

“God created *teshuvah* (repentance) before creating the physical world” (BT Pesachim 54a).

Embedded within the Jewish ideal of *teshuvah* is the understanding, perhaps even the promise, that with appropriate action, forgiveness is possible. Turning one’s life around, finding one’s way back to a life of ethical conduct, is necessary. Finding our way back to the sacred source of all life, the divine thread that weaves this world together—God, from whence we all come and where we are all heading—is the heart of the Jewish journey for many.

As the rabbi in New York State’s only maximum security prison for women, I have struggled year after year to impress upon the incarcerated people I serve how important the path of *teshuvah* is to their spiritual and religious wellbeing. While authentic *teshuvah* is not easy for those of us on the outside, it is made more difficult by the “unforgiving” reality of our system of incarceration in this country. Take for example the case of John Mackenzie a 70-year-old felon, serving a 25-to-life sentence for the shooting of police officer Matthew Giglio. John served almost 41 years, took full responsibility for his crime, had a spotless disciplinary record and impressive accomplishments, and was denied parole 10 times because of the nature of his crime. John committed suicide in his cell on August 4, 2016, after his last parole denial.

I work with women who have served years behind bars, for committing terrible crimes. I am convinced, through my work with this population, that the God of the Jewish people is a forgiving God. I wonder what it takes for each of us to forgive those who have harmed us?



## Yom Kippur 5778

יום כיפור תשע"ח



### Living with the Fragility of Life Rabbi Mychal Springer, Director, Center for Pastoral Education, JTS

Yom Kippur is one 25-hour day that is capable of entering and enriching every day of the year. On Yom Kippur, we peel back some of our denial and make space for the fragility of life. The rituals help us and the liturgy helps us. At the center of the High Holiday *Amidah*, the collection of prayers known as *Tefillah* (Prayer), stands *U-netaneh Tokef*. It begins, “Let us speak of the sacred power of this day—profound and awe-inspiring” (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*). The list of ways in which we can die included in the prayer certainly captures our attention, and can feel overwhelming. I am always drawn to the end of the prayer:

Each person’s origin is dust, and each person will return to the earth having spent life seeking sustenance. Scripture compares human beings to a broken shard, withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, a vanishing dream. And You—You are the Sovereign, living God.

Images of evanescent human life are scattered throughout the Bible, and the rabbis gather them up, presenting us with a vivid reminder that we are vulnerable and our time on earth is fleeting. These images all arise from the natural course of events. It is the nature of grass to live for a short time. We catch a breeze as it brushes by, and then it is gone. We live with this fragility, just as we live with the brevity of our own time on earth in the context of the larger universe.

The honest acknowledgement of the fragility of life is paired with the faith that God is eternal. While I have chosen to use *Mahzor Lev Shalem*’s translation here, because it is gender-inclusive, I do want to point out that in the Hebrew

the word for person is *adam*, which has the resonance of *adamah*, earth. We are made of the earth; we literally come from the earth and we return to the earth. Yom Kippur is preparing us to die. And in preparing us to die, Yom Kippur is preparing us to live well. Each individual life withers and fades, but we are all held in the divine abundance which endures forever. There's an invitation to depend on the largeness and permanence of the divine to help us experience this abundance. Our minds may wrestle with ideas about the ever-living God, but the liturgy juxtaposes our impermanence with God's permanence as an invitation to relax into a promise of something beyond ourselves.

These same images appear in *Yizkor*, the memorial prayers that we also recite on Yom Kippur: We enter into dialogue with those we love who are no longer in this world. Perhaps we ache with grief. We acknowledge that just as their lives were fleeting, so are ours. And our request is:

Teach us to count each day, that we may acquire a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:12).

The Psalms teach us that wisdom comes from keeping in mind that life is limited. With an awareness of our mortality comes a heightened awareness that we must make choices about how we live, that our choices matter and need to reflect our values. There's an urgency about living each day that keeps us on track, or helps us get back on track when we lose our way.

Today we are blessed with many medical interventions which can help us to sustain life. In our liturgy, we give thanks daily for the "knowledge, discernment and wisdom" (*Siddur Sim Shalom*) that has enabled human beings to develop magnificent remedies and technologies. Yet we know that there are times when even the most sophisticated medical advancements cannot keep us alive in ways that we understand to be life. This is why we need to have a heart of wisdom, a discerning heart.

Given the range of medical possibilities that we could face unexpectedly, or in the course of illness, we have an obligation to live daily in the spirit of Yom Kippur, holding onto our awareness of the fragility of life in ways that enhance our living. One profound way in which we can do this is by making sure that the people who are closest to us are aware of what is important to us in life, in a medical crisis, and in illness. I believe we have an obligation to enter into a holy covenant with someone in our life who agrees to serve as a healthcare proxy, in case we are ever in a position where we cannot make

our healthcare wishes known. Beyond that, we have an obligation to talk to our healthcare proxies about our wishes, so that they are familiar with our wisdom and can be guided by it if they ever need to serve as our proxies. And beyond that, we need to grapple with the complexity of decision-making by having conversations to help us discern what our heart of wisdom has to say.

Advance care planning conversations are an extension of Yom Kippur. They take the deepest lessons of our liturgy and help us to cultivate the heart of wisdom that we so profoundly need to navigate all that might unfold in our lives. Yom Kippur invites us to make space for an awareness of our fleeting nature, so that we can rejoice in the magnificence of life and feel the security of knowing that we will be surrounded by loving wisdom even when we are at our most vulnerable.

Visit [www.jtsa.edu/sage-voices](http://www.jtsa.edu/sage-voices) to watch *Sage Voices* a series of videos in which a diverse group of rabbis and religious leaders speak about end-of-life issues. Sage Voices is a part of *What Matters: Caring Conversations About End of Life* ([whatmattersnyc.org](http://whatmattersnyc.org)).

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Holiday Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### *Teshuvah* / Repentance

**Rabbi Joanna Katz, Director of Prison / Reentry CPE, JTS**

"What you can change is looking at and approaching the things in your life differently."

"This Elul, I have had an opportunity to examine and reexamine my life so I might do things differently."

"All the *teshuvah* work we do is inner work; the system does not care about the work we have done."

"I want to be a better person."

—Remarks made to me by Jewish inmates during the month of Elul