



How Shall It all End? Ecclesiastes, Yizkor, and Shemini Atzeret

Rabbi Gordon Tucker

As vice chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, Rabbi Gordon Tucker focuses on enhancing Jewish life at JTS, enriching our study of Judaism with the joy and deep understanding that only lived experience can provide. A leading scholar and interpreter of Conservative Judaism, he also articulates the enduring power of JTS's compelling approach to Jewish law and Jewish life, while strengthening JTS's religious leadership through partnerships with organizations in the Conservative Movement and beyond.

Rabbi Tucker's current role brings him back to JTS, where he served as dean of The Rabbinical School from 1984 to 1992 and as assistant professor of Jewish Thought from 1979 to 1994. He was ordained at JTS in 1975 after receiving his A.B. at Harvard College. He also earned a PhD in Philosophy from Princeton University.

Rabbi Tucker served from 1994 to 2018 as senior rabbi of one of North America's foremost Conservative congregations, Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY. Under his leadership, the synagogue flourished and was characterized by vibrant communal life and an exceptional devotion to Jewish learning. While at Temple Israel Center, Rabbi Tucker mentored numerous JTS Rabbinical School students who worked at the synagogue as part of the prestigious Gladstein Fellowship in Entrepreneurial Rabbinic Leadership. He served, as well, as an adjunct JTS faculty member, teaching courses in Jewish thought and ethics, the history and philosophy of Conservative Judaism, and leadership skills for rabbis.

Today Rabbi Tucker is Temple Israel Center's senior rabbi emeritus and a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. He previously served as board chair of the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel and was a member of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly.

In 1979-80, he was a White House Fellow, and served as assistant and chief speechwriter to U.S. Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti. He is the author of scores of articles on Jewish theology and law, and published *Heavenly Torah*, a translation of and commentary on Abraham Joshua Heschel's three-volume work on rabbinic theology. An anthology of his writings was published in 2014, under the title *Torah for its Intended Purpose*. Most recently, his new commentary on Pirkei Avot was published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2018.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

<p>A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: A time for being born and a time for dying...</p>	<p>לְכֹל זְמַן וְעֵת לְכָל־חֶפֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם: עֵת לְלֵדֶת וְעֵת לָמוּת...</p>
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Exodus 23:16 and 34:22

<p>And [you shall observe] the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in the results of your work from the field.</p>	<p>וְחַג הָאָסֹף בְּצֵאת הַשָּׂנָה בְּאָסְפֹךָ אֶת־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה.</p>
<p>You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest; and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year.</p>	<p>וְחַג שִׁבְעַת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ בְּבוֹרֵי קִצִּיר חֹטִים וְחַג הָאָסֹף תִּקְוֹפֵת הַשָּׂנָה:</p>

Deuteronomy 16:13-15

<p>After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God seven days, in the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.</p>	<p>חַג הַסֻּכֹּת תַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּאָסְפֹךָ מִגֶּרְנֶךָ וּמִיָּקְבֶךָ. וְשִׂמַחְתָּ בְּחֻגְךָ אֵתְּךָ וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאֵלֶמְנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ. שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תַּחַג לֵה' אֶל־לֵהֶיךָ בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר ה' כִּי יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' אֶל־לֵהֶיךָ בְּכֹל תְּבוּאֹתֶיךָ וּבְכֹל מַעֲשֶׂה יָדֶיךָ וְהָיִיתָ אֶךְ שִׂמְחָה.</p>
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Leviticus 23:34-36

<p>Say to the Israelite people: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be the Feast of Booths to the Lord, [to last] seven days. The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations; seven days you shall bring offerings to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering to the Lord; it is an <i>atzeret</i>: you shall not work at your occupations.</p>	<p>דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לַה': בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּקְרִיבוּ אֲשֶׁה לַה' בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרָא־ קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֲשֶׁה לַה' עֲצֵרֶת הוּא כָּל־ מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:</p>
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Rashi on Leviticus 23:36

<p>It is an <i>atzeret</i>. [This means to say] "I am holding you back (עצרתי) with Me." This is analogous to the case of sovereigns who invite their children to festivities for a certain number of days. When the time arrives for them to depart they say, "Children, please, stay just one day more with me; it is so hard for me to part with you!"</p>	<p>עצרת הוא. עֲצֵרְתִּי אֶתְכֶם אֶצְלִי; כְּמֶלֶךְ שֹׁדֵמֵן אֶת בְּנָיו לְסַעוּדָה לְכָרְךָ וְכָרְךָ יָמִים, בֵּינָן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ זְמַנָּן לִפְטֹר, אָמַר, בְּנֵי בְּבִקְשָׁה מִכֶּם עִכְבוּ עִמִּי עוֹד יוֹם אֶחָד, קִשָּׂה עָלַי פְּרִדְתְּכֶם :</p>
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From: "The Green Fields of the Mind", in *A Great and Glorious Game: Baseball Writings of A. Bartlett Giamatti*

It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. You count on it, rely on it to buffer the passage of time, to keep the memory of sunshine and high skies alive, and then just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops. There comes a time when every summer will have something of autumn about it. Whatever the reason, it seemed to me that I was investing more and more in baseball, making the game do more of the work that keeps time fat and slow and lazy. I was counting on the game's deep patterns, three strikes, three outs, three times three innings, and its deepest impulse, to go out and back, to leave and to return home, to set the order of the day and to organize the daylight. I wrote a few things this last summer, this summer that did not last, nothing grand but some things, and yet that work was just camouflage. The real activity was done with the radio--not the all-seeing, all-falsifying television--and was the playing of the game in the only place it will last, the enclosed green field of the mind. There, in that warm, bright place, what the old poet called Mutability does not so quickly come.

13 Principles of Exegesis (“Baraita of Rabbi Yishmael”, introduction to Sifra)

<p>Rabbi Yishmael says: The Torah is expounded through thirteen methods:..... (12) Matters that are illuminated by their contexts, and matters that are illuminated by what is stated at their ends [<i>sofo</i>].</p>	<p>רבי ישמעאל אומר בשלש עשרה מדות התורה נדרשת: מקל וחמר..... דבר הלמד מענינו ודבר הלמד מסופו.</p>
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Ecclesiastes 12:13

<p>The sum [end] of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe God’s commandments!</p>	<p>סוף דבר הכל נשמע את־הא־להים ירא ואת־מצותיו שמו:</p>
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Genesis 6:13

<p>God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them:</p>	<p>ויאמר אלהים לנח קץ כל־בשר בא לפני כי־מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם</p>
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Numbers 7:1

<p>On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils.</p>	<p>ויהי ביום כלות משה להקים את־המשכן וימשח אתו ויקדש אתו ואת־כל־כליו ואת־המזבח ואת־כל־כליו:</p>
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Genesis 2:1

<p>The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array.</p>	<p>ויכלו השמים והארץ וכל־צבאם:</p>
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Deuteronomy 31:30

<p>Then Moses recited the words of this poem to the very end, in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel.</p>	<p>וידבר משה באזני כל־קהל ישראל את־דברי השירה הזאת עד תמם:</p>
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Ronald R. Garet, "Meaning and Ending", in Yale Law Journal 96:8 (1987)

"The ending of a story completes not only the story, but its meaning. For narrative, the cruelty of the ending – the fact that the ending sets a term to the story, brings it to a close – is redeemed by the breath of life that the ending breathes into the story's meaning. The ending makes the meaning possible, and the meaning in turn makes the ending no ending at all, but instead a beginning."

Numbers 29:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17, 32, 35-36

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded. You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to 'ה: one bull of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish.
On the tenth day of the same seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion when you shall practice self-denial. You shall do no work. You shall present to 'ה a burnt offering of pleasing odor: one bull of the herd, one ram, seven yearling lambs; see that they are without blemish.
On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, you shall observe a sacred occasion.....You shall present a burnt offering, an offering of pleasing odor to 'ה: Thirteen bulls of the herd, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs; they shall be without blemish.
Second day: Twelve bulls of the herd, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish;
Seventh day: Seven bulls, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, without blemish; On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering (<i>atzeret</i>).....You shall present a burnt offering, an offering of pleasing odor to' ה; one bull, one ram, seven yearling lambs, without blemish.

Genesis 49:33

When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his kin.	וַיִּכַּל יַעֲקֹב לְצִוֹת אֶת־בָּנָיו וַיֹּאסֶף רַגְלָיו אֶל־הַמֶּטֶה וַיְגֹעַ וַיֹּאסֶף אֶל־עַמּוּיוֹ:
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Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, *Ma'or Va-Shemesh*, on Shemini Atzeret

<p>Another teaching: [Scripture says] "On the eighth day you shall hold an <i>atzeret</i>", and the Targum [Aramaic translation] of Onkelos rendered <i>atzeret</i> as <i>k'nishin</i>, which is equivalent to "gathering". Now the tribe of Dan was referred to in the Torah (Numbers 10:25) as the "gatherer" [<i>m'asef</i>] for all of the camps; this was because its officials marched at the rear and our sages said that they would gather all the objects that were dropped and lost by the Israelites, and would return them to their owners. Similarly, the eighth day is the time to gather together all of the words and thoughts that individual Jews spoke and thought, but were somehow prevented from reaching their fulfillment in holiness. It is the time to raise those words and thoughts to that holiness. And that's why this is called <i>atzeret</i>, a word that denotes the gathering and the raising up of all of those lost words and thoughts.</p>	<p>עוד יאמר: ביום השמיני עצרת תהיה לכם ותרגום אונקלוס עצרת בנישין לשון אסיפה כי הנה שבט דן נקרא מאסף לכל המחנות מפני שריו מהלכין באחרונה ואמרו חז"ל שהיה מאסף האבידות שאבדו ישראל ומחזירין אותן לבעליהם והנה בשמיני הוא עת לקבץ כל הדיבורים וכל המחשבות שחשב ודיבר איש ישראל אשר נידחו מלעלות למקום קדושתן ולהעלות אותם אז וזהו עצרת תהיה לכם לשון אסיפה שתאספו כל הדיבורים והמחשבות להעלות אותם.</p>
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Wendell Berry, "The Gathering", in *Collected Poems: 1957-1982* (1984)

At my age my father held me on his arm
like a hooded bird, and his father held him so.
Now I grow into brotherhood with my father as he
with his had grown, time teaching me
his thoughts in my own. Now he speaks in me
as when I knew him first, as his father spoke
in him when he had come to thirst for the life
of a young son. My son will know me in himself
when his son sits hooded on his arm and I have grown
to be brother to all my fathers, memory
speaking to knowledge, finally, in my bones.

Giamatti, op. cit.

"...there are those who learn after the first few times..... that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who can live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. I am not that grown-up or up-to-date. I am a simpler creature, tied to more primitive patterns and cycles. I need to think something lasts forever."