



בצרוך החיים

IN THE BOND OF LIFE

High Holidays 5785 ימים נוראים תשפ"ה



HOW SHOULD WE approach the coming High Holidays, especially Shemini Atzeret/Simḥat Torah, the *yahrzeit* marking a devastating year of tragedy and loss? How can we go from saying Yizkor to dancing with the Torah?

This struggle is present within the words of the Yizkor liturgy. At the same time that we hold the memories and sadness of our losses, we somehow still pray for a connection to the “bond of life.” In the same way, we hope the Torah insights in these pages will help you reflect and hold the questions and struggles of this past year together, perhaps, with a semblance of hope.

May the coming year hold no more loss, and may we feel in our own lives a connection to the “bond of life.”

The Hadar Team

THE HADAR INSTITUTE

Hadar empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed. Hadar offers learning opportunities for people from all walks of Jewish life, including online courses, public lectures, week-long immersive experiences, and our online Torah and Tefillah library.

EXECUTIVE TEAM

Rabbi Shai Held, President and Dean
Rabbi Avital Hochstein, President of Hadar in Israel
Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, President and CEO
Rabbi Avi Killip, Executive Vice President
Rabbi Aviva Richman, Rosh Yeshiva
Rabbi Ethan Tucker, President and Rosh Yeshiva

EDITORIAL TEAM

Sam Greenberg, Senior Director of Communications
Mikhael Reuven Keshet, Editor
Dr. Jeremy Tabick, Content Manager
Rabbi Effy Unterman, Senior Director of Content
Elisheva Urbas, Editorial Director

Design by Rachel Jackson, www.binahdesign.com

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

Copyright © 2024 by Hadar

In the Bond of Life, High Holiday Reader 2024 by Hadar is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



THE HADAR INSTITUTE

210 West 93rd St, New York, NY 10025
info@hadar.org
646.770.1468

To donate or sponsor future publications, please contact Jeffrey Stein at stein@hadar.org.

INTRODUCTION

- 8 A CORD OF HOPE
R. Shai Held

ROSH HASHANAH

- 12 INVITING GOD HOME
R. Avi Killip
- 15 ROSH HASHANAH AND THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF LIFE
R. Elie Kaunfer
- 19 *SHEVARIM*
R. Aviva Richman
- 24 FROM PARTICULARITY TO UNIVERSALITY
R. Jason Rogoff

YOM KIPPUR

- 30 ON THE POWER OF LITERALITY
Dr. Tsivia Frank Wygoda
- 34 "UNTIL GRAY HAIR, I WILL BEAR YOU"
R. Ethan Tucker

SIMHAT TORAH

- 40 CAN WE ENVISION A DIFFERENT FUTURE?
R. Avital Hochstein

WHO WE ARE



DR. TSIVIA FRANK WYGODA

is Hadar's Be'er Sheva and Southern Israel Coordinator. She holds a PhD in Literature from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and her first book, *Edmond Jabès and the Archaeology of the Book*, was published in English in 2021.



RABBI SHAI HELD

is President and Dean at Hadar. His most recent book, *Judaism is About Love*, was published in 2024. He is also the author of *The Heart of Torah* (2017) and *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (2013), and is the host of Hadar's newest podcast, *Answers WithHeld*.



RABBI AVITAL HOCHSTEIN

is President of Hadar in Israel. She holds a doctorate from Bar Ilan University in Talmud. She received ordination from R. Daniel Landes and from the Beit Midrash Le'Rabbanut Yisraelit and is the co-author of *The Place of Women in Midrash* (2008).



RABBI ELIE KAUNFER

is President and CEO of Hadar. He received *semikhah* from his longtime teacher, R. Daniel Landes, and is currently completing a book on the weekday Amidah. He received a doctorate in liturgy from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was also ordained, and is a graduate of Harvard College.





RABBI AVI KILLIP

is Executive Vice President of Hadar. A graduate of Hebrew College Rabbinical School, R. Killip was a Wexner Graduate Fellow and a Schusterman Fellow. She is the host of Hadar's podcasts, *Responsa Radio* and *Ta Shma*.



RABBI AVIVA RICHMAN

is Rosh Yeshiva at Hadar. She was ordained by R. Daniel Landes and has a doctorate from New York University in Talmud. R. Richman also studied in the Pardes Kollel and the Drisha Scholars' Circle.



RABBI JASON ROGOFF

is Faculty at Hadar. He was ordained in the Hadar Advanced Kollel and holds a PhD in Talmud and Rabbinics from the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is the author, along with Joshua Kulp, of *Reconstructing the Talmud*, Volumes I and II (2014, 2019).



RABBI ETHAN TUCKER

is President and Rosh Yeshiva at Hadar. He was ordained by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and earned a doctorate in Talmud and Rabbinics from the Jewish Theological Seminary. A Wexner Graduate Fellow, he was a co-founder of Kehilat Hadar. He is the author, along with R. Micha'el Rosenberg, of *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* (2017).



A CORD OF HOPE

R. Shai Held

THE DAYS OF Awe are a time of hope, predicated upon the possibility of transformation and renewal. The essence of *teshuvah*, we are taught, is that we ourselves, our families, our communities, our people, and the world as a whole are capable of being more than we presently are, of doing more than we presently do. The day will come, we are promised, when human dignity will be real and the presence of God will be manifest.¹ Then (and only then) will God be fully recognized—and crowned, as it were—as God.

There are times when such transformative hope seems almost totally inaccessible. This is, sadly, one of those times. Both the US and Israel are faced with profound existential crises, and the possibility of redemptive transformation seems remote at best. So many of us are bewildered and exhausted. Hope? Renewal? Transformation? The words fall flat.

So what can we hold on to as the Days of Awe approach?

In a provocative image, the talmudic Sage R. Abbahu imagines that God created and destroyed multiple worlds before creating the one we now inhabit (Bereishit Rabbah 3:7). Commenting on this *midrash*, R. Joseph Soloveitchik² strikingly observes that “here

we have God not only creating, as in the Biblical text, but also recreating, rebuilding after destructions.” Why is this important? Because, R. Soloveitchik suggests, the way God is portrayed here is meant to teach us a profound ethical and spiritual lesson: “As

God creates and recreates... so too, should [human beings] be ready to rebuild and reconstruct, even as previous structures collapse.” This is not easy, Soloveitchik admits: “To build initially is difficult, but to rebuild is even more challenging.” Faced with destruction and devastation, we are nevertheless “bidden to start over again with faith and resourcefulness, as God did. ... This, then, is what the

Torah requires of [human beings]: to act, to create and, when necessary, to recreate, even as did the Divine Creator.”³ To be tasked with being God’s partner, in other words, is not simply to be presented with raw materials and told to build. It is, at least some of the time, to be confronted by horrible loss—by confusion about the past and uncertainty about the future, by the temptation to succumb to despair and fatigue—and to somehow manage to choose life instead.

And yet that choice can feel—and be—so hard. To buoy myself lately, I have been reflecting on the Hebrew word for hope, *tikvah*, which also means “thread,” as

“PERHAPS THIS IS OUR TASK:
TO AFFIRM (TO INSIST) THAT,
EVEN IF MUCH OF WHAT WE
CARE ABOUT MOST IS HANGING
BY A THREAD, GROWTH,
CHANGE, AND RENEWAL
CAN (WILL?) YET COME.”

1 See Micah 4 as a poignant example of this.

2 1903-1993.

3 R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (ed. Abraham R. Besdin), *Reflections of the Rav* (1979), pp. 28-29.

in the phrase *tikvat hut ha-shani*, the cord of crimson thread that Rahab hangs outside of her window as a sign for Joshua and the Israelites to let her family live (Joshua 2:18). I find myself thinking: sometimes hope is little more than a very slender thread, but that thread is everything, almost literally salvaging life from the grips of death.

A verse in Job reflects on the hope suggested by a tree:

איוב יד:ז
כִּי יִשׁ לְעֵץ תִּקְוָה
אִם־יִכָּרֵת וְעוֹד יִחְלֶיף
וְיִנָּקֵתוּ לֹא תִחְדָּל:

Job 14:7

*There is hope (tikvah) for a tree:
if it is cut down it will renew itself;
its shoots will not cease.*

A chopped-down tree may **look** dead, but under the surface there is the possibility of more life. This same hopefulness is captured by a verse in Isaiah using an almost identical metaphor to foretell the messianic redemption:

ישעיה יא:א
וְיֵצֵא חֹטֶר מִגִּזְעֵ יֵשׁוּ
וְנֹצֵר מִשְׁרָשָׁיו יִפְרֶה:

Isaiah 11:1

*A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse,
a twig shall sprout forth from his roots.*

Perhaps this is our task: to affirm (to insist) that, even if much of what we care about most is hanging by a thread, growth, change, and renewal can (will?) yet come.

We should not confuse hope with optimism. I am not optimistic, but I **am** hopeful—at least some of the time. If anything, the literary critic Terry Eagleton writes, “hope and temperamental optimism are at daggers drawn.” The point Eagleton is making is profound and essential. Optimism, he says, is “a form of psychological disavowal... a moral evasion”; it “does not take despair seriously enough.” Perhaps counterintuitively, optimism is thus “the enemy of hope, which is necessary precisely because one is able to confess how grave a situation is.” So what **is** hope? It is, in the philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s wonderful phrase, “a passion for the possible”; it is, Eagleton explains, “a movement toward the good, not simply a craving for it.”⁴

In other words, hope involves commitment.⁵ So as we enter these days of reflection, let us examine both our lives and the world in which we live them, and let us grasp for the cord of hope, however slender and vulnerable it may be.

During the Days of Awe, we recite a wonderful phrase that is as elusive as it is evocative: *ha-yom harat olam*, which is often translated as “today is the birthday of the world.” But in Hebrew, *herayon* refers to pregnancy rather than birth. So, with some homiletical license, I suggest that this year, even amidst our grief and our worry, we translate as “today is pregnant with the [possibility of a renewed] world.”

Amen, ve-khen yehi ratzon. ♦

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (2015), pp. 5, 11-12, 52.

⁵ Wanting things to change without committing to help making them change is wishing, not hoping.

FEB 2-5
NYC

FEBRUARY LEARNING SEMINAR

hadar.org/feb



All learning backgrounds welcome
for a week of dynamic, inspiring Torah



ראש השנה

ROSH HASHANAH



INVITING GOD HOME

R. Avi Killip

THE CORONATION OF God on Rosh Hashanah can be an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and control over the world. But it can also be something more desperate. When we see a world spinning out of control, we invite—maybe even demand—that God sit on the throne, and please, please, take charge of this world!

Through the last 10 years, it has often felt as if God was absent from our world, leaving that throne vacant. From COVID-19 to fragile democracies to the unbearable pain of October 7th and the war that followed, we have too often felt unmoored and unprotected. These painful realities can leave us feeling distant from God. In a more visceral and frightening way, it can feel as if we are witnessing God's departure, watching a world that used to be more stable come apart at the seams.

An especially poetic passage in the Talmud beautifully and painfully describes what it feels like to watch God leave us behind. It offers an account of what it might be like to watch God slowly, step by step, ascending to heaven and withdrawing from the world.

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה לא.

עשר מסעות נסעה שכינה מקראי:
מפצרת לכרוב,
ומכרוב לכרוב,
ומכרוב למפתן,
ומפתן לחצר,
ומחצר למזבח,
וממזבח לגג,
ומגג לחומה,
ומחומה לעיר,
ומעיר להר,
ומהר למדבר,
וממדבר עלתה וישבה במקומה —

שנאמר: "אלך אשובה אל מקומי"
(הושע ה:טו).

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 31a

The Shekhinah traveled ten journeys:

*from ark cover to cherub;
and from cherub to cherub;
and from cherub to threshold;
and from threshold to courtyard;
and from courtyard to altar;
and from altar to roof;
and from roof to wall;
and from wall to city;
and from city to mountain;
and from mountain to wilderness;
and from wilderness she ascended and
rested in her place,
as it is stated: "I will go return to My place"
(Hosea 5:15).*

We can almost picture the Divine Presence flying out from the ark, and then moving slowly outward and upward. With each painful step, the Shekhinah moves away from us until, in the end, God has returned to God's original place in the heavens, and we are left alone. The talmudic poem paints a heartbreaking portrait of God's departure from our temple, from our city, and from our world. We might experience the news cycle similarly: witnessing the wreckage of each new tragedy can feel like watching God's presence float farther and farther away.

The talmudic poem ends with a line from the prophet Hosea, who channels God's words upon departure, "אלך אשובה אל מקומי" - I will go return to My place." At the end of the poem, God has returned to the heavens, and we are left here alone.

But Midrash Tanhuma offers a very different interpretation of this same verse. In fact, this complicated *midrash* offers two different ways to understand God's going and returning in relation to "God's place":

מדרש תנחומא בחקותי ג

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מה אני עושה כאן,
אלך אשובה אל מקומי" (הושע ה:טו).

"אלך ואשובה" אין כתיב כאן, אלא "אלך
אשובה", שאילו היה כתיב "אלך ואשובה" לא
היה תקוה.

Midrash Tanhuma

BeHukkotai 3

The Holy Blessed One said,
"What am I doing here? 'I will
go return to My place' (Hosea
5:15)."

It isn't written, "I will go **and**
return," but rather, "I will go;
I will return." For if it said,
"I will go **and** return," there
would be no hope.

The question is: When God returns, to where is God returning? Is it that God is returning back to where God came from originally (the heavens), or is it that God will eventually return back to us?

The *midrash* notices that there is no *vav*, meaning "and," between the two verbs here—nothing to grammatically conjoin the first part of God's statement, "I will go," to the second, "I will return." Had the two been conjoined, the implication would have been: "I will go and return back to My original place, to the heavens." But that is not what is stated in Hosea. There is no conjunctive *vav*. God states, "I will leave." But also, separately, subsequently, "I will return." Implying that God's ultimate return is not to the heavens, but back to us.

If, in the Talmud, this verse is a warning about God's departure only, in this *midrash* God's declaration is instead a promise: God always returns. The *midrash* emphasizes that the absence of a *vav* means that the statements are disconnected, and we can count on God's return. So there is hope.

The *midrash* goes on to offer a second close reading of the word "I will return" in

this verse that is not only hopeful, but offers us agency in the longing for God's return:

אלא אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אעפ"י שאני
הולך יעשה תשובה ואני חוזר, מתוך צרה...
עושים תשובה, ואני מחזיר שכינתי.

Rather the Holy Blessed One said, "Even
though I leave, do teshuvah, and I return.
In the midst of pain... they do teshuvah
and I return my Shekhinah."

We are taught that even in times of deep pain, *teshuvah* can bring God's Shekhinah back to us.

If the talmudic poem reads Hosea as suggesting that "God's place" is in the heavens—far from our world—for the Tanhuma, "God's place" is here, with us.

In fact, not only is God's place in this world, but we have the ability to bring God back. Without *teshuvah* there would be hopelessness (לא היה תקוה). God would leave never to return. We would be

completely without hope. But *teshuvah* is the antidote to despair: it gives us agency; it gives us the power to change the course of the world; it gives us the power to bring God's presence back not only to ourselves as individuals, but to the world at large.

“THROUGH TESHUVAH,
WE HAVE A WAY
FORWARD. THROUGH
OUR TESHUVAH,
GOD RETURNS.”



Subscribe to Ta Shma

A podcast
where you get to listen in
on Hadar's Beit Midrash



**Ta
Shma**
A HADAR  PODCAST

Teshuvah can transform the world back into God's place. Without our *teshuvah*, God would remain adrift, out of place. Our *teshuvah* can bring God home. This framework reminds us that we do indeed have control. Our choices and behaviors matter.

To be clear, I'm not saying that *teshuvah* alone can stop all the chaos and suffering in our world. For better and worse, good is often unrewarded and bad unpunished; disasters happen without apparent reason. The world is not governed by a simple calculation of sin and punishment. But that does not mean we are off the hook, or that our behavior—our *teshuvah*, our constant striving to be better people—does not matter. *Teshuvah* may not heal all our pain and loss, but it can help manifest God's presence in the world as we face life's storms.

R. Yitz Greenberg concretizes this connection between our actions and God's presence through his teachings on covenant. He explains that, in modern times, we are God's actors in the world. In this era of history, God acts solely through us. We are the ones who feed the hungry. We clothe the naked. We help those in need of help. If we want to experience God's presence manifest in our world, we have to get to work.¹

Without *teshuvah*, we could feel helpless and hopeless. Through *teshuvah*, we have a way forward. Through our *teshuvah*, God returns.

And if *teshuvah* can bring God home, maybe *teshuvah* can do the same for us. We, too, long to return home, to return to our place (אשובה אל מקומי), to feeling settled and at peace. Some years, *teshuvah* is a deeply personal journey of return to feeling at home in ourselves. Some years our individual lives contain their own storms, their own losses of control, and we long for order. We long to find personal peace and safety in our minds and hearts.

This past year has pushed us so much further. This year, returning home has taken on a meaning in our national consciousness more nightmarish and more urgent than we ever imagined. We have spent so much of this past year hoping and praying for exactly this: a return home.

May our *teshuvah* this year serve as a way of enacting this prayer. May we bring about a year of homecoming in every possible sense: for our people, for the world, and for God.

God, we will do *teshuvah*. Please return. ♦

¹ See R. Yitz Greenberg's new book, *The Triumph of Life: A Narrative Theology of Judaism* (2024), esp. ch. 10.

ROSH HASHANAH AND THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF LIFE

R. Elie Kaunfer

ROSH HASHANAH CONFRONTS us with a major existential question, implicitly posed by the Akeidah, the binding of Yitzhak. This story is the Torah reading on the Second Day and a main focus of the Zikhronot section of Musaf on both days. Yitzhak's story pushes us to ask: What is the purpose of my life, and how am I making the most of the years granted to me?

This is much different from another central question of the day, posed by the poem Unetaneh Tokef: "Who shall live and who shall die?" In that prayer, we focus on the basic human drive to live. But the Akeidah takes this one step further, and invites us to ask ourselves not just **whether** we will live, but **how** we should live.

Often we approach this question by thinking about the full arc of our lives. Does my career express my values? Am I leaving a lasting legacy to the next generation through the day-to-day contributions of my work and family commitments? What are my deepest-held beliefs, and am I expressing them regularly through my behavior and relationships? This is a critical set of questions we must ask ourselves continually.

But another way to look at the ultimate purpose of our life does not take a cumulative approach. Rather, it centers a specific moment—one you did not expect or even prepare for—that defines your life and its meaning.

Even before October 7th, I was thinking about this question on a trip to Copenhagen, where I went to the

Museum of the Danish Resistance, which chronicles the experience of regular Danish citizens who resisted the Nazis. When the Germans caught these men (112 in all), they sentenced them to death. But before the resistance fighters were executed, they were allowed to write farewell letters to their families. In the museum, I listened to audio recordings of these letters. Each and every man stated that they were prepared to meet their end, much earlier than they had anticipated, satisfied that they had done the right thing. Their only regret was the pain they caused their family by not returning to them.¹

I thought of these letters again after hearing the story of Ben Zussman, a 22-year old Israeli soldier killed in



¹ These letters are available in the book, *The Final Hours: Farewell Letters from the Executed Danish Patriots*.

battle last December, who left a note for his family to be read in case of his death. In his final words he writes: "I am grateful for the privilege to defend our beautiful land and the people of Israel. Even if something happens to me, I don't allow you to sink into sadness. I had the privilege to fulfill my dream and my destiny."²

On Rosh Hashanah, Yitzhak offers us this model of self-sacrifice in a moment of truth. When we consider the Akeidah, we often focus on Avraham. After all, Avraham knows what lies ahead when heading out on the three-day journey, and he is faced with the choice to follow God's command.

But in considering the purpose of our lives, I want to focus on Yitzhak. How did he consider spending the last moments of his life? The Rabbinic understanding of this story is clear: Yitzhak was not a victim without agency. Rather, he actively decided to submit to his own death. In the words of the Beit Yosef (commenting on the tradition of reading this passage in the daily liturgy), "מסר יצחק נפשו" - Yitzhak handed over his life."³

This becomes all the more significant if we assume that—as many Rabbinic traditions have it—Yitzhak was not a child at this moment, but a 37-year-old man who could have easily fought back.⁴ But he did not resist; rather he helped Avraham with the task at hand:

תנא דבי אליהו זוטא (איש שלום) פרשה ב
יצחק שאמר לאביו, [אבא] כפתיני יפה יפה
ותניני על גבי המזבח, שמא אבעט בך ואכך.

*Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu Zuta 2, ed.
Friedmann, p. 174*

*Yitzhak said to his father: "Father, tie
me down really well when you place*

*me on the altar, lest I kick or strike you
[inadvertently]."*

Yitzhak had a choice in this moment of truth, and decided to "cast himself before his father like a sacrificed lamb."⁵

The power of this story is that Yitzhak's decision is not a once-in-history situation. Indeed, all of Israel is, in some way, represented by Yitzhak.⁶ There are moments in human history when we are faced with a critical decision that will define the meaning and purpose of our life. This is not a matter of career choice or family values, developed in the luxury of the long arc of life, but a clear and quick decision that we may face in one life-altering moment. Most of us will live our lives without this experience. But far too much of Jewish history has been defined by these heroic moments of choice and sacrifice. We have seen it with our own eyes on and since October 7th. How might we ready ourselves

to do the right thing when it matters most?

The drama of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is directly connected to this story of Yitzhak's choice:

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה טז.
אמר רבי אבהו: למה תוקעין בשופר של איל?
- אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: תקעו לפני בשופר
של איל, כדי שאזכור לכם עקידת יצחק בן
אברהם, ומעלה אני עליכם כאילו עקדתם
עצמכם לפני.

Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16a

*R. Abbahu said: Why do we blow a ram's
horn? The Holy Blessed One said: Blow*

2 <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-777508>.

3 Beit Yosef Orah Hayyim 1.

4 See Bereishit Rabbah 55:4 and 56:8, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 588, 603; Seder Olam Rabbah 1, ed. Milikowsky, p. 220; Shemot Rabbah 1:1, ed. Shinan p. 38 and parallels; Rashi to Bereishit 25:20. (One manuscript of Seder Olam Rabbah indicates that Yitzhak was 26 years old; see Milikowsky, vol. 2, pp. 15-17.)

5 Vayikra Rabbah 2:10, ed. Margolioth, p. 50. The parallels to Christianity are striking, however this is clearly a natively Jewish approach. See Shalom Spiegel's tracing of this development in his masterful book *The Last Trial*, trans. Judah Goldin (1993).

6 Yerushalmi Ta'anit 2:4; 65d makes explicit the parallel between Yitzhak and the entire Jewish people.

*a ram's horn before Me, so that I shall
remember for you the binding of Yitzhak,
son of Avraham, and ascribe to you as if
you had bound yourselves before Me.*

On Rosh Hashanah, it is as if we bind ourselves (כאילו עקדתם עצמכם). In this view, Avraham's actions are muted. It is rather Yitzhak's experience of binding himself—and our implicit association with this willful decision—that God remembers on Rosh Hashanah.

What is the impact of Yitzhak's actions? In one talmudic rendering (Shabbat 89b), Yitzhak saves the entire Jewish people through his action. When God later accuses the Jewish people of sinning, Avraham and Ya'akov both respond that Israel is guilty and should be punished. But Yitzhak rises to defend the people. He argues that the sins of Israel should be forgiven on his account, "as I sacrificed my life before You." Yitzhak here is once again the active agent concerning his own sacrifice, and his action brings a form of redemption for the people from their sin.

Another text goes still further, ascribing the ultimate conquest over death to the merit of Yitzhak's self-sacrifice. In this view, God brings people back to life as a result of Yitzhak's decision and consequent actions:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא (מנדלבוים) נספחים א,
זאת הברכה
בזכות יצחק שהקריב עצמו על גבי המזבח
עתיד הקדוש ברוך הוא להחיות מתים.

*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana Additions,
VeZot HaBerakhah, ed. Mandelbaum,
p. 451*

*Through the merit of Yitzhak, who
sacrificed himself on the altar, in the future
the Holy Blessed One will resurrect the
dead.*

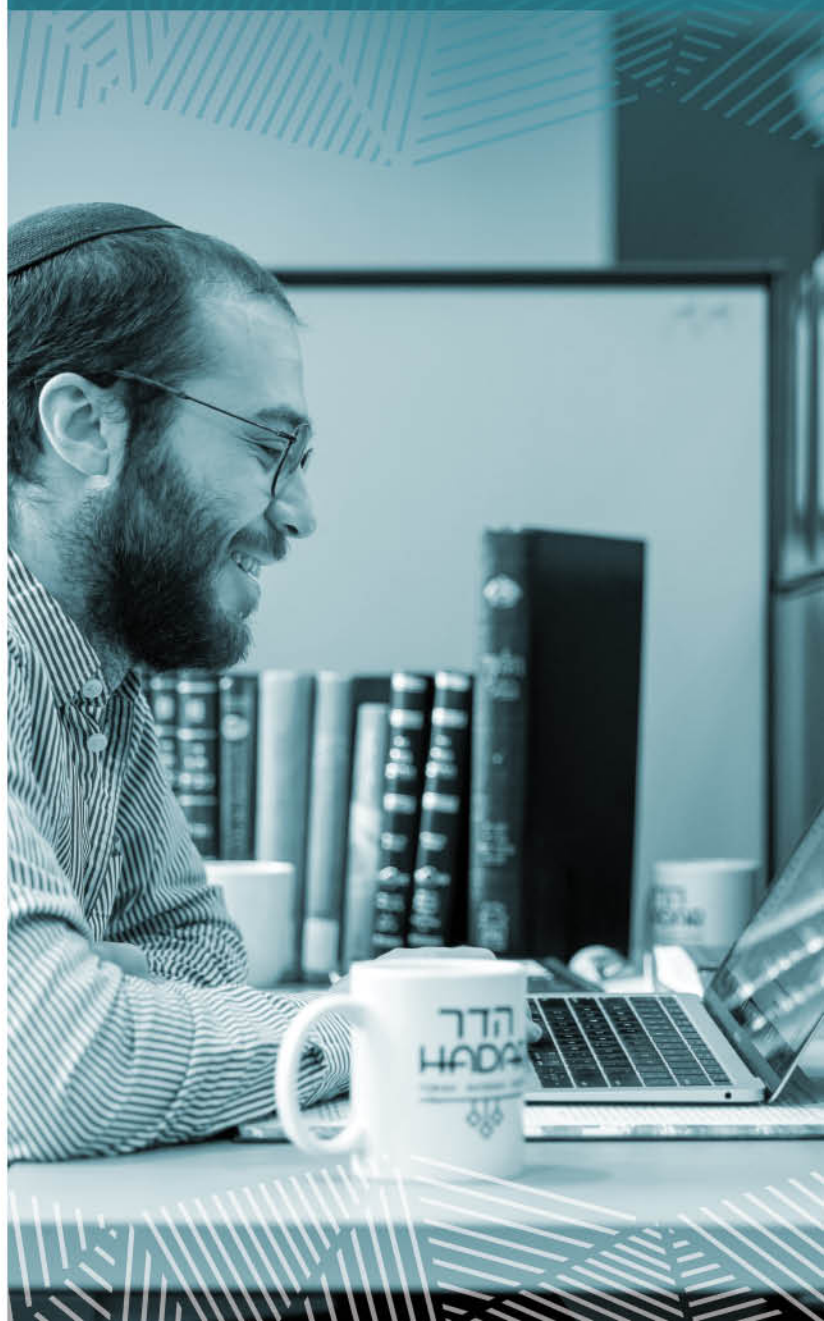
Yitzhak understood that life is not only about self-preservation. There are forces stronger than death, and a purpose to life that goes beyond racking up years lived. This is why his action is connected to God's bringing people back to life. Death is not the final chapter of the story, nor is long life the only measure of a life well lived.

There are few values more important than life in the Jewish tradition. The Torah tells us that its mandates are for the purpose of living (Vayikra 18:5), and the Talmud records that this means human life as such

Virtual Classes at Hadar

Online learning that fits your schedule
morning, midday, or evening

hadar.org/virtual



takes precedence over almost any *mitzvah* (Yoma 85b).⁷ But the story of Akeidat Yitzhak teaches us that which Plato attributes to Socrates: “Not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued.”⁸ Devoting one’s life to a purpose has an even greater power and value than merely being alive. This choice—and decision—of self-sacrifice for a purpose can arise unexpectedly, in moments that are thrust upon us, as we have seen in the most extreme ways this past year.

It is true that most of us won’t need to make the ultimate sacrifice, and we hope no one ever will. Instead, we are faced with making a lifetime of difficult choices—not the choice to forfeit our lives all at once, but the choices to truly live lives of sacrifice for others and for God. And yet Rosh Hashanah encourages us to consider moments of life-defining sacrifice. On this day, we take the Akeidah to heart: we reflect on the purposes to which we are devoting our own lives and ponder whether we would be up to the task if ever faced with the hardest decision. This is not an easy question to consider. But by reflecting upon the ultimate sacrifices of those forced to make that decision, we will certainly face our own lives with clearer purpose and meaning. ♦

7 For an extensive treatment, see R. Yitz Greenberg, *The Triumph of Life* (2024), esp. chs. 4-5.

8 Crito 48b. My thanks to R. Effy Unterman for this citation.



SHEVARIM:

Birth of a Shattered World

R. Aviva Richman

ROSH HASHANAH RECALLS the birth of the world. When we blow the shofar we say “*hayom harat olam*,” today marks the world’s birth. But sometimes, when we take stock of the year, we see destruction rather than birth. Especially this year, in the wake of October 7th and the devastation of months of war, the call of the *shofar* is a haunting, even taunting, question: What does it mean to celebrate a holiday of birth and creation when we find around us a world full of ruins?

The Yiddish poet, Kadya Molodowsky, takes up this question in her poem, “The Shofar Blower - *Der Ba'al Tekiah*.” Born at the turn of the 20th century,

Molodowsky immigrated to the United States in 1935. She wrote this poem in the wake of World War II, in 1945, in the wake of utter destruction. In “*Der Ba'al Tekiah*,” we hear the broken sounds of the *shofar* as a cry into the void. Yet even as she mourns unspeakable devastation, the poem’s very existence testifies to Molodowsky’s resilient act of creation; she turns to the artistic craft of words to describe and confront a shattered world. In doing so, she implicitly directs the reader towards a sense of empowerment and hope—just as she finds her creative voice within the emptiness around her, so might we find our way to recreate, even if we do not yet have the words.



דער בעל תקיעה

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון,
אַן אלטן ניגון צו גאָט.

איבער אים –

אַ הימל אָן שטערן,

חושך אין חושך פאַרלאָרן,

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון:
תקיעה, תרועה, שברים.

די פֿינצטערקייט – אַ ווינט, אַ מויער,

עס איז קיין עדה,

קיין מנין נישטאָ.

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון:
הללוי-ה.

לעבן אים אַ פאַרלאָשענער דאָרן,

אין חושך נאָך פֿינצטעריר שטאַרט,

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון,
אַן אלטן ניגון,

און וואָרט –

דער דאָרן זאָל אָנהייבן ברענען,

אויף אַ וואַנט זאָל אַ פֿלאַם טאָן אַ שריפט.

איבער אים אַ הימל אָן שטערן,

און חושך,

און טויטלעכער גיפט.

נאָר ס'איז נישט מפֿסיק

עם שטילט נישט דער האָרן:

תקיעה,

תרועה,

שברים.

The Shofar Blower (1945),

by Kadya Molodowsky

The shofar blower keens a melody,

An old melody to God.

Above him—

A sky without stars,

Primordial darkness lost in darkness,

The shofar blower keens a melody:

Teki'ah, Teru'ah, Shebarim.

The blackness—wind, a wall,

There is no congregation,

No quorum at all.

The shofar blower keens a melody,

An old melody:

Hallelujah.

Near him, an extinguished thorn,

As he stares into even blacker darkness,

The shofar blower keens a melody,

An old melody,

And waits—

The thorn shall begin to burn,

A flame shall inscribe on a wall.

Above him, a sky without stars,

And primordial darkness,

And deadly venom.

But this does not interrupt,

Does not silence the horn:

Teki'ah,

Teru'ah,

Shebarim.

TRANSLATION

Kathryn Hellerstein, *Paper Bridges* (1999)

Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky

Copyright © 1999 by Kathryn Hellerstein.

חושך
DARKNESS

Molodowsky's poem undoes creation. It is the creation story in reverse as the world around the *ba'al teki'ah* returns to *hoyshekh*—raw, unformed darkness. The recurrence of the word “darkness” echoes with a sense of primordial darkness before anything was created, the chaos of the void, *tohu va-vohu* (Genesis 1:2). Only darkness surrounds the *shofar* blower, who has no one with him. There is no community, “not even a *minyan*” (“no quorum at all”). There is nothing except darkness. Instead of announcing the birth of the world (*hayom harat olam*), this *shofar* blast marks the undoing of the world.

תקיעה, תרועה, שברים
TEKI'AH, TERU'AH, SHEBARIM

The poem's refrain draws on the familiar triad of sounds of the *shofar*, but importantly shifts the order. Instead of the usual order *teki'ah-shevarim-teru'ah*, this phrase ends with *shevarim*, from the root ש-ב-ר, which means to break or shatter. Bookending the poem, the refrain reinforces the sense that the world is shattered. *Teki'ah, teru'ah... shevarim. Teki'ah, teru'ah... shevarim.* Whatever else the sound of the *shofar* is meant to be, in this rendering the *shofar* is primarily the blast that accompanies the world's brokenness.

הללוי-ה
HALLELUJAH

In the second stanza, the *shofar* blower reaches for a melody and this midway point in the poem closes with “Hallelujah.” How does the *ba'al teki'ah* reach for a melody, and even praise, in this context of utter destruction? How does the *ba'al teki'ah* turn toward God at all? Song and praise feel untenable alongside awareness of the world in ruins. How should we understand the meaning and tone of this “Hallelujah”?

On the one hand, the reference to praise and song could be meant as a mockery of High Holiday liturgy. Molodowsky chides us: For hours in synagogue we raise our voices in praise and song exalting God as supreme sovereign—after God allowed the Jewish people to suffer such unspeakable brutality and loss? Hallelujah?!

Or perhaps it is not mockery but an ironic acknowledgment of dissonance. For some reason, we

do find ourselves uttering words of song and praise, even in a shattered world. She asks us to notice that dissonance, maybe even hold onto that dissonance with all our might—not forgetting the destruction, but not abandoning our songs for God either.

Even if the scope of destruction we've witnessed in our own times is not as vast as what Molodowsky describes, if we are honest and not oblivious to our surroundings, “Hallelujah!” should still feel out of place in our broken world—just as discordant as it is in her poem.

חושך נאך פֿינצטעריר
EVEN BLACKER DARKNESS

The *hoyshekh* in the poem represents destruction and the undoing of creation, but paradoxically it also represents potential, where the darkness at the beginning of Bereishit is the harbinger to the creation that follows. Indeed, the Sefat Emet (Rosh Hashanah 1877) teaches that the *shofar's* preverbal, raw, undifferentiated sound takes us back to before the creation of Adam, before any sin, and before any language. This sound of the *shofar* connects us to our source (שורש)—the raw, infinite potential of divine creation that hovers over primordial darkness and dwells within each of us. So, too, in Molodowsky's poem, the *shofar* blower's wordless *nigun* (melody) is embedded in the precreation moment of deep darkness. It is simultaneously an image of total devastation and of absolute potential. Nothing has been formed yet, no contours or boundaries. No one has sinned—no one has done anything or even spoken a word. In this very messy and totally shattered world, we go back to the raw materials and form new building blocks and new structures. Yet, in this telling of *hayom harat olam*, God's voice—issuing statements that will turn chaos into order—does not sound at all. Instead, the only sound and voice comes from a human: the *shofar* blower. In the absence of divine speech, that sound of the *shofar* in and of itself must catalyze creation.

דאָרן
THORN

On closer look, there are actually two kinds of creation in this poem. There is the *shofar's nigun*—a primordial wordless melody penetrating the darkness. And then the *shofar* “horn” morphs into “thorn,” and

the capacity to create through the written word, etched onto a wall of darkness.

To be sure, at first the thorn can't write. At the beginning of the last stanza, we learn that the thorn is extinguished; it is not burning with a flame that has capacity to inscribe. The poet, consumed by the brokenness around her, can only wait. First there is the *shofar* that insists on crying out even with no words. And then the words come. The thorn ignites, able to write.

What is this thorn? Perhaps it is the thorn of the bush of the Akeidah, which we read on Rosh Hashanah. This thorn bush both obscured salvation and produced salvation because of what was stuck inside it. The thorn represents the harshest pain and sacrifice, and it represents stuckness, and yet it also holds possibility. Kadya Molodowsky's thorn writes from this pain and stuckness, neither ignoring it nor pretending it never existed.

נישט מפסיק

DOES NOT INTERRUPT

Perhaps the appearance of song and praise is not gesturing at all towards mockery, or even dissonance. Instead, the poem tells a story of endurance. The very fact that the *shofar* blower continues to sound the song of the *shofar*, from the beginning to the end of the poem, testifies in and of itself to endurance. In the last stanza, we see *nisht mafsik*—nothing can interfere with the call of the *shofar*, not the deepest darkness, not even deadly venom.

SHEVARIM:

HAYOM HARAT OLAM

LIKE MOLODOWSKY AT first holding an extinguished thorn, we too might find ourselves in limbo waiting for the capacity to create. As we are confronted by all sorts of brokenness—unspeakable acts of violence, terrorism, displacement, widespread hunger, colossal failures of leadership—what world could we possibly write into existence this year? What words could we form with confidence to chart our course when so much feels irreparable?

We may want to start afresh this Rosh Hashanah and build a better self and a better world, but Molodowsky's focus on *shevarim* teaches us that sometimes the work of building begins from ruins. We confront *hoyshekh*, darkness, chaos, because our world has become so utterly broken. But ruins can sometimes lead to new creation if we, like the *ba'al teki'ah*, persist in "keening a wordless melody" with our most authentic voice. Our sense that we don't yet know the words in the face of unspeakable devastation does not mean we have to be at a loss. Instead, our loss for words can forge a raw connection with God's infinite creative power which is beyond words. From that power, we might create again.

Like God's words that created the world in Genesis, Molodowsky's poem moves us from utter destruction to a broken sound to the possibility of articulating actual words—as we pray for the inscription of the contours of our lives and our world in the year ahead. "כתבינו בספר החיים - Write us in the book of life!" Give each of us the capacity to write the next chapter in our book of life, as part of a world that can emerge from ruins. ♦



Attn: High School Students!

Maimonides Moot Court Competition



Debate modern ethical questions
using Jewish legal wisdom

March 27-30 | Westchester, NY

hadar.org/mmcc



FROM PARTICULARITY TO UNIVERSALITY:

The Power of Malkhuyot in Our Time of Crisis

R. Jason Rogoff



I STOOD IN *SHUL* on the Seventh Day of Pesah during Yizkor, surrounded by my friends and fellow worshippers. Tears welled up in my eyes as I heard the raw, audible cries of some in the congregation. It was the first time we recited the special version of the *El Malei Rahamim* prayer composed especially for the victims of the October 7th attacks. Its somber melody was a stark contrast to the joyous tunes of the *Hallel* prayers we recited during *Shaharit*. The words hit me like a physical blow. “Killed, murdered, burned, and slaughtered,” chanted the *hazzanit*, her voice heavy with emotion. It felt surreal. How could these phrases from our liturgy, traditionally reserved for the memory of the crusades, pogroms, and the unspeakable tragedy of the Shoah, be so achingly relevant today? Here I was, standing in a *minyan* within the borders of the modern State of Israel, established in part to shield its people from the horrors of the past. Yet, in that moment of shared grief, the prayer’s words resonated with a terrifying contemporaneity.

With *Simhat Torah* 5784 casting its long shadow over this past horrific year—etched with war, tragedy, and collective grief that feels unending—a question claws at my heart: How can we possibly focus our prayers at this critical moment? In a world that has been spiraling so far into chaos—where the distance between us and the Divine feels vast and unforgiving, where many Jews grapple with an enormity of suffering that seems ripped straight from the pages of our darkest history—can we truly step into our synagogues and *minyanim*,

our voices hoarse from lament, and pray with any shred of genuine hope for a better year?

I found one answer hidden within the Malkhuyot section of the Musaf prayer on Rosh Hashanah. Unlike any other part of the Amidah recited throughout the year, the Malkhuyot liturgy transcends our particularistic needs and concerns. In our daily prayers, we focus on the well-being of the Jewish people, pleading for the return of exiles and the arrival of the messianic age. Shabbat and holiday prayers emphasize the uniqueness and holiness of these days. Yet, specifically on Rosh Hashanah during Malkhuyot we focus on the universalistic in its most expansive terms.¹ On this day, we stand before God as representatives of all humanity, acknowledging God's universal reign. It is with this heightened awareness that we recite Malkhuyot, a powerful plea for God to regain control of the entire world for the benefit of all humanity.

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. מְלוּךְ עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם
כָּלֹּ בְּכַבֻּדְךָ וְהַנִּשְׂאָ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בִּיקְרָךְ וְהוֹפֵעַ
בְּהַדָּר גָּאוֹן עֶזְךָ עַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵּבֶל אֶרֶץ. וְיֵדַע
כָּל פֶּעוּל כִּי אַתָּה פִּעַלְתָּ וְיָבִין כָּל יְצוֹר כִּי אַתָּה
יִצְרָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר כָּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָה בְּאִפּוֹ ה' אֱלֹהֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל מְלֹךְ וּמְלֻכּוֹתָ בְּכָל מְשָׁלָה (תהלים
קג:יט):

*Our God and God of our ancestors, reign
over the entire world with Your glory,
and be uplifted over all the earth with
Your honor, and appear in the splendor
of Your majestic might over all who dwell
in the inhabited world of Your earth; so
everything that has been made will know
that You have made it, and it will be
understood by everything that was formed
that You have formed it. And all who
have breath in their nostrils will say: The
Eternal, God of Israel, is King, and God's
kingship rules over all (Tehilim 103:19).*

Delving into earlier Rabbinic texts reveals a fascinating disagreement among Hazal regarding the focus of the Malkhuyot prayer. The Sifrei Bemidbar features a debate about the origin of the Rosh Hashanah

¹ See Menahem Kahana, "Ha-Yahas le-Nokhrim bi-Tkufat ha-Tannaim ve-ha-Amoraim," *Et ha-Da'at* 3 (1999), pp. 30-33.

Responsa Radio

A podcast
where you ask
and we answer
questions of Jewish law
in modern times



Musaf prayers, which hints at the underlying purpose of the Malkhuyot section.²

ספרי במדבר פסקא עז

“אני ה' אלקיכם” (במדבר י:י), למה נאמר?
לפי שהוא אומר: “דבר אל בני ישראל לאמר
בחדש השביעי” (ויקרא כג:כד) אבל מלכות
לא שמענו, תלמוד לומר: “ה'
אלקיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו”
(במדבר כג:כא), זה שופרות
ומלכיות.

רבי נתן אומר: אינו צריך,
שהרי כבר נאמר: “ותקעתם
בחצוצרות” (במדבר י:י) הרי
שופרות, “והיו לכם לזכרון”
(שם) זה זכרונות, “אני ה'
אלקיכם” (שם) זה מלכיות. אם
כן מה ראו חכמים לומר מלכיות
תחלה ואח”כ זכרונות ושופרות.
אלא המליכהו עליך תחלה
ואחר כך בקש רחמים לפניו
כדי שתזכר לך, ובמה בשופר
של חירות, שנאמר: “והיה ביום
ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול”
(ישעיה כז:יג).

Sifrei Bemidbar #77³

“I am the Eternal, your God”
(Bemidbar 10:10). Why is this said?
Because it says: “Speak to the Israelite
people thus: In the seventh month...”
(Vayikra 23:24). But we have not heard the
verses of Malkhuyot! Scripture therefore
teaches: “The Eternal their God is with
them, and their Sovereign’s trumpet blast
in their midst” (Bemidbar 23:21). This is
Shofarot and Malkhuyot.

R. Natan says: This is not needed, for it
is already written, “You shall sound the
trumpets” (Bemidbar 10:10)—this is
Shofarot; “They shall be a reminder of
you before your God” (10:10)—this is
Zikhronot; “I am the Eternal, your God”
(10:10)—this is Malkhuyot. And why
did the Sages see fit to say
Malkhuyot first, and then
Zikhronot and Shofarot?
Make God King over you
first, and then seek mercy
before God so that you may be
remembered. And with what?
The shofar of freedom, as it
says, “And in that day, a great
ram’s horn shall be sounded”
(Yeshayahu 27:13).

The section begins with an
anonymous, terse interpretation of
Vayikra 23:24: “Speak to the Israelite
people thus: In the seventh month,
on the first day of the month, you
shall observe complete rest, a
sacred occasion **commemorated**
with **loud blasts**.” The first opinion
finds in these words references
to the Zikhronot and Shofarot
sections of the Musaf Amidah,

but no mention of Malkhuyot. It therefore brings in
a verse from a totally different location in the Torah
(Bilam’s blessings of the Israelites) in order to anchor
the requirement for Malkhuyot in the Torah. R. Natan
disagrees. He, instead, derives all sections of the Musaf
from a single verse in Bemidbar which references
sounding the trumpets on the festivals.

R. Natan’s straightforward interpretation raises
the question: why would the first opinion disagree
with him, requiring a more convoluted *midrash*?

2 A similar *midrash* appears in Sifra Emor Parashah 11.

3 Found on pp. 523-24 of Menahem Kahana’s edition of Sifrei Bemidbar.

Furthermore, why would it choose a verse from the story of Bilam that has absolutely nothing to do with Rosh Hashanah or festivals?

I believe the answer lies in their conflicting understandings of the significance and meaning of the Malkhuyot. If we look closely at R. Natan's explanation and proof-text, it is clear that he sees Malkhuyot as expressing God's kingship over **Israel**. The proof-text is from the words, "I am the Eternal, **your** God." When he explains the progression of the Musaf service, he declares, "Make God King over **you** first, and then seek mercy before God so that **you** may be remembered." R. Natan's Malkhuyot is particularistic.

In contrast, the anonymous opinion deliberately chooses the words of Bilam, the paradigmatic non-Jewish prophet. Bilam's recognition of God's sovereignty over all nations serves as a powerful testament to God's dominion extending far beyond the Jewish people. This broader understanding of God's kingship is reflected in the Malkhuyot prayers we find in our liturgy today. This includes verses referencing not only Israel, but also the recognition of God by other nations, the universal affirmation of God's sovereignty expressed in the Aleinu prayer, and the prayer quoted above.⁴

So our liturgy aligns with the more universalistic vision for Rosh Hashanah, expressing a hope that the entire world will recognize and be ruled by God. And yet, this does not have to mean that our universal aspirations come at the expense of the particular. These two positions in the Sifrei—the anonymous universalist and the particularist R. Natan—may not be completely at odds, such that R. Natan is rejected out of hand. Perhaps, instead, each has its place, and they build upon each other.

As my teacher and colleague, R. Shai Held, so poignantly writes: "for Jewish ethics, the path to universal love is *through* partiality rather than around it. The goal of more growth... should be to *expand upon* rather than replace the narrower loyalties that come more naturally to us."⁵ To use the terms of Sifrei Bemidbar, in order to achieve the universal kingship

of the anonymous first opinion, we must first establish the particular kingship of R. Natan.

This move from the particular to the universal in establishing God's presence in the world is embedded in another central prayer, one we recite every Shabbat: the prayer for the State of Israel. As I recite this, followed by the prayer for the welfare of the soldiers of the IDF and the prayer for the return of the hostages, it is hard not to descend into despair. But the structural coherence with Malkhuyot provides me some comfort as I understand the significance of the inclusion of elements of the Malkhuyot in the prayer for the State of Israel.

This prayer moves from the particular to the universal by beginning with the immediate needs of Israel:

הִגְן עָלֵינוּ בְּאַבְרַת חֶסֶד, וּפְרֵשׁ עָלֵינוּ סֶכֶת
שְׁלוֹמָה, וְשַׁלַּח אוֹרֶךְ וְאַמְתָּךְ לְרֹאשֵׁינָה, שְׁרִיָּה
וְיוֹעֲצֵינוּ... חֲזֹק אֶת יְדֵי מְגַנֵּי אֶרֶץ קְדִישֵׁנוּ...
וְנָתַתָּ שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ, וְשִׁמְחַת עוֹלָם לְיוֹשְׁבֵיהָ.



4 The Aleinu first appears as part of the daily prayer in *Mahzor Vitry* (early 13th century), but was beforehand associated primarily with the Malkhuyot section on Rosh Hashanah.

5 Shai Held, *Judaism is About Love*, p. 144.

*Shield it with Your love; spread over it
the shelter of Your peace. Send Your light
and truth to its leaders and advisors...
Strengthen the hands of those who defend
our Holy Land... Place peace in the land
and grant its inhabitants eternal happiness.*

The prayer then expands outward, yearning for the in-gathering of the exiles:

וְאַתָּה אֲחֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, פָּקֵד נָא בְּכָל
אֲרָצוֹת פְּזוּרֵיהֶם, וְתוֹלִיכֶם מִהֶרָה קוֹמָמִיּוֹת
לְצִיּוֹן עִירָךְ.

*Remember our brothers, the whole house
of Israel, in all the lands of their dispersion,
and bring them speedily to Zion, Your city.*

It culminates in a plea for God's kingship to be recognized by all humanity, using the very words of the Malkhuyot:

הוֹפֵעַ בְּהֶדֶר גָּאוֹן עֶזְדָּךְ עַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֶל אֲרָצָךְ,
וַיֹּאמֶר כָּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָה בָּאֶפֶס: ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
מֶלֶךְ, וּמַלְכוּתוֹ בְּכָל מְשָׁלָה!

*Appear in the splendor of Your majestic
might over all who dwell in the inhabited
world of Your earth; and all who have
breath in their nostrils will say, "The
Eternal, God of Israel, is King, and God's
kingship rules over all."*

When I internalize the lesson of Malkhuyot, I am able to better understand these prayers as a call to action, teaching us that our work in ushering the world at large into a more perfected era must begin at home.

But where do we even start? The answer lies in the words of the prooftext, according to the anonymous opinion of the Sifrei Bemidbar cited above, for saying Malkhuyot altogether:

במדבר כג:כא

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ עִמּוֹ וְתִרְעֵת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ:

Bemidbar 23:21

*The Eternal their God is with them, and
their Sovereign's teru'ah in their midst.*

The verse, like much of Bilam's poetic blessing, is difficult to understand. Rashi suggests that "teru'ah" here does not mean "trumpet blast," but rather comes from the word, "rei'ut," meaning love and fellowship.

According to this, the final clause in the verse now reads, "their Sovereign's love and fellowship resides with them," which mirrors the phrase before it: "the Eternal their God is with them."

I would like to offer another possible reading of the verse based on Rashi's definition of *teru'ah*. Instead of reading the verse as parallel, we should read it as causational: God is with us as King **when** God's love and fellowship are reflected in our midst.

The dream of universal redemption and global moral leadership must expand out of the foundation of particular *ahavat Yisrael*. If God's kingdom is not manifested through love of our fellow Jews, it cannot be established over the world at all.

It is my fervent prayer this Rosh Hashanah that we work together and start taking the steps necessary to rebuild in order to ensure Israel's survival, the flourishing of the Jewish people, and the establishment of God's kingship over the world. As we read the words of Malkhuyot this year, let us remember its multivocal backdrop in the Sifrei, and contemplate how we might lean into *ahavat Yisrael* as a step to achieving a redemptive vision for the world at large so that the words of our prayers can be fulfilled: "Our God and God of our ancestors, reign over the entire world with Your glory." ♦

The background of the image is a detailed architectural drawing of a synagogue's interior, specifically focusing on a large, ornate arched window. The drawing is rendered in a light blue line-art style. The arch is decorated with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns. Below the arch, there are two large, fluted columns supporting the structure. The floor is depicted with a grid pattern, and the walls show various architectural details like moldings and smaller arches. The overall tone is a deep blue, and the drawing is overlaid with a fine grid of lines.

יום כיפור

YOM KIPPUR

ON THE POWER OF LITERALITY

Dr. Tsivia Frank Wygoda



As long as we are not chased from our words we have nothing to fear. As long as our utterances keep their sound we have a voice. As long as our words keep their sense we have a soul.

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* (1963)

SO MUCH OF our prayer belongs to the literary order of metaphor. Indeed, the language of prayer almost always requires a constant operation of translation from literal to figurative language. When we speak of God as our King, ask God to open the gates of Heavens to our prayers, or pray to be written in the Book of Life,

we use metaphors that inscribe ineffable realities in human images and imagination.

Think of the opening paragraphs of Unetaneh Tokef,¹ or the *piyyut* that precedes the Vidui on Yom Kippur (כי אנו עמר): from the image of the king to the image of the shepherd, from the betrothed to the guardian of the vineyard, these texts weave together tangible figurations of divine rule and care that echo through the Torah, the Prophets, and the Book of Psalms. These evocative images are vehicles that allow us to grasp the nature of our relationship to the Divine, and support a dynamic conceptualization of God.

This regimen of loose connection between words and their literal meaning has multiple functions. For example, the poetic scaffolding of our prayers stimulates

¹ Unetaneh Tokef, the poem that introduces the Kedushah of Musaf, is the quintessential piece of Rosh Hashanah liturgy in the Ashkenazi Mahzor. It migrated to the prayers of Yom Kippur as well; the conflation with the Yom Kippur war in 1973 gave this poem new layers of meaning in Israeli culture.

a spiritual state of contemplation and elevation. It also enables us to attach dynamic meanings to static texts, and thus, to sustain our spiritual needs in shifting personal, cultural, and religious landscapes. Last, it allows us to escape the boundaries of the here and now and reframe our own existence within broader historical and theological frameworks of meaning.

Yet the prayers of the Yamim Nora'im contain several passages that strike me as escaping the literary order of metaphor and allegorical language. One of them is a short part of Unetaneh Tokef, made iconic by Leonard Cohen's "Who by Fire?" (1974). Another, much longer passage, known as the Seder Avodah, is the minute description of the ritual performed on Yom Kippur by the High Priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, based on the text of Massekhet Yoma. **Literality**, in each of these texts, operates differently and has distinct functions; yet both escape the traditional metaphorical orientation of prayers; they force us to stop and ponder the literal meaning of our words and their implications.²

This year, as the return of the Yamim Nora'im brings the completion of a year since the attacks of Simḥat Torah—a year of immense grief and turmoil, both individual and collective—I approach the literality I find in these texts with a counterintuitive suggestion: that rather than hinder our spiritual journey, literality might augment the emotional, philosophical, and ethical stakes of our prayers.

LOCATING OUR SELF

Returning to Unetaneh Tokef, we find that after a beautiful and deeply moving introduction, underpinned by powerful cultural images, the text shifts away from the metaphorical depictions of God to dwell instead on us, human beings. Leaving the poetic flourishes of the previous part and the allegorical imagery of God as King and Shepherd, it becomes explicit, literal, raw:

ונתנה תוקף

בראש השנה יכתבון, וביום צום כפור יחתמון.
כמה יעברון וכמה יפראון, מי יחיה ומי ימות,
מי בקצו ומי לא בקצו, מי במים ומי באש,
מי בחרב ומי בחיה, מי ברעב ומי בצמא, מי

ברעש ומי במגפה, מי בחניקה ומי בסקילה, מי
יגוח ומי ינוע, מי ישקט ומי יטרף, מי ישלח ומי
יתסר, מי יעני ומי יעשיר, מי ישפל ומי ירום.
ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזירה.

Unetaneh Tokef (Sefaria community translation)

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by lapidation, who shall have rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted. But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

The literal intensity of this passage, with its litany of death possibilities—death by water, death by fire, timely and untimely deaths—is almost unbearable to read. Its lapidary, schematic depiction of our lives leaves little room for poetic indeterminacy. It sums up the human condition with violent, inevitable, brutal clarity.

Soon, the poem returns to analogies and metaphors: human beings are like "dry grass, they shrivel and wither; like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that passes, like dust that scatters, like a fleeting dream. But You are the King who lives eternal." The magic of poetic language operates again; through analogies and metaphors, it sublimates reality, transports us to a metaphysical realm, and softens the human condition by transcending it.

Yet the short paragraph of pure, raw literality remains, haunting our thoughts. And it is not an aberration, not a slippage, nor a wavering of the poet's hand.

2 There are, to be sure, other literal moments in the Yamim Nora'im prayers. Kol Nidrei, the opening piece of the Yom Kippur prayers, is arguably the ultimate occurrence of meta-literality in the Mahzor. If I do not engage with this passage here, it is because of its legalistic origins, fabric, and purpose, which are at odds with the rest of the Yamim Nora'im liturgy.

This literality is a portal to the self: our reality, our present, our emotional and spiritual state. These few sentences are where we pour out the story of our year and our life; where we stop to grieve the unusual deaths of so many beloved people, those we knew and those we never met; those from our communities, and those strangers with whom we share the human fate. This is where, this year, we will pour out our anguish, cry over our loss, grieve individually and collectively. The open-ended referentiality of the text (“who?”) meets the definite, concrete, unavoidable meaning that each of us reads into it. The literality of this passage functions as a referential anchor, a grounding of the prayer in the subject that utters it. It brings the prayer home.

But literality is not only a blank canvas on which our souls may inscribe themselves in prayer. It carries existential implications. The bare literality of this passage exposes the frailty, the limits, the very essence of human existence: we are left to face our humanity, yet unmediated by the abstractions and remote beauty of poetic language and images. This is a moment when prayer hits rock bottom; this moment of unraveling vulnerability foregrounds the meaning of the Kedushah that follows.

THE LITERAL GOAT

Another passage of the Yom Kippur liturgy in which literal referentiality plays a crucial role is the Seder Avodah: a lengthy description of the sacrificial rituals

performed on Yom Kippur at the Temple. Every Musaf includes a list of the sacrifices brought on the special occasion, but on Yom Kippur—instead of the short, generic naming of that day’s sacrifices recited in the silent Amidah—the repetition minutely describes the many steps and movements of the High Priest, his changes of clothes and the order of his ablutions, the exact gestures he would make while spilling the sacrificial blood over the altar, the particulars of the ritual of the scapegoat, the Torah reading, and the three prayers of atonement. The intricacy and the repetitive quality of the detail are so unusual and emphatic that they have acquired their own liturgical power: the counting of the aspersions, and its various melodies, exemplify how a hyper-literal moment (וכך היה מונה) can become itself hauntingly poetic.

Against the backdrop of the liturgy of the Yamim Nora'im, in which the primary textual modes are metaphor and allegory, the Seder Avodah is strikingly devoid of metaphors: it is, to the contrary, very literal in its representation of the materiality, the physical reality, of the sacrificial ritual. From the end of the introductory poem (in its two versions: אתה כוננת / אמיץ כוח), which sets the cosmic dimension of the Temple, to the *piyyut* (מראה כהן) which concludes it in a symphony of analogies—helping us imagine the particular splendor of the High Priest at the end of these moments of awe—the text rarely strays away from the technicality of the ritual operations.



For our Sages, who placed the memory of the Temple prominently in the Mishnah, the text and its recitation were an act of nostalgic remembrance; for further generations they were, and still are, an act of religious imagination, representation, even reenactment. But they are also an invitation to ponder the meaning and value of the literal of the ritual, as a strand coursing beneath the metaphorical scaffolding of the language of prayer. The pure materiality of the Seder Avodah forces us to confront the way in which literal and metaphorical interact in our spiritual life. It forces us to acknowledge the very realities that are the basis upon which we construct ideas and ideals.

In the service of Yom Kippur, the sending of the scapegoat described in the Seder Avodah is precisely the moment where the articulation of the literal to the metaphorical—or rather the anchoring of the metaphorical to the literal—occurs. When the goat falls, the vision of its body thrown upon the rocks rendered in minute detail, the priest who performs the ritual says: “כָּךְ יִמְחוּ עֲוֹנוֹת עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל” - Thus may your sins, Israel, be forgotten.” “כך—Thus,” means both “through this ritual,” and “exactly like this.”³ The ritual of expiation is essentially a metaphorical transference, in which the goat stands for us; but the animal that dies in the wilderness, and the one that dies on the altar, are literal, before they become a metaphor.

Running against the temptation to go (entirely) metaphorical, to let our prayer soar in abstraction, the Seder Avodah reminds us that the recourse to metaphor promises meaning and spiritual elevation but comes with a risk: it habituates us to forget and forgo the literal for the figural. We should be wary of symbolic operations in which the literal collapses under the weight of metaphors: our ethics as a society lay on our ability to acknowledge human reality in its complexity, and to act on it with clearheadedness and compassion.

“AS WE RECONSTRUCT
OUR LIVES, REAFFIRM
OUR VALUES, AND
FIGHT FOR OUR
FUTURE, IT IS ALSO
IMPORTANT NOT TO
LOSE SIGHT OF THE
LITERAL: WHAT IS LOST
AND CANNOT BE
RECOVERED;
WHAT IS DESTROYED
AND CANNOT BE
REBUILT.”

CONCLUSION

On the day of Simḥat Torah 5784, so much of our language lost its usual metaphorical signification. Torn from their connotations of joy, peace, and harmony, words suddenly acquired a new literality. The red anemone that has for years been a metonymy of the beautiful winter bloom in the Western Negev region suddenly became a grim symbol for the massacre, along with the words “Darom Adom” (Red South)—the name of the yearly anemone festival. “Shelters” meant traps. “Doors” did not distinguish between open and closed, but between life and death. Dawn, a synonym for hope; Shabbat, a day of peace; Simḥat Torah, a time of joy—each lost their meaning in the desperation and helplessness of that day.

In the wake of that terrible day, psalms, poems, and prayers received tangible, urgent, rock-bottom literality in ways they never had before. Since then, amidst our grief and anguish, amidst the constant turmoil that plagues us, we have tried to ponder this new literality, the literality of suffering and death and war, and let its urgency resonate in our language.

As we reconstruct our lives, reaffirm our values, and fight for our future, it is also important not to lose sight of the literal: what is lost and cannot be recovered; what

is destroyed and cannot be rebuilt. Perhaps this work may begin first and foremost in our prayers over these Yamim Nora'im.

May the anchoring literality of our prayers this year propel us to places where perhaps metaphor alone could not, and may that experience somehow help us to ground our selves, comfort our souls, and bring clarity. ♦

3 Note here that the text of the Maḥzor strays from the Mishnah (see Yoma, ch. 6), where no words are uttered as the animal falls down the cliff.

“UNTIL GRAY HAIR, I WILL BEAR YOU”: God, Our Full Selves, and Yizkor

R. Ethan Tucker

WHEN MY OLDEST child was small, she, like most children, said many distinctive and memorable things. Those things kids say are funny and memorable because they stretch the boundaries of language, but also because they often contain profound truths in more primitive and basic language. Often, when she got upset and we would try to calm her down or correct

her perspective, she would simply reply, “You can’t feel me.” An adult might have said something more sophisticated and less vivid, such as “I don’t think you and your analysis are able to truly capture the feelings I am holding inside that can’t be fully externalized.” But “you can’t feel me” says it much better and simpler: there is something about me that you don’t get. You



just can't see all of me. You can't feel the entirety of what it is to be **me**.

I have thought about that for years now, not just as a nostalgic father, but in contemplating what it is to know another person. Do people ever really know us? Do we ever really know other people? Can we feel them? Almost by definition, we cannot and do not. Too often our mental images, even when they try to take account of more than one aspect of the person in front of us, end up producing something like a cubist painting—at best a flat hint at the multidimensionality of the thing. And an inevitable casualty of this endeavor is that those paintings often obscure the true integrated self even further.

Sometimes that lack of full knowledge about others manifests in guessing and speculation. Does she have a temper that I have never seen? Is he really as nice as he seems? When Rabban Gamliel imposed, as an entry requirement to his *beit midrash*, a litmus test of “תוכו כבחו” —that only those whose outsides perfectly matched their insides could come in—eligibility rates plummeted, and the study hall was nearly empty (Berakhot 28a). Most people are complex; we cannot extrapolate from our fragmentary experiences of them to an accurate picture of the whole.

This can be frustrating—as it was to my daughter—when we feel that people don't get **us**. Particularly as we get older, as we settle into professional and personal patterns, we may start to ask: Do people think this is all there is to me? My students know me primarily as a teacher of Talmud and *halakhah*, and maybe I can get them to see me as a cyclist as well. But they don't see me as a parent or spouse or as a *shaliah tzibbur* on Yom Kippur. So do they know me? What about the versions of ourselves that were never fully realized, but that we also didn't entirely leave behind? The courses of study we never pursued, the professions we never chose, marriages that ended but that were nonetheless constitutive of who we are—are these not also parts of our selves? How can people possibly know us if they don't know and understand these things?

And so it is with God. It is not just that it is impossible to know an infinite Being. Yes, our experiences with God are all necessarily fragmentary and partial. But more than that, they are also distinctive, disjointed, and prone to compartmentalization. By the time we are done with these varied experiences, we may be unsure whether we are encountering anything with any unity at all. This is captured by the Mekhilta, the early collection of *midrash* on the book of Shemot,



SUBSCRIBE TO DEVASH

Hadar's weekly
parashah magazine
for kids!

HADAR
Children & Families



Subscribe at
hadar.org/devash





SPEND WINTER BREAK AT YESHIVAT HADAR!

For college students
and young adults
ages 18-25

WEEK 1

Jan 5-9, 2025

WEEK 2

Jan 12-16, 2025

NYC

hadar.org/mwls



which notes the range of experiences the Jewish people had with God:

מכילתא מסכתא דבחדש ה
נגלה על הים כגבור עושה מלחמה שנאמר:
"ה' איש מלחמה" (שמות טו:ג)
נגלה בסיני כזקן מלא רחמים...
שלא ליתן פתחון פה לאומות העולם לומר:
שתי רשויות הן.

Mekhilta, Massekhta de-Vahodesh 5

*God was revealed at the Sea as a warrior
hero, as it is said, "God is a warrior"
(Shemot 15:3).*

*God was revealed at Sinai like
an elder, full of mercy....*

*[This was so] that it should
not give an opening to the
nations of the world to say,
"There are two powers!"*

God appeared differently at the Sea than at Sinai. This multivalent experience of God is a strong invitation to polytheism: Is it possible that these different experiences are manifestations of different and even dueling deities? No, says the *midrash*:

אלא: "אנכי ה' אלקיך" (שמות כ:ב), אני
במצרים, אני על הים, אני בסיני, אני לשעבר,
אני לעתיד לבא, אני לעולם הזה, אני לעולם
הבא.

*Rather, "I am the Lord your God" (Shemot
20:2)—I am in Egypt, I am at the Sea, I
am at Sinai, I was in the past, I will be in
the future, I am in this world, I am in the
next world.*

That same God who appeared as a warrior is just the One we call Hashem. "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt," says God at Mount Sinai. Why this first person introduction here? And why bring in the Exodus at this moment of revelation? In order to teach: "I, the God you are encountering here at Sinai as a merciful elder, am the same God Who took you out of Egypt, the same God Who split the Sea for you as a warrior, the same God Who will deliver you in the future and accompany you to the next world." It is like the *midrash* has God saying, "Try to feel me!" But, by

clarifying that all these different aspects of God are God, it acknowledges how hard that is for us to do.

The desire to feel God in this way also seems to be part of our plaintive yearning in the Kedushah of Musaf:

והוא ישמיענו ברחמיו שנית לעיני כל חי להיות
לכם לאלקים: אני ה' אלקיכם.

*And God will inform us in God's mercy a
second time in the eyes of all the living to
be for you a God: "I am the Lord your
God."*

Give us another taste of Your presence, and clarify for us that it is **You**, the same You that we speak about, pray to, tell stories about; give us a sense of integration and wholeness.

Perhaps it is also a call for us to do the same thing we are asking of God. Since we are created in the image of God and are meant to imitate God, this *midrash* calls on us to be integrated people as much as we can, to share with ourselves and others all the parts of ourselves

that make us who we are. People may still not be able to feel us, but we can at least do our part to share the fullness of who we are with those whom we would like to know us.

Reflecting on all of this makes Yizkor a particularly humbling experience. We sit here as the custodians of the memory of the departed. Sometimes we share that custody with others, whether they sit next to us or thousands of miles away. We may even tussle over the memory of those who have passed, arguing implicitly or explicitly with others about what their legacy is—or should be. But, if we are honest, we didn't fully know those people that we memorialize in these sacred moments. For those born before us, there are whole segments of their lives we simply did not know. For those whose lifespans were tragically contained within our own, we still did not spend every waking moment with them and could not know all aspects of their time on earth. Who has not been at a Shiva and seen the mourners surprised by a friend or colleague's vignette about the deceased that fills out a picture of the beloved? Even those who have tragically lost a child in the earliest stages of life may feel this. Who can truly know what is happening behind the veil of an infant's eyes, and what emotions are captured by both the cries

“WE SIT HERE
AS THE CUSTODIANS
OF THE MEMORY
OF THE DEPARTED.”

and the silence that punctuates them? In short, we don't ever fully know anyone.

But God does. And this is God's critical role in the Yizkor service. There is a remarkable set of verses in Yeshayahu—quoted in part in the continuation of the Mekhilta above—that hammer home how God is the only one who is there for us every step of the way:

ישעיה מו:ג-ד

שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי בֵּית יַעֲקֹב וְכָל שְׂאֲרִית בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַעֲמָסִים מִנִּי בֶטֶן הַנְּשָׂאִים מִנִּי רֶחֶם: וְעַד זָקְנָה
אֲנִי הוּא וְעַד שִׁיבָה אֲנִי אֶסְבֵּל אֲנִי עֲשִׂיתִי וְאֲנִי
אֲשָׂא וְאֲנִי אֶסְבֵּל וְאֲמַלֵּט:

Yeshayahu 46:3-4

Listen to me, house of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, I have borne you from the belly, I have carried you from the womb. Until old age, it is me, until gray hair, I will bear you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will bear you and I will deliver you.

Yeshayahu here places God as uniquely present for every moment of our lives, from our earliest, unconscious moments until our last breath on earth. Precisely when we feel most alone, most vulnerable, least understood, the prophet reminds us of the everpresence of divine companionship.

Not everyone sees this facet of divine continuity as implicit in our remembrance of those we have lost. And indeed, God's place in this prayer has been contested. When Yosef Trumpeldor and his comrades—among whom was a relative of mine, one Ya'akov Tucker—fell at Tel Hai in 1920, the Labor Zionist leader Berel Katznelson composed an elegy that would play the mythic chords of the liturgy while avoiding the dissonance of God for a modern, atheist, or at best agnostic audience. And so he changed the opening of the memorial prayer to "יִזְכֹּר עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַנְּשָׁמוֹת הַטְּהוֹרוֹת שֶׁל בָּנוּ וּבְנוֹתֵינוּ" - Let the **Jewish People** remember the pure souls of its sons and daughters" who fell in battle. This formulation was adopted by the IDF as the official liturgy for state memorial services. R. Shlomo Goren, as Chief Rabbi of the IDF, objected vociferously to this secularization of the text, and eventually succeeded in getting the official text altered to read "יִזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַנְּשָׁמוֹת הַטְּהוֹרוֹת" - Let **God** remember these pure souls."

Yes, this effort to put God back into Yizkor was part of the ongoing tension between the secular state and religious practice. But God's presence in the Yizkor prayer is about so much more than that. Particularly after a year of hearing this prayer over and over again for fallen soldiers, many of them young, cut off in the prime of their lives, we perhaps can feel more than ever how we need the figure of God to help us hold the memories of those whose fullness we cannot hold on our own. How many hours have we devoted to hearing reports, to learning about their stories? And the more we learn, the more they appear to us similar to our own children—the more we feel them, and the more we feel their loss. And yet, also similar to our own children, we don't really know them. Not them, not the nearly 1,300 slain by Hamas on October 7th, not the many innocent people who have died in this last year's war, both in Israel and in Gaza, and not the millions upon millions of our people throughout our history persecuted, hunted, and murdered because they were Jews. Try as we might, we can't feel them. Not really.

But God can. God is the *בוֹחֵן כְּלִיּוֹת* (*bohein kelayot*), the One with the emotional X-ray vision to see our innermost parts, the One Who can paint a cubist painting of each and every person and have it look truly multidimensional, the only One Who can truly "feel us." Somewhere, in the book where everyone's signature is recorded, God has kept an accurate account in every fine detail of every story and every life. Somehow, God is able to hold all of them. Somehow, God is able to feel every single one of them.

יִזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת נִשְׁמוֹת קְרֹבֵינוּ—May God remember the fullness of all the people we call to mind on Yom Kippur, and while we strive to honor and remember the lives of those we have lost, may we take comfort in knowing that each soul is eternally remembered by the God who can really feel them, and to Whom they are never lost. ♦



שמחת תורה

SIMHAT TORAH

CAN WE ENVISION A DIFFERENT FUTURE?

R. Avital Hochstein

THE CATASTROPHIC EVENTS of last year's Simhat Torah serve as a stark reminder of the adage in our Haggadah, "In every generation, they rise up against us to annihilate us." These events mark a turning point, further entrenching a worldview steeped in this notion of inevitable conflict. The belief that things can be different has steadily eroded, fueled not only by lived experiences but also by a pervasive discourse that assumes a predetermined fate—both for humanity in general and for the Jewish people in particular. One example of this is an assertion that Hamas fighters are the modern-day Amalek. This analogy implies that Amalek is a constant threat, merely changing form across time. Similarly, the words, "by the sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40), are seen by some—and maybe by many—as an unalterable Jewish-Israeli destiny of violence.¹

In the shadow of these events, optimism for positive change is withering. This loss of hope breeds passivity, creating a mental and practical stagnation. People fall into a cycle of inertia, perceiving reality with no horizon for improvement. The possibility for change seems more remote than ever. Crucially, we lack the starting point, the unwavering belief, the courage, and the resourcefulness to keep trying despite setbacks. Our core faith was shaken on Simhat Torah because

standing before such immense evil locks us into paralysis. It makes us see the world as predetermined, a fate we accept when we feel only evil lies ahead.

The events of October 7th may have also undermined our ability to do *teshuvah* (repentance). Without a belief that things can be different and for the better, the very foundation of *teshuvah* crumbles.

Unexpectedly, it's Ecclesiastes, the book traditionally associated with deep melancholy, that offers a counterpoint. Read during Sukkot, just before Simhat Torah, Ecclesiastes reminds us to act despite the world's uncertainties. Even with the constant threat of evil and the universal certainty of death ("the same fate awaits them all,"

2:14), Ecclesiastes calls us to action.

One verse that exemplifies this concept appears toward the conclusion of the book:

קהלת יא:ב

תָּרַחֲלֶק לְשִׁבְעָה וְגַם לְשִׁמוֹנָה כִּי לֹא יָדַע מָוֶה
יְהִיָּה רָעָה עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

Ecclesiastes 11:2

Distribute portions to seven or even to eight, for you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth.

1 I discussed many of these issues with R. Elazar Symon and R. Avi Killip in our podcast, *On Sacred Ground*, launched in response to October 7th. You can listen to the episodes on your podcast apps or here: <https://hadar.org/on-sacred-ground>.

The verse's apparent simplicity advises diversifying one's resources and opportunities, allocating them widely among seven or even eight parts. This advice is linked to the acknowledgment of uncertainty about the future: "For you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth." The verse suggests that while adversity and evil will likely come, its exact nature and timing remain unknown. Therefore, it advocates preparedness through diverse measures, ensuring readiness for whatever challenges lie ahead.

Roni Megidov, in her book *There is Life Before Death*, explains the worldview of the verse:

הנחת היסוד היא שבנושאים רבים הקשורים בו ובמעשיו אין לאדם ידיעה. הוא איננו יודע מתי צפויה פורענות.... רבים הם הדברים הסמויים מן העין.... על אף נסיבות קיומיות אלה של היעדר ודאות, אל ימנע עצמו אדם מעשייה.... המתנה לתנאים הנכונים, כלומר לאפשרות המתאימה ביותר, לביטחון המוחלט, תבלום יוזמה ותוביל לחידלון.

The basic premise is that, in many matters related to him and his actions, man has no knowledge. He does not know when calamity is expected.... Many things are hidden from view.... Despite these existential circumstances of the lack of certainty, a person should not prevent himself from action.... Waiting for the right conditions, that is, for the ideal opportunity, for absolute security, will curb initiative and lead to failure.²

According to this interpretation, the verse before us does not diminish uncertainty or fear by simply proclaiming "it will be good." Instead, it calls upon individuals to take proactive measures in the face of uncertainty and the constant threat of evil. Moreover, the verse advocates for engagement on numerous and diverse fronts—allocating portions to the seven and even to the eight. It rejects inertia, the comfort of familiarity, and the safety of routine. Instead, it acknowledges that uncertainty and the potential for adversity should spur individuals to heightened activity, embracing a variety of innovative approaches—without the assurance beforehand of which will succeed.

In the midrashic collection *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, a direct connection is drawn between *Simhat Torah* and this active worldview of *Ecclesiastes*, assuming that the future holds bad and evil.

A Sage begins his *derashah* by referencing our verse from *Ecclesiastes* (11:2), which at first glance appears unrelated to the holiday. How does this verse connect to *Simhat Torah*? The number eight, mentioned in both the verse in *Ecclesiastes* and in the opening verse of the Torah portion for the holiday, "on the eighth day" (*Numbers* 29:35), serves as a technical link anchoring the connection. However, the *derashah* in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* also develops a conceptual link between these two verses:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא כח

ר' לוי אומר: "תן חלק לשבעה" (קהלת יא:ב), אילו שבעת ימי החג. "וגם לשמונה" (שם), ביום השמיני עצרת תהיה" (במדבר כט:לה).

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 28

R. Levi says, "Distribute portions to the seven" (*Ecclesiastes* 11:2)—these are seven



2 Roni Megidov, *Yesh Hayyim Lifnei ha-Mavet* (2024), pp. 162-163.

days of the festival [of Sukkot]. “And also to the eight,” (11:2) [referring to] “on the eighth day there shall be an assembly” (Numbers 29:35).

The *derashah* prompts us to conceptualize Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah within the context of its preceding festival, Sukkot, which spans seven days. Simhat Torah stands as an “additional” holiday, occurring on the eighth day after the initial seven days of celebration.³ According to this *midrash*, Ecclesiastes elucidates that there is intrinsic value in “more,” a value born out of humanity’s inherent uncertainty about the future.

Rashi offers this explanation of the verse:

רש"י קהלת יא:ב

”תן חלק לשבעה” - קרבנות צבור של שבעת ימי פסח.

”וגם לשמונה” - של שמונת ימי החג

”כי לא תדע מה יהיה רעה” - אם יחרב הבית, ולא תקריבו עזו, ויועילו קרבנות הראשונים, לבטל גזרה הרעה:

דבר אחר: ”כי לא תדע מה יהיה רעה” - לא ידעת מה נגזר על הגשמים בחג. ויועילו הקרבנות, ויבטלו גזרות רעות:

Rashi to Ecclesiastes 11:2

“Distribute portions to seven”—The communal sacrifices of the seven days of Pesah.

“Or even to eight”—The eight days of the Festival of Sukkot.

“For you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth.”—If the Temple will be destroyed, and you will no longer be able to bring sacrifices, [perhaps] the first sacrifices will be effective in annulling the evil decree.

Another explanation: “For you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth”—You do not know what has been decreed on the Festival regarding the rains, and [perhaps] the sacrifices will be effective in annulling evil decrees.

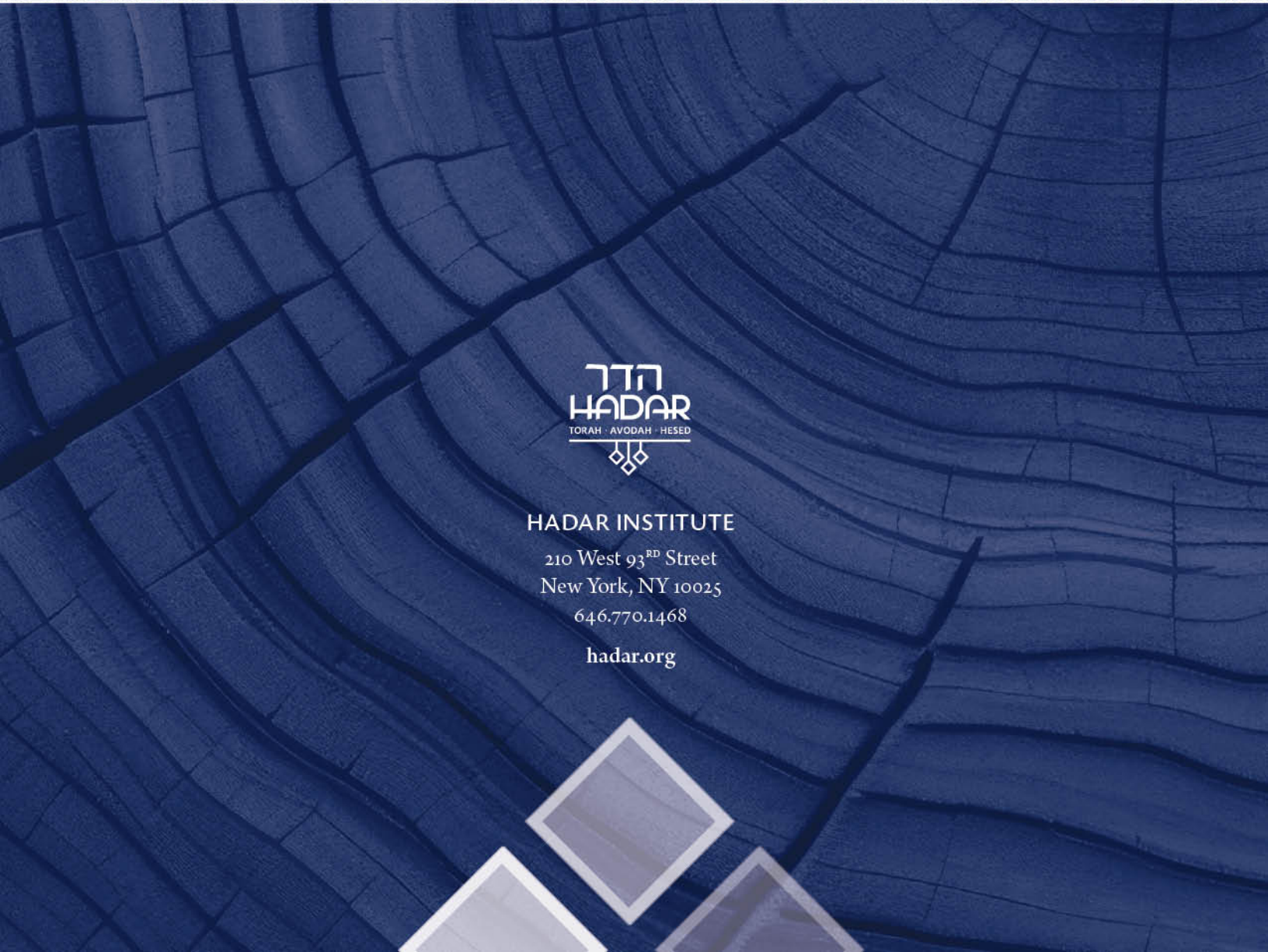
Rashi, likely drawing from the *midrash*, correlates the call for increased activity, sacrifices, and expanded communication with a twofold uncertainty highlighted by Ecclesiastes’ admonition: “for you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth.” Firstly, the verse underscores uncertainty about the future: since we cannot predict whether personal troubles, religious crises, national discord, or even war may arise. Secondly, there is uncertainty regarding the impact of our actions: what will prove beneficial, influence reality, and foster connections? Therefore, the directive to do more—to divide into seven and even eight—emerges from Ecclesiastes as a profound response to this dual uncertainty: grappling with the meaning and consequences of present actions while acknowledging the unpredictable nature of the future and its challenges.

The future is influenced by the past, intertwined almost fatefully, shaping its essence. Yet, the future is not monochromatic; it can appear bleak and stagnant—a result of fear and the repetition of familiar patterns—or vibrant and varied—born from innovation, movement, and expansive endeavors.

By linking Simhat Torah to an eighth attempt, an eighth action, and giving an eighth portion, the author transforms this holiday into a day that calls for ever-increasing activity. Simhat Torah becomes not a day of stopping, but a day of ever-more experimentation, even in the face of possible failure. Ecclesiastes encourages us to persist, repeatedly trying anew, and demands that our worldview cannot be confined to a single event—no matter how foundational it might seem—recognizing that various influences shape our perception and reality. This openness allows for change, for *teshuvah*, and even for hope.

Perhaps this year, we should aspire to understand Simhat Torah not only within the context of the immediate past but also in light of what precedes it, and what might follow. I pray that this Simhat Torah will bring a renewed ability to think creatively, the courage to take action, and the resourcefulness to keep trying, especially with innovative approaches, in the face of any challenges that may lie ahead. ♦

3 In the Diaspora, Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah are different days (days eight and nine); in Israel, they are the same (eighth) day. Therefore, the Pesikta, from 5th-6th century Eretz Yisrael, does not treat them as separate days.



HADAR INSTITUTE

210 West 93RD Street
New York, NY 10025
646.770.1468

hadar.org

