See Psalm 105:42.

Zokhreinu

Rabbi Deborah Sacks Mintz

Am G C C G Em Am

Zokh - rei-nu le-ha - yyim me - lekh ha-feitz ba-ha - yyim ve -

5 Am Dm G C Dm F G Em Am

khot - vei-nu be - se-fer ha-ha-yyim le - ma'an-kha E - lo - him ha - yyim ve -

9 Am Dm G C Dm F G Em Am

khot - vei-nu be - se-fer ha-ha-yyim le - ma'an-kha E - lo - him ha - yyim le -

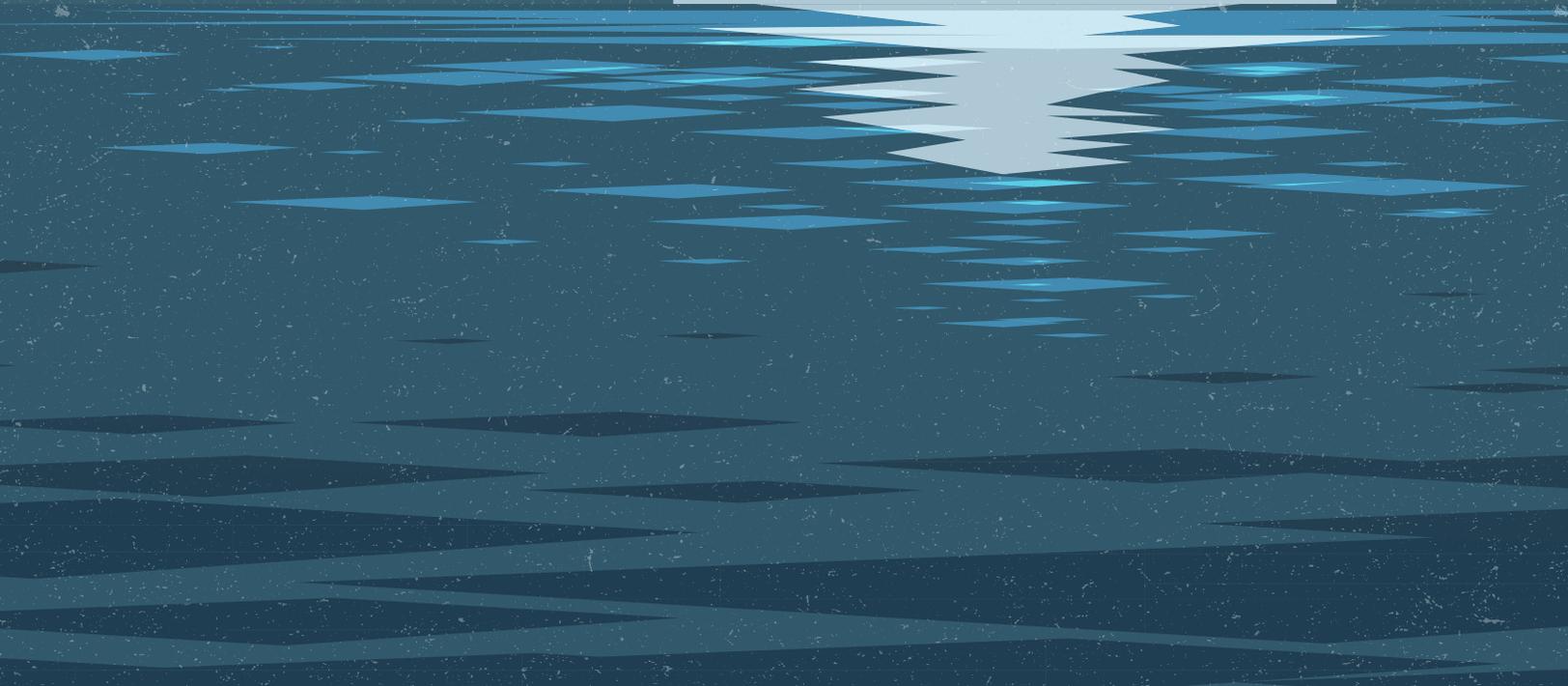
13 Am C Dm E E7 Am

ma'an - kha le - ma'an - kha E - lo-him ha - yyim le - ma'an - kha le -

18 C Dm F G Em Am

ma'an kha, o le - man - kha E - lo - him ha - yyim.

YOM KIPPUR



KOL NIDREI

Approaching God Through Sound, Not Translation

R. Elie Kaunfer

"God seems to dwell in the making and unmaking of language."

—Patricia Cox Miller, *"In Praise of Nonsense"*

Once when I was in Israel, I visited a first-grade class that was learning the Amidah. The prayerbook in use provided space under the traditional words for the students to record what the blessing meant to them. I looked at one boy's entry for the blessing asking for a good agricultural year. The boy had written, "I pray that my brother comes home safely from Lebanon." In prayer, words and intentions don't always match.

What is it about Kol Nidrei that is so powerful? Far more important than the literal meaning of its words, this prayer conjures up images of our annual communal outpouring on Yom Kippur: crowded sanctuaries, introspective worshipers, and haunting music. Perhaps no other Jewish prayer demonstrates so starkly the fact that praying is much more than simply understanding, translating, and saying a prayer's words.

On the surface, Kol Nidrei is a technical legal formula, not even really a prayer. Its function is purportedly to release us from all kinds of vows made or, depending on the version, yet to be made. But the content of Kol Nidrei seems almost incidental to the emotional valence of the words that constitute it. Why is that?

One obvious reason is the music, which has the power to transcend

I BELIEVE THAT THE POWER OF KOL NIDREI DOES INDEED STEM FROM ITS WORDS... FROM THEIR FORM AND SOUND

the limits of verbal translation. Much has been written about this music, most especially the powerful melody known to most Ashkenazi worshipers. Avraham Zevi Idelsohn, a leading scholar on the history of Jewish music history,² puts it this way: "While the text, a mere renouncement of vows, is devoid of religious emotions, its musical setting is generally accepted as expression of the deep religious feelings which move the Jewish heart on the eve of the Day of Atonement."³ Idelsohn is certainly tapping into a widely held sentiment about the power of the music.

But are there no "religious emotions" to Kol Nidrei other than the music? It has certainly aroused plenty of emotions in its day. It has evoked official rabbinic opposition almost since its initial appearance in the liturgy, and the Jews who defended it against its powerful rabbinic opponents predated its haunting Ashkenazi melody by many centu-

ries.⁴ Is there something else, then, about the prayer that is so appealing? Something beyond the music, on the one hand, and the literal textual meaning, on the other?

I believe that the power of Kol Nidrei does indeed stem from its words—not necessarily from their particular meaning, however, but from their form and sound. As with any poem, the rhyme and rhythm—the sonorous forms of the words themselves—play a significant role in shaping its aesthetic character and symbolic meaning. In the case of Kol Nidrei, it could be precisely the strangeness, repetitiveness, or some other quality in the form of the words that constitutes its ability to move us so powerfully as we reach toward the Divine.

One of the few material remains archaeologists have found from the Jewish community that produced the Babylonian Talmud are what are known as incantation bowls. These are magical items, produced by and for both Jews and non-Jews, used for protection from demons and other evil forces. They are usually written in Aramaic, the common language for most of the people who lived in this region, but also one that was apparently understood to be especially effective for magic. These incantations rely on the poetry and sounds of the words, in many cases much more than their literal meaning.

Similarly, despite at least one extant version of Kol Nidrei in Hebrew,⁵ the text of this prayer we use today

1 In A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 481-505.

2 1865-1921.

3 A. Z. Idelsohn, "The Kol Nidre Tune," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 8-9 (1931-1932), p. 493. See also A. M. Haberman, *Mipri ha-Et ve-ha-Et* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1981), p. 180: "It seems logical that the sweet melody kept/guarded it."

4 For more about the opposition to—and defense of—Kol Nidrei, see R. Ethan Tucker's recorded class, "Cutting Our Losses or Preparing for Failure?: An Analysis of Kol Nidrei," available [here](#).

5 One form of it, at least, is preserved in a manuscript of Seder Rav Amram Gaon (one of the first books we could call a "Siddur," from the 9th century CE), although many texts there, probably including this one, are interpolations from a later era. See Daniel Goldschmidt (ed.) *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), pp. 162-163. A Hebrew version is also attributed to Hai Gaon (d. 1038).

is in Aramaic. It is deliberately hard to understand: even those who read Aramaic cannot easily find accurate ways to translate the list of technical synonyms that constitute Kol Nidrei's key words.⁶ Precisely because the prayer defies easy translation, worshipers tend to dwell on its succession of syllables and rhymes, not the cognitive meaning of its words, as their main worship experience.

Kol Nidrei, therefore—as scholars have noticed—shares many features with the incantation bowls; it has the sound and feel of a magical incantation or mantra-esque poetry. Occasionally, the language of the bowls mirrors the words of Kol Nidrei itself.⁷ The tradition to say Kol Nidrei three times is also shared with incantation practice.⁸

Incantations are known for their use of language in a non-rational manner. Some ancient incantations used in the bowls, scholars have shown, began sensibly enough in their original Greek contexts, but their original meaning was lost even as the words were preserved in a

twisted version and used for incantations.⁹ Regarding magical names specifically, “It is their very strangeness which makes them magically potent.”¹⁰

Kol Nidrei's overlap with Babylonian magical spells should not be taken to indicate some form of derision or dismissal, as if to say, “Oh, we don't believe in magic anymore.” Like it or not, there is a deep aesthetic power to the words of magical spells, precisely because they force us to confront our inability to understand everything we say.

And this, I would argue, is the central experience of Yom Kippur. First, we recognize that, in a world so focused on articulation and expression, deep relationships defy linguistic boundaries. Who could express in words the love of a parent for a child? Or the pain of a spouse losing a partner? Stepping into the intensity of Yom Kippur through words that don't “mean” reminds us of the futility of language to capture our emotions.

And second, on a day focused on confronting the Divine Presence, we can't pretend that all the words we are about to say in the Maḥzor will encapsulate or accurately describe God and our potential relationship with God. God cannot be captured in words.¹¹

Kol Nidrei allows us to skirt the grooves of our minds that rely so much on expressive language. When you catch yourself drawn in by Kol Nidrei despite not knowing what it means, allow yourself to remain open to all those non-cognitive experiences that make up the deeper human spirit, and which shape the core of our most cherished relationships. After all, as our Rabbis recognized, in many ways all prayer is futile; only emotions can penetrate the heavens.¹² ♦

- 6 Moshe David Herr, “Inyanei Halakhah be-Eretz Yisrael be-Me'ah ha-Shishit ve-ha-Shevi'it liSfirat ha-Notzrim,” *Tarbiz* 49 (1979-1980), p. 68, n. 29 (end).
- 7 This was first noted in academic literature in the late 1870s and early 1880s. See J. Halevy, “Observation sur un vase judeo-babylonien du British Museum,” *Comptes rendus de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 5 (1877), p. 291, cited in Charles Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press and the Society of Biblical Literature, 1975), p. 7 n. 36. This similarity was also noticed by E. Babelon and M. Schwab in “Un Vase Judea-Chaldeen,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 4 (1882), p. 170. See further Herr, “Inyanei Halakhah,” p. 68 n. 29.
- 8 Gershom Scholem (“Havdallah de-Rabbi Akiva: Makor liMsoret ha-Magi'ah ha-Yehudit biTkufat ha-Geonim,” *Tarbiz* 50 [1980-1981], p. 262 n. 61) notes how common such repetitions are in magical texts.
- 9 Claudia Rohrbacher-Sticker, “From Sense to Nonsense, From Incantation Prayer to Magical Spell,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3 (1996), pp. 24-46. An example of this phenomenon could be the word “abracadabra.”
- 10 Rohrbacher-Sticker, p. 25.
- 11 This is the argument of Rabbi Hanina on Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 33b, when a prayer leader starts to add additional words of praise to the first paragraph of the Amidah: “Have you concluded all the praise of your Master!?”
- 12 Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 32b: “Rabbi Elazar said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer are locked. But even though the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are not locked.”



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ANGEL OR GHOST?

Yom Kippur of Nightmares and Dreams

R. Aviva Richman

INTRODUCTION

When we don the white *kittel* on Yom Kippur, it often conjures an image of an angel, inspiring us to reach for our inner purity and innocence. But there is a darker side to this simple white garb. It is also our burial shroud, reminding us of the precariousness of life and proximity of death. So, the message we send by dressing in kittels is a little unclear. We might be channeling our inner angels, but we also might be parading as ghosts.

The haunting side of our white dress comes into full view in the Talmud's discussion of Yom Kippur. Most of Massekhet Yoma describes the intricate steps of *kapparah* (atonement) through various sacrifices in the sanctuary, all done to fulfill the theology of Leviticus, enabling God to continue "dwelling with us" in the thick of our impurities.¹ But the last chapter turns to the practice of Yom Kippur when there is no more sanctuary. After the destruction of the Temple, our modern Yom Kippur is not just an alternative, do-it-at-home method to achieve *kapparah*. There is a gaping schism between the rest of the tractate and this part, a total paradigm shift. The methods outlined so carefully for seven chapters failed; God could no longer dwell amongst our impurities, and allowed the sanctuary to be destroyed. Our attempts at *kapparah* were too feeble, and the Yom Kippur that remains is a fundamentally different entity.

To bring home this message, the Talmud (Yoma 76b-77a) relates an embellished account of the "figure dressed in white לבוש בדים" (איש לבוש בדים), who is the protagonist in the prophesies of God's punishment and flight

from the sanctuary in the book of Yehezkel. As we study this narrative, we find the makings of the antithesis of Yom Kippur, a Yom Kippur of our nightmares. While it is scary and disturbing to read, it also invites us to articulate our own worst fears and deepest anxieties. Only from this kind of articulation and confrontation can true *teshuvah* emerge.

ANTITHESIS/NIGHTMARE OF YOM KIPPUR

In the midst of discussing the practical laws of Yom Kippur that are relevant beyond the Temple, the Talmud abruptly plunges us into the book of Ezekiel, as the prophet is shown a vision of the Temple precincts in the preliminary stages of the great destruction. There he finds the "cloud of incense" (ענן הקטרת),² twisted perversely as part of idol worship rather than playing its sacred role in the Yom Kippur service, where it is meant to accompany the high priest's entrance to the inner sanctum.³ The people all say God has left them (עזב), rather than dwelling in their midst (השכן אתם בתוך תומאותם).⁴

Then comes the figure dressed in white linen (לבוש בדים)—but it is not the high priest wearing white for the special Yom Kippur *avodah* (ומכנסי) (בד יהיו על בשרו) sent on a mission of destruction:

יחזקאל י:ב

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶי הָאִישׁ לְבֹשׁ הַבְּדִים
וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּא אֵלַי בְּיָנוּת לְגַלְגֹּל אֶל־
תַּחַת לְכַרְוֵי וּמֵלֵא חֲפִינֵי גַחְלֵי־
אֵשׁ מִבְּיֹנוֹת לְכַרְבִּים וְזָרְזֵן עַל־
הָעִיר וַיָּבֵא לְעֵינָי:

Ezekiel 10:2

[God] spoke to the man clothed in linen and said, "Step inside the wheelwork, under the cherubs, and fill your hands with glowing coals from among the cherubs, and scatter them over the city." And he went in as I looked on.

The instruction to this angel dressed in white linen is an eerie parallel to the Yom Kippur service:

ויקרא טז:יב-יג

וַיִּלְקַח מֵלֵא הַמְּחֹתָה גַחְלֵי־אֵשׁ
מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' וּמֵלֵא
חֲפִינֵי קֹטֶרֶת סַמִּים וְזָקָה וְהִבִּיא
מִבֵּית לְפָרֹחֶת: ¹³וַיָּנִתוּ אֶת־הַקֹּטֶרֶת
עַל־הָאֵשׁ לְפָנֵי ה' וַכֶּסָה עָנָן
הַקֹּטֶרֶת אֶת־הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־
הָעֵדוּת וְלֹא יָמוּת:

Leviticus 16:12-13

¹²[Aharon] shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar before God, and two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense, and bring this behind the curtain. ¹³He shall put the incense on the fire before God, so that the cloud from the incense screens the cover that is over [the Ark of] the Pact, lest he die.

God tells him to take a handful of coals, like the high priest who takes a pan of hot coals and a handful of incense. While for the high priest, this handful would have been a source of protection, to ensure he doesn't die as he is in the inner sanctum, in Yehezkel's vision it is a source of destruction, as the angel dressed in

1 See Leviticus 16:16: השכן אתם בתוך תומאותם.

2 Ezekiel 8:11.

3 Leviticus 16:13: וכסה ענן הקטרת את הכפורת אשר על העדות ולא ימות.

4 Comparing Ezekiel 8:12 with Leviticus 16:16.

5 Comparing Ezekiel 9:2 and Leviticus 16:4: "there will be linen on his skin."



white is told to cast the burning coals on the city.

God is entirely fed up with the people's sins; there is no more Divine mercy:

יחזקאל ט:ה

וּלְאֵלֶּהָ אָמַר בְּאָזְנֵי עֶבְרֹ בְעִיר
אֲחֲרָיו וְהִבּוּ אֶל־תְּחוֹס עֵינֵיכֶם וְאַל־
תִּנְחַמְלוּ:

Ezekiel 9:5

To those God said in my hearing, "Follow him through the city and strike; show no pity or compassion."

Yet the Talmud makes a frightening story into even more of a nightmare. The passage in Ezekiel leaves room for those who despair of the people's sinful ways to have a means of salvation. The angel dressed in white is told to mark their foreheads so that they will be saved:

יחזקאל ט:ג-ד

וַיִּכְבֹּד אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶעְלָה
מֵעַל הַכְּרוּב אֲשֶׁר הָיָה עָלָיו אֵל
מִפְתַּן הַבַּיִת וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־הָאִישׁ
הַלְבֵּשׁ הַבְּדִים אֲשֶׁר קִסַּת הַסִּפֵּר

בְּמַתְנֵי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָּו עֲבֹר בְּתוֹךְ
הָעִיר בְּתוֹךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם וְהַתְּוִיֵת תָּו
עַל־מִצְחוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים הַנִּאֲנָחִים
וְהַנִּאֲנָקִים עַל כָּל־הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת
הַנְּעֻשׂוֹת בְּתוֹכָהּ:

Ezekiel 9:3-4

³Now the Presence of the God of Israel had moved from the cherub on which it had rested to the platform of the House. God called to the man clothed in linen with the writing case at his waist; ⁴and God said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who moan and groan because of all the abominations that are committed in it."

In the Talmud's expansion, though, God doesn't even spare the righteous. When the angel tries to defend the righteous, God says they will burn with everyone else:

תלמוד בבלי יומא עז.

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למיכאל:
מיכאל! סרחא אומתך. אמר
לפניו: רבונו של עולם, דיי לטובים
שבהם! אמר לו: אני שורף אותם

ולטובים שבהם, מיד: "ויאמר (לאיש) לבוש הבדים ויאמר בוא אל בינות לגלגל אל תחת לכרוב ומלא חפניך גחלי אש מבינות לכרובים וזרוק על העיר ויבא לעיני".

Talmud Bavli Yoma 77a

The Holy Blessed One said to Mikha'el, "Mikha'el! Your nation has sinned." He said before God, "Master of the world, the good ones among them are enough for me!" God said to him, "I will burn them and the good ones among them." Immediately, "[God] spoke to the man clothed in linen and said, 'Step inside the wheelwork, under the cherubs, and fill your hands with glowing coals from among the cherubs, and scatter them over the city.' And he went in as I looked on" (Ezekiel 10:2).

In the continuation of the Talmud's telling, it is a mere accident that anyone is saved:

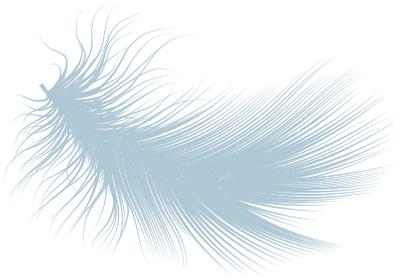
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מיד: "וישלח הכרוב את ידו מבינות לכרובים אל האש אשר בינות הכרובים וישא ויתן אל חפני לבוש הבדים ויקח ויצא".
אמר רב חנא בר ביזנא אמר רבי שמעון חסידא: אילמלא לא נצטננו גחלים מידו של כרוב לידו של גבריאל - לא נשתיירו משוואיהן של ישראל שריד ופליט.

Immediately, "And a cherub stretched out his hand among the cherubs to the fire that was among the cherubs; he took some and put it into the hands of him who was clothed in linen, who took it and went out" (Ezekiel 10:7).

Said Rav Hana bar Bizna said R. Shimon Hasida: If it weren't for the fact that the coals cooled [moving] from the hand of the cherub to the hand of Gavriel, there would have been not even a remnant or survivor of "the enemies of Israel"⁶ remaining.

The picture of God in this story is entirely different from the deliberate and merciful judge we (want to) pray to on Yom Kippur. Here, God is fed-up, angry, even capricious. This is not a God who reviews the record of each person's deeds, carefully deciding who shall live and who shall die. It is certainly not a God who pardons. The possibility of survival feels arbitrary. This is a world where vengeance and destruction are the norm. There is no role for prayer or supplication. Forget mercy and compassion—there is not even justice. It

is the antithesis of all we hope for on Yom Kippur, giving voice to our worst nightmares about how our own reality might feel day in, day out.

This passage becomes an even more acute antithesis to the Yom Kippur of our dreams when we look at the broader context in the book of Ezekiel. Accompanying the depiction of destruction, there is a vivid portrayal of God's presence departing from the *mikdash* (sanctuary). While we think of Yom Kippur as a time when the *kohen gadol* had the most intimate encounter with God's presence, and a time when the *avodah* (temple service) is designed to bring atonement so as to ensure God's presence remains with us (the *heshbon* atonement),⁷ Ezekiel represents a breakdown of this theology. The passage describes God's presence departing from the *mikdash* because the people's impurity has become intolerable (Ezekiel 8:6, 17-18). It is a total undoing of the promise of Leviticus 16, that God can withstand our sins. God's presence ups and leaves—from the inner courtyard to the platform to the wings of the cherubs—ultimately abandoning the city altogether.⁸ Instead of the sense of "witnessing" God's presence in the courtyard during the *avodah*, this is the story of how and why God left us.

DREAM/VISION

What do we do with this incredibly dark picture the Talmud throws in our face as we engage with the part of the tractate meant to be meaningful in a post-destruction world?

The extended narrative in the Talmud also brings us to the book of Daniel.⁹ The prophet is in exile, after the destruction of the First Temple. And that is crucial, because being a member of the post-destruction reality makes him a perfect model for where we still find ourselves today. Remarkably, the book reflects on a moment when Daniel mourns for the Temple by manifesting the prohibitions of Yom Kippur, and it recounts a prophetic vision in which Daniel be-

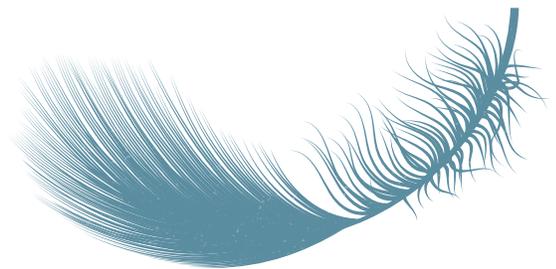
holds, of all things, an "איש אחד לבוש" - a man dressed in white":

דניאל יג-ה, יב, יח-יט
לְחֶם חֲמֹדֹת לֹא אֲכַלְתִּי וּבֶשֶׁר
וַיִּין לֹא-בָא אֵלַי וְיַיִן לֹא-סָבַתִּי
עַד-מְלֵאת שְׁלֹשֶׁת שָׁבָעִים יָמִים:
וְגַבְיֹם עֲשָׂרִים וְאַרְבָּעָה לַחֲדָשׁ
הָרִאשׁוֹן וְאֲנִי הֵיטִיתִי עַל יַד הַנְּהַר
הַגָּדוֹל הוּא הַדְּקוּל: וַיֵּאשָׁא אֶת-עֵינַי
וְאָרָא וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ-אֶחָד לְבוּשׁ בְּדָיִם
וּמְתַנְיָו חֲגָרִים בְּכֶתֶם אוֹפָז: ...
וַיֵּאמֶר אֵלַי אֶל-תִּירָא דְנִיֵּאל
כִּי מִן-הַיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲשֶׁר נִתְּתָה
אֶת-לִבְךָ לְהִבְיֹן וְלְהִתְעַנּוֹת לִפְנֵי
אֱלֹהֶיךָ נִשְׁמַעוּ דְבָרֶיךָ וְאֲנִי-בִאתִי
בְּדָבָרֶיךָ: ...
וַיִּסְתֵּי וַיִּגְעֵבֵי בְּמַרְאֵה אַדָּם
וַיַּחֲזִקֵנִי: וַיֵּאמֶר אֵלַי תִּירָא אִישׁ-
חֲמֹדֹת שְׁלוֹם לָךְ חֹזֵק וְחֹזֵק
וּבְדַבְרוֹ עָמִי הִתְחַזְּקֵתִי וְאֲמַרְהָ
יְדַבֵּר אֲדֹנָי כִּי חֹזֵקֵתִנִּי:

Daniel 10:3-5, 12, 18-19

³I ate no tasty food, nor did any meat or wine enter my mouth. I did not anoint myself until the three weeks were over. ⁴It was on the twenty-fourth day of the first month, when I was on the bank of the great river—the Tigris—⁵that I looked and saw a man dressed in linen, his loins girt in fine gold...

¹²He said to me, "Have no fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to get understanding, practicing abstinence before your God, your prayer was heard, and I have come because of your prayer..."



⁶ A common euphemism for "Israel," or order to avoid talking about Israel's destruction.

⁷ Leviticus 16:16.

⁸ See Ezekiel 10:3-4 and 11:22-23.

⁹ Yoma 76b quotes Daniel 10:12.

¹⁸He who looked like a man touched me again, and strengthened me. ¹⁹He said, "Have no fear, precious man, all will be well with you; be strong, be strong!" As he spoke with me, I was strengthened, and said, "Speak on, my lord, for you have strengthened me!"

Steeped in fasting, Daniel encounters the angel dressed in white. But this vision is not a nightmare. Instead, the angel tells him that his fasting and prayers were heard before God, from the very first moment. This angel is not a warmonger; it is the harbinger of news that there will be a redemption one day. This angel—perhaps, even, the same angel—offers words of encouragement and strength.

WE GIVE OURSELVES PERMISSION TO ARTICULATE AND CONFRONT OUR WORST NIGHTMARES OF WHAT COULD BE

Our white on Yom Kippur could represent the *kohen gadol*, having an intimate encounter with God's presence. It could represent the nightmarish, ghostly figure who is designated to wreak destruction. Or perhaps our white clothes represent the final figure we meet in Daniel, who tells us that the wait is long, but girds us with strength so we can endure it.¹⁰

Once we have seen the ghostly perspective of Ezekiel, what can bring us strength? Intriguingly, while the Talmud made the nightmare of Ezekiel even more terrifying, a *midrash* reframes this vision, seeing hope and optimism even there. Vayikra

Rabbah (26:8) inserts intentionality into the transfer of the coals that are meant to bring destruction. In its telling, Gavriel intentionally holds on to the coals as long as possible, out of the hope and expectation that Israel will repent. When he gives up and is ready to unleash destruction, God speaks up to defend Israel:

א"ל הקדוש ברוך הוא לגבריאל
גבריאל, להונך להונך, יש בהם בני
אדם שעושין צדקה אלו עם אלו,
שנא' וירא לכרובים תבנית יד
אדם תחת כנפיהם (יחזאל י:ח).

The Holy Blessed One said to Gavriel: "Gavriel, slow down, slow down! There are among them people who do tzedakah with one another." As it says, "The cherubs appeared to have the form of a man's hand under their wings" (Ezekiel 10:8).

In stark contrast to the condemnation we saw in Ezekiel and amplified in the Talmud, here God is on our side, and there is a redemptive path forward. Our "saving grace," so to speak, stems from the fact that some people offer their hand to one another. We become the protagonists in this story, staring down God's disappearance by the simple act of caring for each other. If even just a few people embody gestures of care, this is enough to prevent destruction, it is enough to change our fate.

OUR PRAYER: BETWEEN NIGHTMARE AND DREAM

Just as Daniel is assured that "those who are written in the book" will survive (Daniel 12:1), we too hope to be written in the Book of Life. We have no illusions about what might happen in the interim as we wait for a more redeemed world. We give ourselves permission to articulate and confront our worst nightmares of what could be, admitting that our failures can feel overwhelming and that there is often nothing to fend off destruction. Even so, there are other perspectives; there is reason yet to

hope. Our white clothes encapsulate all of that picture in its complexity.

And perhaps what allows us to navigate this tension, what girds us with the strength offered by the angel to Daniel, is the capacity to draw and offer strength to each other. Perhaps this is the final valence of the white clothing, the ultimate meaning of the symbol. Even when we feel we may be living in a nightmare, we can try to show up like the angel dressed in white before Daniel—ourselves manifesting to each other a message of hope and support, present to each other's emotional and physical needs (in Vayikra Rabbah's words: ונותנין (in צדקה אלו עם אלו). This is our key to transform nightmares into dreams of hope, or ghosts into angels, as we endure what can feel like an intolerable wait. ♦



¹⁰ The *kohen gadol* and Daniel's angel meet in the man dressed in white that Shimon the Righteous sees every year in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur (Talmud Bavli Yoma 39b). In this story, the white indicates good news—that he will live another year—while, when the man comes dressed in black, Shimon knows that this is the year he will die.

(RE)MARRYING GOD ON YOM KIPPUR

Jeremy Tabick



We are accustomed to thinking of Yom Kippur as a solemn day of self-reflection, a day of analyzing our past actions, and aspiring to do better next year, of acknowledging the prospect of our death so that we may be renewed in life. We may not be accustomed to thinking of Yom Kippur as a day of joy, dancing, and matchmaking. Yet this is exactly how it is described at the end of Mishnah Ta'anit:

משנה תענית ד:ח

אמר רבן שמעון בן גמליאל: לא היו ימים טובים לישראל כחמשה עשר באב וכיום הכפורים, שבהן בנות ירושלים יוצאות בכלי לבן, שאולין, שלא לבייש את מי שאין לו, כל הכלים טעונין טבילה, ובנות ירושלים יוצאות וחולות בכרמים, ומה היו אומרות: בחור, שא נא עיניך וראה מה אתה בורד לך, אל תתן עיניך בנוי, תן עיניך במשפחה (משלי לא:ל) "שקר החן והבל היופי אשה יראת ה' היא תתהלל", ואומר "תנו לה מפרי ידיה ויהללוה בשערים מעשיה" וכן הוא אומר (שיר השירים ג:יא) "צאינה וראינה בנות ציון במלך שלמה בעטרה שעטרה לו אמו ביום חתונתו וביום שמחת לבו" ביום חתונתו - זו מתן תורה, וביום שמחת לבו - זה בנין בית המקדש, שיבנה במהרה בימינו, אמן:

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8

Said Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: There have never been good days for Israel like the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur, for on them the daughters of Jerusalem went out in white clothes—borrowed, in order to not shame anyone who didn't have (all the clothes required immersion)—and the daughters of

Jerusalem went out and danced in the vineyards.

And what would they say? "Young man, lift your eyes and see what you choose for yourself!

"Do not look at beauty but look at family, 'Grace is a lie and beauty is vain, a woman who fears God—she is to be praised!' (Proverbs 31:30)."

And it says: "Give her from the fruit of her hands and her deeds praise her in the gates."

And so it says: "Go forth O you daughters of Zion and gaze upon King Shlomo crowned with the crown his mother made for him on the day of his wedding and on the day of the gladness of his heart" (Song of Songs 3:11).

"On the day of his wedding"—this is the giving of the Torah;

"And on the day of the gladness of his heart"—this is the building of the Temple, may it be built swiftly in our days, Amen.

Dancing in vineyards and choosing your marriage partner are not exactly how we typically celebrate Yom Kippur today! But as we picture the scene, we see that it does capture a central theme of Yom Kippur: our gratitude for being alive.

Set outside Jerusalem, the *mishnah* here describes Temple times, presumably after the day's Temple service was completed. While today we are never certain whether our pleas for forgiveness on Yom Kippur are accepted, when the Temple stood and the High priest brought the goats for God and Azazel, the people of Israel knew with absolute certainty whether God had forgiven

them. To fulfill the verse, "If your sins are like crimson thread, they will be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18), a red string in the Temple grounds would turn white as soon as the goat for Azazel had been dispatched, as a sign that we were forgiven for another year. In a world where it is possible that God will decree for communal life or death and we know for sure that it has turned out to be life, it makes total sense for the tension to dissipate, for the people to rush out into the fields and think about their lives for the coming year. Yom Kippur is a day of joy and marriages

THE SCENE...
CAPTURE[S] A
CENTRAL THEME
OF YOM KIPPUR:
OUR GRATITUDE
FOR BEING ALIVE

because it comes with the certainty that, if we survived the day, we must be forgiven.¹

That said, it is hard to square Yom Kippur as a day of matchmaking with the halakhic requirements for *inu'i* ("affliction"); indeed, one of the prohibitions is against marital intimacy (Mishnah Yoma 8:1)! Speaking from this perspective, the 19th century commentator on the Mishnah, Tiferet Yisrael, rereads this entire mishnah metaphorically:

¹ The palpable celebration at Kehilat Hadar on this day is a perfect reflection of this, as are the words of the Yom Kippur *piyyut*, Mareh Khohein.

תפארת ישראל יכין תענית ד:ח:
צאינה וראינה וכו'. נ"ל דלהכי
מיייתי הך קרא, דר"ל אע"ג דביו"כ
לא שייך שישוררו בחור שא נא
וכו', דוכי ט"ד שישראל קדושים
יתעסקו ביו"כ הקדוש והנורא
בשדוכים,

ע"ז משיב וכן הוא אומר וכו',
דביו"כ התכוונו להקב"ה שנקרא
בחור בשיר השירים כולו, דנאמר
בחור כארזים (שיר ה' פט"ו),
שא נא עיניך מה אתה בורר לך,
ר"ל איה אומה קדושה בעולם
כאומה זו, אל תתן עיניך בניו,
דאע"ג שחטאו לפניך תתן עיניך
במשפחה, בניך בני בחונ(נ)ר(יך)
הם, בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב...

**R. Yisrael Lipshitz, Tiferet
Yisrael Yakhin Ta'anit 4:8**

"Go forth and gaze..."—it seems to be that this is why this verse was brought, i.e. that certainly Yom Kippur has nothing to do with singing "Young man, lift" and so on, for would you really think that holy Israel would occupy themselves on the holy and awesome Yom Kippur with matchmaking!?

About this, [the Mishnah] responds "And so too it says..." that on Yom Kippur they incline themselves towards the Holy Blessed One, who is called "Young man" throughout Song of Songs, such as "Young man like cedars" (Song of Songs 5:15). "Lift Your eyes and see what You choose for Yourself"—i.e. where is a holy nation in the world like this one!? "Do not look at beauty"—for even though they sinned before You, "look at family"—they are Your children, the children of Your chosen ones, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...

Instead of dancing youths in the vineyards and *shiddukhim*, Tiferet Yisrael focuses on the verses from Song of Songs at the end of the *mishnah*, utilizing the traditional understanding of this biblical book as a love song

between God and Israel. The dancing girls are now none other than us, the Children of Israel, while the "young man" that they spoke of is none other than God. According to the commentary in place of Rashi, the *mishnah's* reference to "the giving of the Torah" is not to Shavuot, as we might expect, but actually Yom Kippur, because it was the day on which the second set of tablets were given after the Golden Calf.² Yom Kippur is, then, the day where we dance to grab God's attention, to persuade God to commit to us for another year. According to this understanding, Yom Kippur is an important step in the nuptials between us and God, perhaps best analogized as the day that we finalize the betrothal arrangements.

This metaphor of betrothal between us and God relies on the fundamentally patriarchal legal structure of *kiddushin*. Along with what we certainly hope will be love and commitment, in traditional *kiddushin* a man acquires the exclusive rights to a woman's body and her labor; in return, he takes on the obligation of intimacy and the financial obligations of her sustenance and protection. While this might be a problematic model for modern marriage and gender dynamics,³ it is an incredibly apt metaphor for the relationship between us and God, what we might otherwise call a *berit* (covenant). In our *berit*, there are two parties, one major power (God) and one minor power (Israel); this maps onto the unequal relationship between the husband and wife in *kiddushin*. Furthermore, the *berit* entails our promise to be exclusively loyal to God⁴ and, in return, God offers us sustenance and protection—matching exactly traditional *kiddushin's* gender roles.

There is one way, however, in which our relationship to God on Yom Kippur is unlike *kiddushin*. *Kiddushin* is a one-time arrangement between two parties, ending in only death or divorce. Following Tiferet Yisrael's understanding of the *mish-*

nah, we need God to betroth us every year—it is not a once only deal but rather one of constant renegotiation. While *kiddushin* builds a new relationship out of nothing, our devotion to God is always based on a prior history: our relationship to God and the world in the past year. This prior history affects the nature of our relationship. Maybe the last year didn't work out for us, and maybe that was our fault or maybe it was even God's fault. Maybe we ended up building a Golden Calf and breaking the first set of tablets. Nonetheless, in spite of that, Yom Kippur is the day we choose to recommit to God—and, we hope, God to us.

Perhaps, then, an even more appropriate metaphor for the relationship between us and God is the *ma'amar*. This is a kind of betrothal that only takes place in a very specific circumstance with a prior history: levirate marriage, where, if a married or betrothed man dies without



² Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 26b. The "Rashi" commentary to Ta'anit is sometimes called "Pseudo-Rashi"—in the same style as Rashi, but not written by Rashi himself.

³ In full disclosure, I married my wife through double *kiddushin*: I acquired exclusive rights to her in return for financial support, and she acquired exclusive rights to me in return for the same.

⁴ In biblical and rabbinic marriage, a man can have multiple wives but a wife can't have multiple husbands—the wife owes exclusive loyalty to him, but he does not need to return the favor. This is also true of God: we promise to serve God exclusively, but God also cares for the other nations and the whole world.

children, his brother has a chance to marry the widow in order to give the deceased's line a chance to continue. One prominent way in which the levirate marriage can be formalized is through the *ma'amar*, a special kind of *kiddushin* that operates only for levirate marriage. This *ma'amar* marks the commitment of the living man to his deceased brother and to looking after his brother's widow, and the commitment of the woman to her late husband's family.

In other words, the *ma'amar* is a kind of *kiddushin* that acknowledges a prior history that didn't work out as planned. Through some tragic or unfortunate circumstance, the original relationship never had a chance to work. And yet, the woman still commits to that man and that man's family. Perhaps our relationships with God didn't work out so well last year. Perhaps we are angry, hurt, no longer on speaking terms. Perhaps we are guilty for all the violations we transgressed or things we could have done—but didn't—while we had the

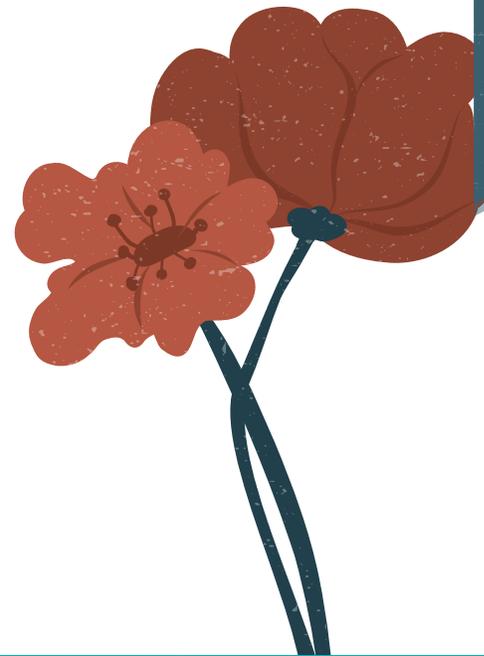
time. Yom Kippur is an opportunity to commit anew, to acknowledge the prior history and complex relationships and—without forgetting the broken tablets—to continue into a new relationship, a new life with God and Torah—with tablets renewed.

This is encapsulated in our Yom Kippur liturgy in the *piyyut* Ki Anu, in the final pair of metaphors:

אנו מאמיריך, ואתה מאמירינו
*We are Your ma'amar and You
 are our ma'amar.*

The meaning of the word used here (referencing Deuteronomy 26:17-18) is not clear. The Malbim on this verse, however, connects it to this very *ma'amar*, the levirate betrothal. If so, then this is the liturgical affirmation of Tiferet Yisrael's insight. Yom Kippur is the day we recommit to God, and the day God recommit to us. It is specifically the *ma'amar* and not *kiddushin* because we are not starting with a blank slate, but with wounded feelings and trage-

dy. Our task on Yom Kippur is, while bearing this history in mind, to plan our future for the new year, to begin again with a new set of tablets. ♦



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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ETHICS OF SHAMING



THE CASE: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ETHICS OF SHAMING

According to the UN, an estimated one-third of teenagers worldwide have recently experienced bullying. When it comes to cyberbullying, the problem is even more pervasive—according to a recent Pew survey, 59% of American teenagers have experienced abusive online behaviors, including offensive name-calling, the spreading of false rumors, and physical threats.

Research shows that bullying thrives in environments where bystanders do not intervene, and the same research indicates that even small interventions have the potential to make a positive difference. There has been a push, particularly in educational environments, to transform potential bystanders into upstanders—those who will intervene, interrupt, or speak up against the bullying they are seeing. However, upstanding itself is not always so simple and raises a host of ethical questions.

In recent years, students have taken to the internet to denounce their peers for behaviors they see as harmful. In one phenomenon, students have used “call-out pages” to expose the offenders. However, this type of public call-out may bring negative consequences of its own. The case this year explores the ethical questions facing students in how to respond to bullying within their school. Should they share a video on a social media page dedicated to exposing bullies? Or would such a public act do more harm than good? What must they consider before making a decision?

The passage below is the source of multiple foundational *mitzvot* that pertain to our discussion. As you read through these four verses, focus on the relationship between the various *mitzvot*.

SOURCE #1

ויקרא יט:טו-יח

Vayikra 19:15-18

¹⁵לֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ עֹנֵל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא-תִשָּׂא
פְּנֵי-דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצַדִּיק
תִּשְׁפֹּט עִמִּיתְךָ: ¹⁶לֹא-תִלְךָ רֵכִיל בְּעַמִּיךָ
לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ אָנִי ה': ¹⁷לֹא-
תִשְׂנֵא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחֵהוּ
אֶת-עִמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא:
¹⁸לֹא-תִקֶּם וְלֹא-תִטֹּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ
וְאֶהְבֵּת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אָנִי ה'.

¹⁵You shall not perform injustice in judgement: do not favor the poor or show deference to the powerful; with righteousness shall you judge your kinsman. ¹⁶Do not gossip among your people; do not stand by the blood of your fellow: I am God. ¹⁷You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your kinsman, and you shall not bear a sin because of him. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance, and you shall not bear a grudge against your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am God.

1. How do these various *mitzvot* relate to one another? Are they completely complementary obligations, or is the relationship between some of them more complex and tension-filled?
2. If you had to choose one clause from the passage above that bears most directly on our case, which one would it be? Why?

PART 1: THE LIMITS OF REBUKE

Vayikra (19:17) above is the source of the obligation to give rebuke. The Talmud derives from the double language of rebuke (“הוּכַח תּוֹכִיחַ”) that there is an obligation to rebuke an individual multiple times if the person continues to transgress (Talmud Bavli Arakhin 16b). However, elsewhere the Talmud limits this responsibility, explaining that in certain circumstances it is preferable, or even obligatory, to *remain silent*.

SOURCE #2

תלמוד בבלי יבמות דף סה עמוד ב

כשם שמצוה על אדם לומר דבר הנשמע
 כך מצוה על אדם שלא לומר דבר שאינו
 נשמע רבי אבא אומר חובה שנאמר
 (משלי ט, ח) אל תוכח ליץ פן ישנאך הוכח
 לחכם ויאהבך

Talmud Bavli Yevamot 65b

Just as it is a *mitzvah* (i.e. it is ideal) for a person to say that which will be heeded, so is it a *mitzvah* for a person not to say that which will not be heeded. Rabbi Abba says: This is obligatory (i.e. stronger than just “ideal”), as it is stated: “Do not rebuke a scorner lest they hate you; rebuke a wise person and they will love you” (Proverbs 9:8).

1. Is it ever worthwhile to give rebuke in circumstances where it is unlikely to lead to change? Why or why not?
2. How does one determine whether in a given situation it is preferable to speak up and offer rebuke, or to remain silent?
3. Why might Rabbi Abba perceive silence as an obligation in certain circumstances?
4. Does this passage inform whether one should “call out” a bully on social media? If yes, how so?



PART 2: BALANCING LASHON HARA (GOSSIP) AND PREVENTING HARM

Vayikra 19:16 (source 1) links two prohibitions: “Do not gossip among your people; do not stand by the blood of your fellow.” While the Torah does not specify the connection between these *mitzvot*, Maimonides understands the second clause as a reflection of the severity of the first: gossip is so severe that it can lead to bloodshed (Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 7:1).

However, it’s also possible to understand the relationship between these two prohibitions as a type of tension, as the Pithei Teshuvah does below. In this reading, while gossip is generally strictly forbidden, there are times when one has an obligation to share negative information about another person to avoid violating the prohibition of standing idly by when someone is in harm’s way.

SOURCE #3

פתחי תשובה אורח חיים קנו

...שיש עון גדול יותר מזה, וגם הוא מצוי ביותר, וזהו מי שמונע עצמו מלגלות אוזן חבירו במקום שיש צורך להציל עשוק מיד עושקו, מפני שחושש לאיסור לשון הרע, כגון הרואה מי שאורב לחבירו להרגו בערמה, או שחותר מחתרת באישון לילה ואפלה בביתו או בחנותו של חבירו, ומונע את עצמו מלהודיע לחבירו ולהזהירו בעוד מועד, מפני שחושב שהוא בכלל איסור לשון הרע, ובאמת שהנהוג כן גדול עונו מנשוא, ועובר על לא תעמוד על דם רעך... והכלל בזה שהדבר מסור ללב אם כונתו לרעת האחד הוא לשון הרע אבל אם כונתו לטובת השני להצילו ולשמרו הוא מצוה רבה.

Pithei Teshuvah Orah Hayyim 156

[In addition to the sin of gossip], there is an even greater transgression that is very prevalent, and that it is not to give one’s friend information when there is a chance to save the oppressed from their oppressor because of the fear of transgressing *lashon hara* (gossip). For instance, one who sees another person set a covert trap to kill someone, or sees someone dig a tunnel in the darkness of night into the house or store of their neighbor, and then holds back from telling his friend and warning them in time, because they are afraid that this would violate *lashon hara*, and in truth, one who behaves this way, their sin is too great to bear, and they transgress the prohibition of “do not stand by the blood of your fellow”... The general principle is that if the intention is to cause harm to the first person then it is *lashon hara*, but if the intention was for the benefit of the second person, and to save and protect them, then it is a great *mitzvah*.

In the above passage, the Pithei Teshuvah warns against acting as a bystander, rather than possibly speaking *lashon hara* by informing their friend that they are in danger. In these circumstances, one has an obligation to prevent the harm from taking place, even if it means sharing gossip.

1. How does this passage relate to the previous source about it sometimes being a *mitzvah* to remain silent?
2. Refer back to the verses in the initial source from Vayikra. Did reading these passages affect how you understand the relationship(s) among the obligation to give rebuke, the prohibition against speaking gossip, and the prohibition against standing idly by?

3. How should students balance these various *mitzvot* in our case? Is sharing potentially damaging information on a public social media page warranted?
4. Based on this passage, with whom may one share *lashon hara* in order to prevent harm? Even if it is concluded that information must be shared, is there enough guidance here to determine whether or not the information may be shared publicly, such as on social media? What criteria do you think are necessary to establish in order to justify public disclosure in these cases?



DARKEKHA

Singing Our Desperation

Hadar's Rising Song Institute



On Yom Kippur, we stand on the precipice. On this day of sealed fates, we remove everything—both extraneous and essential—from our immediate experience and fill the empty space before us with radically honest prayer.

Joey Weisenberg's setting for the *piyyut*, "Darkekha," channels this nothing-left-to-lose clarity of purpose. As vocalist, Rabbi Yosef Goldman said during the recording sessions: "The melody captures the directness that comes from desperation: 'I'm putting it all out before You. Save us.'"

Appearing in Yom Kippur's opening Ma'ariv service, the lyrics of "Darkekha" are stark:

דַּרְכֵּךְ אֶלְקֵינוּ לְהִאָרֵךְ אֲפִיךָ
לְרַעִים וְלַטּוֹבִים וְהִיא תְהִלָּתְךָ
לְמַעַנְךָ אֶלְקֵינוּ עֲשֵׂה וְלֹא לָנוּ
רָצָה עֲמִידָתְנוּ דָלִים וְנִקְיִים

*It is Your way, our God, to slow
Your anger*

*against the wicked and the
good and that is Your praise*

*Do it for Your sake, our God,
not for ours*

*look at our position—poor and
empty handed*

Joey Weisenberg's rendition of this liturgical poem is a song of pleading that pairs Ashkenazi *nusah* (prayer chant) with elements of the Blues to deepen the supplication of *selihot* (pleas for forgiveness).² To Joey, the Blues is not just grit and yearning; it's also about admitting vulnerability. And being vulnerable is fundamental to spiritual life. Letting your guard down is a prerequisite to sensing the divine presence in this world. We need to have the openness and honesty to say: "Here's where I am. It's not that great. But it's real."

On the studio version of "Darkekha," there is a moment where

composition gives way to improvisation, to pure prayer. Echoed in this cantorial trembling is the traditional High Holidays *nusah*. Searing down deep, finally it is free to burst forth and soar away. It's the longest track in Joey's discography, as if mirroring the immensity of the day.

Coming toward the beginning of Yom Kippur, "Darkekha" is a rock-bottom plea in which we leave ourselves behind and are thereby set free. Intoning our atonement for twenty-five hours, weak-kneed and wandering among hundreds of pages of liturgy, our individually whispered intentions intermingling with feverish collective devotions, we can experience the spiritual weightlessness of being "poor and empty handed." We have nothing. You are everything. Don't get mad too quickly. We're here together. Come, let us sing. ♦



SCAN THE QR CODE
TO LISTEN TO A RECORDING

- ¹ This *piyyut* is attributed to R. Yose ben Yose, perhaps the earliest composer of *piyyutim* who is known by name. The song's text is derived from a much longer quadruple-acrostic liturgical poem. Though most congregations no longer chant the full *piyyut*, its alternating two-line refrain remains.
- ² "Darkekha," Rising Song Records, 2022. Music composed and directed by Joey Weisenberg. Featuring Joey Weisenberg (guitar, lead vocals), Daniel Ori (bass), Richie Barshay (percussion), Yosef Goldman (vocals), and Deborah Sacks Mintz (vocals).

Darkekha

Joey Weisenberg

♩ = 54

A Dm Gm F Gm

Dar-ke- kha E-lo - kei - nu l' - ha-a - rikh a - pe - kha

9 F

la - ra - im v'-la - to - vim v' - hi

15 E♭ Dm Cm Dm

s' hi la - se - kha (lai lai....) (oh) -f'-

B Dm B♭ F Gm

ma - a - n' - kha E - lo kei - nu a - sei v'
(r)ei ami - da sei - nu da - lim v'

28 Dm

lo la - nu - - R'

1. 2.

SUKKOT



COVENANTAL JOY

What Sukkot Can Teach Us

R. Shai Held

The Torah insistently connects the festival of Sukkot with the obligation to rejoice, and later Jewish tradition calls Sukkot *z'man simhateinu*, the time of our joy. Why is Sukkot of all holidays singled out as the time of happiness and delight? Understanding the joy associated with Sukkot helps us gain crucial insight into the nature and dynamics of God's covenant with the Jewish people.

Leviticus' description of Sukkot offers both an agricultural and a historical explanation for the holiday. First, it speaks of agriculture: "Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of the Lord to last seven days" (23:39). Then, a few verses later, the Torah ties the commandment to spend a week living in booths (*sukkot*) to a historical experience: the Israelites are to dwell in booths "in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God" (23:43). The Torah entwines agricultural blessings and God's acts in history in its presentation of Sukkot, reminding us that God is present in both nature and history.¹

When Leviticus 23 offers this portrait of the holiday cycle, it attaches a special mandate to Sukkot: "You shall rejoice (*usmahtem*) before the Lord your God seven days" (Leviticus 23:40). Of all the sacred days of the year, Sukkot alone is explicitly linked to joy. Deuteronomy's description of the holidays is different in this regard: both Sukkot and Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) are connected to joy (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14-15). Yet even Deuteronomy accentuates the joy of

Sukkot. The call to be joyous is mentioned twice, and the presentation of the holiday ends with the vigorous charge, "You shall have nothing but joy" (*vehayita akh samei'ah*) (16:15).

So Sukkot comes to be known in Jewish liturgy (in the Amidah and in Kiddush) simply as the time of our joy. But what is the meaning of the deep joy associated with Sukkot?

In terms of the holiday's agricultural dimension, the link is obvious: during this fall festival the harvest is being gathered, and Israel is thankful for its bounty. As a *midrash* notes, the contrast with Pesah, a spring festival, is striking: "The expression of rejoicing occurs three times in connection with Sukkot... but no such expression occurs even once with regard to Pesah. Why? Because the fate of one's crops is still in the balance on Pesah, and one does not know whether there will be a yield or not" (Yalkut Shimoni, 654). The experience of Sukkot must have been exhilarating. A people who had been slaves in Egypt were redeemed by their God and brought to the land they had been promised, and now the land was bringing forth blessing in abundance. And so they "rejoiced before their God" in gratitude for the fullness of what they had received.

But what about the historical dimension? What historical event is the source of Sukkot joy? As we've already seen, Sukkot recalls a time of intense divine-human intimacy, a moment when God shielded the Israelites under God's protective presence. Kabbalistic sources offer a beautiful image of this communion between God and Israel. The minimum requirement of Jewish law is that a *sukkah* have two complete walls and one partial one, even as small as a hand-

breadth (Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 6b). The shape formed by these obligatory walls is like the arm, the forearm, and the hand, constituting a divine embrace. In entering the *sukkah*, then, we are held in God's arms.² In a similar vein, the book of Exodus refers to Sukkot as "the Feast of Ingathering (*hag ha-asif*), when you gather in the results of your work from the field" (Exodus 23:16). The Hasidic Master, R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1905), comments: "This is an important time to remember that we and everything we have belong to God... God, too, gathers us into God's home, which is the *sukkah*" (Sefat Emet, Sukkot 1875).

Covenant is not just about obedience; it is also about intimacy, tenderness, and love. Sukkot embodies that covenantal reality. All of this reaches its climax on Shemini Atzeret, which follows on the heels of Sukkot. On that day, we put away the four species associated with Sukkot. Rituals are kept to a minimum in order to remind us what is really at stake on Sukkot: relational closeness to God. Rashi (1040-1105) cites a *midrash* that evokes God's gentle affection for Israel: "It is like a king who invited his children to a banquet for a number of days. When they came for parting, he said, 'Please, my children, stay with me for one more day. Your departure is difficult for me'" (Rashi to Leviticus 23:36).

Let's probe even deeper. Pesah recalls and reenacts the Exodus from Egypt. Shavuot, in the Rabbinic imagination, recalls and reenacts the revelation at Mount Sinai. Each of these two spring festivals marks one of Judaism's foundational events. Which orienting moment does Sukkot recall? The striking answer is that Suk-

¹ Cf. Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *Leviticus: Divine Presence and Community* (1997), p. 131.

² See, for example, R. Hayyim Vital (1543-1620), *Sha'ar Ha-Kawanot*, Sha'ar Hag HaSukkot, chapter 4; and R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), *Likkutei Torah*, Devarim, p. 79b.

kot harkens back to... no particular event at all. Instead, it recalls and re-enacts the long and difficult journey through the desert in the wake of the Exodus. As R. Yitz Greenberg nicely puts it, "On Passover, Jews restage the great event of liberation. Sukkot celebrates the way of liberation—the march across a barren desert to freedom and the Promised Land."³

There is something profoundly surprising here: the festivals focused on the two defining events in Jewish history and theology—Exodus and Sinai—are not the ones Judaism most powerfully connects with joy. The most joyous days of the year do not commemorate earth-shattering, world-transforming events, but rather the arduous and protracted journey from Exodus to destination. To be sure, in the biblical account, God is radically present with Israel in the desert—and memories of God's providential care lie at the heart of the holiday. And yet Judaism does not primarily connect joy to the great moments when God interrupts history and turns things upside down, but rather to something far more sober: to the attempt to live with God in the day-to-day march through the desert, through history, and through life. Greenberg writes, "It is relatively easy to rise to one peak moment of... courageous commitment. It is more taxing and more heroic to wrestle with everyday obstacles without highs or diversions. True maturity means learning to appreciate the finite rewards of every day along the way."⁴ Some traditions associate Sukkot with ecstatic joy (cf. Mishnah Sukkah 5:1), but at least as crucial is a calmer covenantal joy: the delight of living with God, of obeying God's will, and of trying to build God's world in the midst of a stubborn, often recalcitrant reality.

This is the joy of the quotidian and the pedestrian—the utterly non-ecstatic; it is the joy of commitment and responsibility rather than of uplift and exhilaration. Covenant is not just about intimacy; it is also, and fundamentally, about faithfulness. Note the wonderful paradox here: Sukkot is the holiday that cel-

brates the non-holiday (the *yontef* that delights in *hol*), the sacred time that celebrates regular time, the festival that celebrates not the high points but the morning after—and the morning after that as well. Like a good marriage, the covenant be-

SUKKOT IS THE HOLIDAY THAT CELEBRATES THE NON-HOLIDAY, THE SACRED TIME THAT CELEBRATES REGULAR TIME

tween God and Israel requires moments of excitement and jubilation. But it ultimately depends on the joy of simply waking up on a less-than-eventful morning and going about the business of life.

There is more. Sukkot takes place mere days after Yom Kippur, and that too, I think, adds to the intense joy of the holiday. In the course of moving through the world, we all too often fall short of both God's expectations and our own aspirations. We lose sight of God and we cause pain and disappointment to others. Imagine living in a world where forgiveness—from God and from others—was not available; imagine living in a universe of "one strike and you're out." Friendship would be impossible, parenting would be inconceivable, and marriage would last days at most; an enduring covenant with God would be unimaginable. *Teshuvah* (repentance), *mehilah* (forgiveness), and *kapparah* (atonement) are what make life and relationships possible. This is what the Talmud means when it suggests that *teshuvah* was created even before the world itself (Pesachim 54a). Without human repentance and divine forgiveness, life would be little more than a series of irredeemably broken relationships.

With human repentance and divine forgiveness, the almost miraculous possibility of healing and renewal emerges. Part of what we experience on Sukkot is the joy of living in a world where forgiveness is possible. Covenant depends on—and celebrates—the possibility of restoring relationships.

Extreme as it may sound, on Yom Kippur Jews enact their own death. The *kittel*, or white garment, worn by many Jews on Yom Kippur is in fact a burial shroud; and fasting itself is meant to mimic death. Having just endured a dress rehearsal for death, we emerge ready to more fully embrace life. Greenberg writes, "Only those who know the fragility of life can truly appreciate the full preciousness of every moment." Sukkot invites us to embrace the kind of joy that is deepened by a clear-eyed awareness of our own fragility and mortality. "The release from Yom Kippur leads to the extraordinary outburst of life that is Sukkot."⁵ Kohelet, about whom, not coincidentally, we read during Sukkot, instructs his readers: "Even if a person lives many years, let him take pleasure in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be" (Ecclesiastes 11:8). In other words, we will be dead for a very long time, so best to find joy now in the time we are allotted.⁶ "Whatever is in your power to do," he adds, "do to the best of your abilities, for there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, and no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going" (9:10). Really live now, the festival of Sukkot and the book of Ecclesiastes advise us. Yom Kippur has reminded you that your time is limited, so now, on Sukkot, live accordingly, with all the joy of embracing a gift you will not possess forever.

Sukkot is a time of joy; for Judaism, as we've seen, it is really the time of joy. Sukkot joy is covenantal joy—the joy of closeness with God; of faithfulness to God and Torah in the midst of the mundane; of gratitude for living in a world where forgiveness and renewal are possible; and of commitment to savoring life while we still have it. ♦

³ Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (1988), p. 96.

⁴ Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, p. 97.

⁵ Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, p. 112.

⁶ In fact, I am not sure that what Kohelet advocates is joy so much as pleasure.



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THE SUKKAH OF LEVIATHAN

Roofs, Walls, and How Old Ideas Never Die

R. Ethan Tucker

Many of us recite the following prayer when we leave our *sukkah* for the final time at the end of the holiday of Sukkot:

יהי רצון מלפניך, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאַלְהֵינוּ
אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, בְּשֵׁם שְׁמַיִמְתִּי וְיִשְׁבְּתִי
בְּסֻכָּה זוֹ, בְּן אֶזְבָּה לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה
לִישֵׁב בְּסֻכַּת עוֹרוֹ שָׁל לְוִיָּתָן. לְשָׁנָה
הַבָּאָה בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם.

Let it be your will, God our Lord and Lord of our ancestors: just as I have fulfilled [a mitzvah] and sat in this sukkah, may I merit next year to sit in a sukkah made out of the skin of Leviathan. Next year in Jerusalem!

This prayer expresses longing for the opportunity to sit in the ultimate *sukkah*, one constructed out of the mythical Leviathan, the epic biblical sea monster who represents the forces of chaos and evil. Ultimately, in the end times, Leviathan will be slain by God and prepared as a banquet for the righteous.¹ But what will happen to Leviathan's inedible hide? This prayer prompts us to imagine it as the material out of which we construct our *sukkah*. Animal hides are completely invalid for *sekhakh*, the *sukkah's* earth-grown and water-permeable roof. The image of Leviathan's skin here is therefore meant to conjure up the walls of our future *sukkah* in our mind's eye. But why are we talking about the *sukkah's* walls at all, let alone defining this future *sukkah* in terms of its walls? Isn't *sekhakh* the essence of what a *sukkah* is about, the part that must be carefully constructed to conform to the expectations of our halakhic canon? Why would the walls be the focus of our point of departure?

As we answer this question, we will have the opportunity to discover an important truth: true debates are durable. In a self-reflective moment, Mishnah Avot 5:17 opines that all debates possessed of a heavenly character last forever (כל מחלוקת שמה שמיים סופה להתקיים). This durability is one of the most compelling features of the debates nestled in the rich treasure trove we refer to as *halakhah*. When it comes to Jewish practice, of course, debates usually need to be resolved and a formal victor is often declared. Action generally begets some degree of decisiveness. But the close reader of *halakhah* will see, not so far beneath the surface, steady undercurrents of the "losing" side, which often continue to shape not just the debate—but even practice—for centuries to come.

One wonderful example of this dynamic can be found in the laws surrounding the construction of a *sukkah*, specifically its walls. By studying them, we can not only understand the prayer with which we opened, but also appreciate the broader dynamics of *halakhah*.

ויקרא כג:לט-מג

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ
הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת תְּבוּאוֹת
הָאָרֶץ תַּחֲגוּ אֶת חַג ה' שִׁבְעַת
יָמִים בְּיוֹם הָרֵאשׁוֹן שִׁבְתוֹן וּבְיוֹם
הַשְּׁמִינִי שִׁבְתוֹן: ⁴⁰וְלִקְחֶתֶם לָכֶם
בְּיוֹם הָרֵאשׁוֹן פְּרֵי עֵץ הַדֶּרֶךְ כַּפַּת
תְּמָרִים וְעֵנַף עֵץ עֵבֶת וְעֵרְבֵי
נָחַל וּשְׂמַחֲתֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ⁴¹וְחַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חַג
לֵה' שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּשָׁנָה חֻקַּת
עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי
תַּחֲגוּ אֹתוֹ: ⁴²בְּסֻכַּת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת
יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְבָּח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ
בְּסֻכֹת: ⁴³לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי
בְּסֻכֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי
ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Vayikra 23:39-43

³⁹But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruits of the land, you shall keep the feast of God seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. ⁴⁰And you shall take for you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the God your Lord seven days. ⁴¹And you shall keep it a feast unto God seven days in the year; it is a statute forever in your generations; you shall keep it in

1 See Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 75a for one reference to this idea. See also an excellent book on the topic, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, by Jon D. Levenson.

the seventh month. ⁴²You shall dwell in booths (*sukkot*) seven days; all citizens in Israel shall dwell in booths; ⁴³that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am God your Lord.

This passage doesn't tell us much about the *sukkah*, other than the fact that we are supposed to live in it for seven days. Must it have walls? A roof? Shield those dwelling in it from wind or rain? Truth be told, the surface reading of the Torah offers few clues as to what this structure ought to be or what its minimum requirements are. If we wanted to extract some information from this passage, we *might* conclude that the vegetation mentioned in verse 40 is somehow meant to be a part of the *sukkah's* construction, be it roof or walls.²

Rabbinic tradition took a different approach. The vegetative material mentioned in Vayikra 23, according to *halakhah*, relates to an independent *mitzvah* of raising and shaking the materials on the holiday, the practice we know as נטילת לולב (taking the four species). The *sukkah* need not be made of these materials.³

Furthermore, although there are various regulations around the materials used in the construction of the roof, the *sekhakh*, the material used to make the walls is not regulated. Even though the Torah could be read as demanding some guidelines for the construction of all parts of the *sukkah*, Mishnah Sukkah 1:4-5 singles out only the *sukkah's* roof for such regulation:

משנה סוכה א:ד-ה

זה הכלל כל שהוא מקבל טומאה ואין גידולו מן הארץ אין מסככים בו וכל דבר שאינו מקבל טומאה וגידולו מן הארץ מסככין בו: חבילי קש וחבילי עצים וחבילי ברדן אין מסככין בהן

ובולן שהתירן כשרות
ובולן כשרות לדפנות:

Mishnah Sukkah 1:4-5

This is the rule: Anything that can receive impurity and which does not grow from the ground may not be used as sekhakh; anything that cannot receive impurity and which does grow from the ground may be used as sekhakh.

Bundles of straw, wood, and reeds may not be used for sekhakh.

But if any of these bundles

TRUTH BE TOLD, THE SURFACE READING OF THE TORAH OFFERS FEW CLUES AS TO WHAT THIS STRUCTURE OUGHT TO BE

*were untied, they are valid,
and they all are valid as walls.*

This *mishnah* lays out two basic requirements:

1. The *sekhakh* must be made of things that originally grew in the ground.
2. The *sekhakh* may not be made of items that receive impurity—items that have been domesticated and turned into tools for human use.

The *mishnah* then discusses another case: straw, wood, and reeds are all valid materials for *sekhakh*, as they originate as plants in the ground.

When tied up into bundles, however, these materials become invalid for use as *sekhakh*. The *mishnah* does not specify why this is the case, but the next line clarifies that once the cord is cut on these bundles and they revert to their unbound state, they are valid again. Then the *Mishnah* offers a final guideline: “and they are all valid as walls.” Does this line refer back only to the different types of disqualified bundles we just discussed? Or is it a comprehensive permission to make the walls out of anything one likes? Rashi is definitive in his interpretation:

רש"י סוכה יב.

ובולן - הפסולין ששינונו בסכך.
כשרין לדפנות - דכל סוכה
הכתוב סכך משמע, דדופן לא
איקרין סוכה...

Rashi Sukkah 12a

“And they are all”—of the items that are invalid for sekhakh.

“Valid as walls”—Because whenever the verse speaks of a sukkah, it is referring to sekhakh, because a wall is not called a sukkah...

In other words, according to Rashi, the walls of a *sukkah* are entirely functional; so long as they exist, they can be made of anything. Walls need not be made of natural materials that grow in the ground and they can be made of things that contract ritual impurity. Rambam (Hilkhot Shofar ve-Lulav 4:16) states this clearly as a general principle: “The walls of a *sukkah* may be made of anything.” A similar approach is taken by the Tur⁴ and the Shulhan Arukh⁵ (Orah Hayyim 630) as well. This would seem to settle the matter: what makes up the walls is immaterial in the eyes of the law.

However, beneath the surface of this seemingly resolved discussion lies an undercurrent of dissent. If we return to the Talmud, we see that some other sources entertained the

² This is the practice of Karaites until this day. Following what they understand to be the literal meaning of the Torah as filtered through a passage in Nehemiah (8:13-15), Karaites dwell in *sukkot* made of the species that the Torah singles out in its description of this holiday.

³ Talmud Bavli Sukkah 36b records the view of R. Yehudah, who holds that the roof of the *sukkah* can only be made of the four species referenced in Vayikra 23. While this maps onto the Karaite view of *sukkah* construction, R. Yehudah would agree that there is also a *mitzvah* to take those four forms of vegetation and raise and wave them on the holiday, which is not a practice taken on by Karaites.

⁴ R. Ya'akov b. Asher, Germany/Spain, 13th-14th c.

⁵ R. Yosef Karo, Turkey/Land of Israel, 16th c.

notion that perhaps the walls were also an integral part of the conceptual structure of the *sukkah*, such that we might need to care what they are made of, too.⁶ Consider the following rich talmudic discussion, which concerns how much shade must be cast by the walls of a *sukkah*:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ז:
(משנה:): ושחמתה מרובה מצלתה פסולה.

תנו רבנן: חמתה - מחמת סיבוכ, ולא מחמת דפנות. רבי יאשיה אומר: איך מחמת דפנות.

אמר רב יימר בר שלמיה משמיה דאביי: מאי טעמא דרבי יאשיה

- דכתיב "וסכת על הארון את הפרכת" (שמות מ:ג).
פרכת מחיצה, וקא קרייה רחמנא סוכה. אלמא: מחיצה כסבך בעינן.

ורבנן: ההוא דניבוכי ביה פורתא, דמחזי כסבך.

אמר אביי: רבי ורבי יאשיה ורבי יהודה ורבי שמעון ורבן גמליאל ובית שמאי ורבי אליעזר ואחרים, כולהו סבירא להו: סוכה דירת קבע בעינן.

Talmud Bavli Sukkah 7b
[Mishnah:] *And if the sukkah has more sun than shade, it is invalid.*

Our Sages taught: More sun— On account of the sekhakh and not on account of the walls. R. Yoshiyah says: Even on account of the walls.

Said R. Yeimar b. Shelamiah in the name of Abaye: What is R. Yoshiyah's verse? It is written, "You shall drape (ve-sakota) the curtain over the ark" (Shemot 40:3).

The curtain is a wall, and yet the Torah refers to it as sekhakh, therefore, we require a wall that is like sekhakh.

But the Sages would reply: The use of the term ve-sakota is

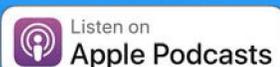
- 6 We are not exploring here the classical Rabbinic discussions around the number of walls that the *sukkah* must have, which was indeed a preoccupation of a number of texts. See Tosefta Sukkah 1:12-13. Most notably, when the Talmud wants to ground the debate over two or three complete *sukkah* walls in Scripture, it does so by appealing to the way the word בסכת is spelled in its various appearances in Vayikra 23. This suggests that the Torah's use of the word *sukkah* encodes information not just about the *sekhakh*, but also about the walls! We saw how Rashi above wanted to deny any sort of symbolic meaning for the walls. He must therefore cast this talmudic discussion as a mere focus on full and deficient spellings that might generate some details that we extract for the purpose of counting walls, but he tried to mute the potential hint here at the deeper significance of the walls for the integrity of the *sukkah*: ולא ממשמעותא.
- 7 The question מאי טעמא literally means "What is the reason?" but it sometimes is used by Amoraim in the Bavli specifically to ask the question "What is the verse that supports this opinion?" (e.g. Shmuel on Berakhot 12a, R. Abahu on Sotah 21b). This is also how the phrase העמם is used generally in the Yerushalmi.

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only to require that the curtain be folded up a bit near the top, so that it looks like sekhakh.

Said Abaye: Rabbi, R. Yoshiyah, R. Yehudah, R. Shimon, Rabban Gamliel, Beit Shammai, R. Eliezer, and “others”—all hold that the sukkah must be a permanent abode.

This passage begins by analyzing a quotation from Mishnah Sukkah 1:1, which rules that any *sukkah* that has more sun than shade is invalid. Is this a problem even if the sun is streaming in on account of the walls, as opposed to on account of the *sekhakh*? Here, we find a debate between an anonymous authority and R. Yoshiyah. The anonymous view is satisfied with a layer of *sekhakh* that mostly keeps the sun out; if the nature of the walls means that the floor of the *sukkah* lacks significant shade, that is no problem. R. Yoshiyah, by contrast, holds that the *sukkah* must be shady, and both the *sekhakh* and the walls must ensure that this is so. On its own, this might be a local pronouncement about the importance of shade. But Abaye then fleshes out the conceptual basis for this position: R. Yoshiyah must think that the wall is also a kind of *sekhakh*! How do we know this? Because the Torah uses the root, סכך/“drape,” with respect to the vertical curtain that separated the sections of the *mishkan* in the desert. This shows that the terminology of *sekhakh* can apply to a wall, and if the primary function of *sekhakh* is to provide shade, then so must the wall. The Talmud presents us with an abstract conceptual conclusion: for R. Yoshiyah, מחיצה נסכך, בעינין (we require a wall that is like *sekhakh*).

It is a small leap from here to suggest that R. Yoshiyah—and any who would have agreed with him—would have slapped all sorts of requirements on the walls. Indeed, some medieval authorities argued precisely that. Ra’avia⁸ II:609 argues that R. Yoshiyah’s ruling regarding shade is part of a package deal that treats the walls as an integral part of the *sukkah*’s construction. He assumes that R. Yoshiyah would apply all of the Rabbinic regulations around *sekhakh* to the walls as well. Still, he deflects all of this as normatively irrelevant since R. Yoshiyah is taken to be a minority view, is contradicted by another tannaitic passage in the Tosefta, and is conceptually grouped in the Talmud with other rejected positions such as those of Beit Shammai.

Nonetheless, this notion of the walls mattering lived on, this time through the reinterpretation of a cryptic passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Sukkah 1:5, 52b).⁹ The original passage was a little unclear, but an emended version emerged during the Middle Ages—a version that had surprising practical consequences:

ר' יצחק בן משה מוניה, ספר אור
דרוע ח"ב - הלכות סוכה סימן
רפס

ירושלמי ר' לוי בשם ר' חמא
בר חנינה כתיב וסכת על הארון
את הכפורת [צ"ל הפרוכת] מיכן
שהדופן קרוי סכך מיכן שעושיין
דפנות בדבר שאינו מקבל טומאה
ולפי זה יש לנו לפרש דהא
דקתני וכולן כשירות דהיינו דוקא
אחבילי קש וחבילי עצים וחבילי
זרדים קאי דכשרין דאורייתא
אפי' לסכך ורבנן הוא דגזור בהו
ולדפנות לא גזור וכפי זה היה
צריך להזהר שלא לעשות הדפנות

מדבר המקבל טומאה ואין גידולו
מן הארץ.

Or Zarua II:289, R. Yitzhak b. Moshe, Vienna, 13th c.
Yerushalmi: “R. Levi in the name of R. Hama b. Hanina: ‘You shall drape the cover [should read: the curtain] over the ark’—from here we learn that the wall is called sekhakh, from here we learn that one makes the walls out of items that do not receive impurity.” According to this, we must explain the Mishnah’s ruling that “they are all valid as walls” to refer only to bundles of straw, wood, and reeds, since these are biblically valid as sekhakh, and it is only the Sages who forbade their use and they did not forbid them for use as walls. Following this logic, one should be careful not to make the walls out of something that can receive impurity and that does not grow out of the ground.

This version of the Yerushalmi notes that the description of the *parokhet* as a kind of *sekhakh* forbids the use of items that receive impurity for the walls. In other words, the walls are not material-neutral. Or Zarua then notes that, if we take this Yerushalmi seriously, we ought to have much stricter requirements for the walls of our *sukkah*! Indeed, how do we deal with the *mishnah* we saw above, “And all of them are valid for the walls?” Wasn’t that a blanket endorsement of a principled lack of standards for the materials used for the walls? Or Zarua rightly notes that this *mishnah* might be read more conservatively: perhaps the last permissive line only refers to the cases of the bun-

8 R. Eliezer b. Yoel Ha-Levi, Germany, 12th-13th c.

9 “רבי יוסא בשם רבי חמא בר חנינה וסכות על הארון את הכפורת [צ"ל הפרוכת] מיכן שהדופן קרוי סכך מיכן שעושיין דפנות בדבר שהוא מקבל טומאה.” This passage has some clear parallels to the section from the Talmud Bavli we learned above. A link is made between the *parokhet* (curtain in the *mishkan*) and the root סכך (to drape), and this is deemed to have consequences for how we think about the walls. But beyond this, the text is somewhat cryptic. While it makes sense to derive from the *parokhet* that a wall or vertical barrier can be described as a kind of *sekhakh*, how does this prove—as this text suggests—that one can make walls out of items that receive impurity? Doesn’t calling the wall a kind of *sekhakh* subject it to the sort of regulation that would forbid this, since such objects cannot be used for the *sukkah*’s roof? In fact, Rabbeinu Hananel (10th c. North Africa) on Sukkah 18a preserves a version that undoubtedly carries the original sense of this Yerushalmi, simply by including the conjunction, *vav* (and), in between the two clauses beginning “from here”: i.e. what we thought was one connected clause was supposed to be two unconnected clauses. The Yerushalmi argues: 1. A wall can be called *sekhakh*—such as for the purposes of ensuring shade; and, separately, 2. just as the curtain receives impurity, so too the walls of the *sukkah* must be able to receive impurity. In other words, the Yerushalmi takes a hybrid view of the wall: it must be there and still provide shade. In this sense, it maps onto the most basic level of meaning of R. Yoshiyah. But on the other hand, the curtain in the *mishkan* shows that the walls can be constructed of anything one likes. I am grateful to my father and teacher, R. Gordon Tucker, for this close reading of R. Hananel and the Yerushalmi.

dles. These bundled items, which are made of materials permissible for *sekhakh*, can be used for the walls even without being untied. But the Mishnah might well agree that a *sukkah* made with walls made from materials that would be intrinsically invalid as *sekhakh* is completely invalid! Or Zarua seems aware that common practice does not hew to this standard at all; nonetheless, he seems to prefer pushing people in that direction. Indeed, hundreds of years later, the Bah¹⁰ recommended following this suggestion of the Or Zarua.

This resurrection of the idea that the material of the walls matters was once again shut down. Eliyah Rabbah¹¹ and Birkei Yosef¹² both reject this stringency as unnecessary. The Vilna Gaon,¹³ while conceding that the Yerushalmi would indeed point us in this direction, invokes the Ra'aviah and says that this sort of view maps on to the minority opinion of R. Yoshiyah, and so can—and should—be disregarded.

Be'ur Halakhah¹⁴ goes further, pointing out that the dominant reading in the Yerushalmi is opposite that of the Or Zarua, and cannot possibly support his conclusion. Indeed, other than the Or Zarua, all quotations of the Yerushalmi affirm that one can make a wall of a *sukkah* out of something that receives impurity.

This would seem to end the saga of the *sukkah's* walls. Starting with a particular reading of Vayikra, we entertained the notion that the *sukkah* cannot be so easily separated into walls and roof. But Rabbinic tradition pushed us to a more lenient standard for walls, leading many medieval commentators to adopt a principled lack of standards when it came to these legal barriers. R. Yoshiyah's voice emerges as an important contrast, and he is invoked as the basis for a more robust commitment to caring about the materials used to construct the walls of a *sukkah*. Nonetheless, he is marginalized as a minority view. Finally, an obscure Yerushalmi is reread in order to produce a view that makes some

meaningful demands on *sukkah* wall construction, and advocates of this position try to roll back some of the permissiveness of the major medieval and modern codes. At the end of the day, however, this view is also largely rejected and relegated to the dustbin of halakhic history, representing a path not taken.

Still, as a supremely ironic reminder of the fact that great ideas never die, we end up with the prayer with which we began this essay. The walls have their final revenge as the culminating moment of departure from the *sukkah* features them and not the *sekhakh*. In leaving the *sukkah* walls open to all materials, the discourse of *halakhah* largely defeated the notion that the material of the *sukkah's* walls has deep intrinsic significance. Here, the *aggadah* of our prayers resurrects one element of the significant in the fragments of R. Yoshiyah, the Or Zarua, and the Bah. Perhaps the walls matter after all.

Reciting the prayer for the Levathan-walled *sukkah* is always done very close to the end of a long jour-

ney, at the near conclusion of a drawn-out High Holiday season that is often inspiring, to be sure, but also often draining. We invest a lot of time, resources, and mental and emotional wherewithal into these special days, but we don't always see immediate and obvious spiritual results. Perhaps we sometimes feel like our best intentions were ill-conceived, even rejected from on high by superior contravening forces. But the *sukkah* walls should remind us that no neglected position, when introduced for the sake of heaven, will ever go in vain. They live on with us, and they may even be the star feature in days of redemption. May our *sukkot* both shelter us and surround us with meaning. And may they help us remember that even rejected ideas in the realm of Torah endure, and great debates will never die. ♦



10 R. Yoel Sirkes, Poland, 16th c.

11 R. Eliyah Shapira, Prague, 17th-18th c.

12 R. Yosef Hayyim Dov Azulai, Land of Israel/Turkey/Italy, 18th c.

13 R. Eliyahu b. Shlomo, Lithuania, 18th c.

14 R. Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen, Poland, 19th-20th c.

DANCING OUR WAY INTO JEWISH HISTORY

R. Yitz Greenberg

Until the 20th century, Simḥat Torah was the last Jewish holiday to emerge. Of all the inherited holidays of the Hebrew calendar, only Simḥat Torah (literally, “Rejoicing in the Torah”) is not referred to either in the Bible or in the Talmud. Its establishment is a triumph of the *Torah she-ba-al peh* (the Oral Tradition) which accompanied, interpreted, and applied the Written Scriptures to the constantly changing conditions of Jewish history. According to Rabbinic tradition, the Oral Tradition was also revealed at Sinai, albeit not written down, and is of equal authority to the Written Scriptures.¹

The public reading of the Torah (with translation and commentary, so the masses would understand) probably goes back to the return from the Babylonian Exile in Second Temple times.² The custom of reading it weekly became dominant after the Destruction of the Temple, when public readings of the Torah text in community became the center of Jewish practice and religious experience. There were two established Torah reading patterns. In Israel, the Five Books were read weekly, but the cycle was completed over a three-year period. In Babylon and much of the Diaspora, the Torah cycle was read and completed in one year. Somewhere between the ninth and twelfth centuries, the Babylonian custom won out.

All communities then read the Five Books in the course of the year, with the last chapter of Deuteronomy read on Shemini Atzeret (the Eighth Day of Assembly). This day concludes the intense holiday season of Tish-

rei—from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to Sukkot and, finally, Shemini Atzeret. The Torah text is vague, but it seems to treat Shemini Atzeret as a separate holiday, even though it immediately follows the seventh day of Sukkot. While Shemini Atzeret is called in our liturgy *z’man simḥateinu* (time of our rejoicing), as is Sukkot, the day has no specific practices comparable to waving the *lulav* or building a *sukkah*. This left Shemini Atzeret open to the development of a celebration of the Torah itself, which eventually morphed into the holiday of Simḥat Torah.

As the tradition of completing the annual Torah reading on Shemini Atzeret became increasingly established, the community made two important additions to the day. Out of love of the Torah and tradition, people added elements of celebration: of dancing with the Torah, of honoring the person called up for the final reading, and of singing and dancing at the completion of the cycle. Over time, the custom grew that every male³ member of the congregation be given an *aliyah*, and all the children of the congregation would be called up for an *aliyah* with an adult. The entire group joined in the blessing of the Torah and the whole congregation joined in a special blessing of the children afterward.

The second important set of additions is meant to signal that the study of the Torah never ends. After reading the last portion of Deuteronomy, a second Torah is brought out and the opening portion of Genesis (the Creation story, Genesis 1:1-2:3) read. The full opening *parashah* of

Genesis (1:1-6:8) is read on the following Shabbat. But on this festival day, the opening portion was read to make clear the intention to pursue a never ending cycle of Torah study and reading. In the words of our Rabbis: “*Hafokh ba ve-hafokh ba, de-khola va - turn it over* (i.e. analyze and reflect) and turn it over again, for all (i.e. endless wisdom and teaching) is in it” (Mishnah Avot 5:22).

All this expansion in celebration culminated in crystallizing the day as Simḥat Torah, the holiday of rejoicing in the Torah.

The celebration and dancing component of Simḥat Torah enabled the holiday to play a central role in the reunion of Soviet Jewry with Judaism and world Jewry. Young Russian Jews—at first a handful, but eventually by the tens of thousands—reconnected to a religion that had been denied to them by attending the Simḥat Torah celebration in Moscow’s main synagogue on Arkhipova Street.⁴ For people who could not read Hebrew or say a prayer, just being present or joining in the dancing became an act of defiance of tyranny and of reclaiming their Jewish identity. When unaffiliated American Jews keep only one holiday, it is typically Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, self-denial, and endless—often incomprehensible—prayers. But I have always marveled at the Soviet Jews who wisely chose to connect to the holiday cycle with Simḥat Torah, a day of socializing, dancing, and celebration.

In addition to filling Shemini Atzeret with a special observance, there was another logic for developing Simḥat Torah in this season. Pe-

1 It could be argued that the Oral Torah is superior in authority, in that there are oral interpretations which are authoritative as to the meaning of the Written Torah, even though they could be seen as “overriding” the plain meaning of the Torah’s statements. For two famous examples, see Babylonian Talmud Bava Kama 84a and Makkot 22b.

2 See Nehemiah 7-8.

3 Over the last century or so, the liberal denominations, together with a contingent of progressive Orthodoxy, brought women into this ritual.

4 For a summary of these events, see *Simchat Torah on Arkhipova Street: Jewish Pride and Dreams of America* (accessed 5/5/2022).

sah and Sukkot, exactly six months apart, both celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, the core event of Jewish religion. The people noted that seven weeks (seven times seven days) plus one day after the Exodus, the Hebrew calendar marks the holiday of Shavuot as the holiday of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.⁵ Shavuot was known as *Hag Ha-Atzeret* (the Holiday of Assembly), when the people gathered to receive the Torah at Sinai, and reenacted that acceptance every year. “Atzeret” also means “concluding,” as in *Shemini Atzeret*. The logic of the biblical calendar was that the Exodus was not only an event of liberation from servitude, but the beginning of a process whose climax was the acceptance of the Torah and the covenant on Shavuot. Through that process, the Israelites became a “holy nation” with a mission to pace humanity toward a future redemption (i.e. *tikkun olam*), when the world would be redeemed. Hence, the Holiday of Atzeret is a culmination—a closing of the loop—of the process of redemption initiated by the Exodus.

The people saw that Sukkot—the celebration of the Exodus liberation from Egypt in Tishrei—could be connected to a seven-plus-one day as well, namely: *Shemini Atzeret*. This Atzeret-assembly would parallel Shavuot by closing the liberation process with a renewed acceptance and celebration of the Torah and covenant on the eighth day. This was the message of *Simhat Torah*, which became a kind of parallel Shavuot.

There is another message in the establishment of *Simhat Torah*. The processes of revelation and of living the covenant did not stop with the founding events and religious leaders of Judaism. Judaism is a covenantal way of life. Jewry goes through his-

tory trying to redeem the world and teach all nations the good life, and about the divine-human partnership, in order to turn this planet into a paradise. Therefore, the creation of new holy days and the absorption of new religious experiences is appropriate and welcome. It is a sign that Judaism is alive, and that every generation can contribute to the unfolding of the Torah.⁶

The fact that the people, rather than divine command, created *Simhat Torah* also is testimony to the quality and inspiration of Jewry. The advance of the Torah is not just accomplished through divine revelation, or by the authority of learned scholars, but is driven by the collective wisdom and spirit of Jewry. The vitality of Jewish activity in history in recent centuries has been expressed from the grassroots. Zionism was mostly initiated by a small avant-garde who understood that it was time to end exile, persecution, and powerlessness, and to renew Jewish life.⁷

One of my father’s favorite quotes from the Talmud was: “leave it to the children of Israel [to get the religious issues right and add new religious experiences]—for if they are not prophets themselves [prophecy having ended two millennia ago], they are the children of prophets” (Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* 66a). This means that Jews have an innate spiritual quality that inspires them to live covenantally—i.e. authentically religiously—in changing times and new civilizations.

This year, when you go celebrate and dance and experience *Simhat Torah*, know as you experience this joy that you are confirming the wisdom and creative religious spirit of the Jewish people. Follow this up with absorbing the new sacred events and

memories of world Jewry and acting them out. With every dance step, we are witnessing the emergence of the next phase of Jewish renewal and religious renaissance. ♦



- 5 The number seven in the Bible is a signifier of wholeness and completion (e.g. the seventh day, Shabbat, marks the completion of creation). The number eight (one more than seven) is a signifier of covenant in the Bible. Humans take God’s creation—symbolized by seven—and add on a covenant to improve it even more (seven + one). Shavuot, the holiday of the covenant, occurs fifty days, which is seven x seven days (i.e. completion squared) after the Exodus, plus one covenant day.
- 6 See also my essay on Parashat Bo, “The Hebrew Calendar is the First Commandment,” which explores this theme of Jewish holidays as a core expression of the unfolding covenantal way, available [here](#).
- 7 I believe that the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel represent major developments on the Jewish way in history. Therefore, Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Commemoration Day) and Yom Ha’Atzma’ut (Israel Independence Day) are major new holy days on the sacred Hebrew calendar. When I wrote my book on the Jewish holidays, *The Jewish Way*, I included chapters on these two contemporary days, arguing that they are sacred and central to Jewish self-understanding, just as the classic holidays such as *Pesah*, Shavuot, and Sukkot are. It is notable that these holy days were established by so-called “secular authorities,” particularly the Knesset of the State of Israel, in response to the popular will. To my mind, it is regrettable that Haredi leadership has opposed these initiatives, while many other religious leaders have dragged their feet or accepted these days with limited fervor and support.



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