
Choice and Change:

High Holiday Reflections from JTS

2023/5784

The Torah's Stories— and Our Own

DR. SHULY RUBIN SCHWARTZ, Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History



During these *Yamim Noraim*—these Days of Awe—we might expect to be poring over biblical texts that exhort us to act honestly, compassionately, and justly: the Ten Commandments perhaps, or the Holiness Code of Leviticus 19. Instead, the Torah portions we read as we usher in the New Year are stories that are filled with unbearable pain—first, in Genesis 21, Abraham banishes his wife Hagar and their son Ishmael, and then, in Genesis 22, he almost sacrifices his son Isaac (Mahzor Lev Shalem, pp. 100–102 and 103–105). As we gather to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, why do we hear stories that are filled with themes of alienation, betrayal, and loss?

Countless rabbis, teachers, writers, artists, and ordinary readers over the centuries have tried to understand these texts by parsing verses, imagining the emotions of voiceless characters, and offering theological interpretations. To these countless readings, I add yet another: these texts spotlight the pain and suffering that exist within our midst, the heartache that is sometimes apparent but oftentimes invisible.

Gut-wrenching pain has accompanied me for many years now, and I'm acutely aware that this year, 5784, marks twenty years since the sudden, untimely deaths of both my son, Elie, and five months later, my husband, Gershon. For

Contents

The Torah's Stories— and Our Own	1
Choosing to Choose	3
Safe in God's Memory.	5
Life Is Good	6
The Courage to Hope.	8
The Value of Doubt.	10
Seeking Forgiveness for Structural Injustice	13
Approaching the King.	14
Clay in the Potter's Hand	15
Confronting Our "Concealed Things"	17

several years after their deaths, I found these texts—describing the loss of one’s closest loved ones and the rejection and possible sacrifice of one’s own child—too painful to read on every level; even now, a generation later, the stories sting both emotionally and theologically.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate that by foregrounding some of the most searing narrative portions of the Torah on Rosh Hashanah, our tradition demonstrates the power of storytelling in processing our pain. Just as the Torah shares an account of these painful experiences, we, through the telling and retelling of our own stories, strive to find some meaning, strength, and comfort in our distress. Storytelling—when focused on human suffering and foibles, on strength in adversity and lessons to be learned—offers a way of coming to terms with our challenges. That God opened Hagar’s eyes to see the well of water reminds us that support can be found around us if we open ourselves up to it. Her survival models a resilience that is essential to our own.

Storytelling also enables us to extract attributes and values that can nourish us and those that come after us. It gives us a way to transmit love through the generations. I cherish moments when I can share stories with my grandchildren—silly stories, touching stories, family stories passed down throughout the generations. When one of my grandchildren casually notes that “Saba Gershon”—for whom he is named—would have been

These texts spotlight the pain and suffering that exist within our midst, the heartache that is sometimes apparent but oftentimes invisible.

proud of him, it feels like a salve on my heart. As the next generation internalizes our stories and incorporates them into the narratives of their lives, our collective story moves forward.

That the Torah, and these Torah texts in particular, are read in community, further reminds us that others can hold our suffering when the burden is too great for us to do so alone, that others can offer comfort and share our pain. Our tradition knew what attachment research has only been able to prove in the last decade: that our pain, our experience of distress, is attenuated by contact with a close friend or family member and that communal support further enhances this effect.

Hearing these readings, it is easy to simply judge the actions of our biblical forebears. There is nothing wrong with doing that—indeed, it can be instructive. Yet I suggest that we can derive additional meaning from the text by empathizing with the biblical figures in ways that give us a window into the struggles of those around us. We can recognize—sometimes as a result of its absence in the stories—how much reaching out to others can affect them positively.

This focus on stories finds its echoes in the educational vision of JTS. As the new academic year—which coincides roughly with the new Jewish year—begins, we immerse our students in the stories of the Jewish people—through texts both traditional and contemporary; written, visual, and musical; texts that we study with head, heart, and soul. And our students learn to do so with others, in *havruta*, in community. The leaders we train grow to access the riches of our tradition, and they in turn, inspire others to see Judaism as a fortifying resource in their lives. Their studies also rouse them to pierce complacency and ameliorate suffering, inspiring others to do the same—whether on a small scale or on a communal, national, or global scale.

In the past months alone, students in our Center for Pastoral Education, including our rabbinical and cantorial

students, have offered compassionate care to people in hospice, nursing homes, mental health clinics, soup kitchens, congregations, and more. Despite the war in Ukraine, we've continued to run a joint academic program in Jewish Studies at the National University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. And with support from the scholarship named for my son, one of our undergraduates spent the summer on a Jewish farm exploring regenerative agriculture and researching how new farming techniques might mitigate climate change. These are just some of the ways we harness our educational work to help people write new stories for themselves, adding new links to the chain of our tradition.

May the new year bring healing and resilience to all—as individuals and as a community, for the Jewish people and in the world at large.

And may you have a sweet and joyful 5784.

Choosing to Choose

On *Hayom Harat Olam* in the Musaf Amidah for Rosh Hashanah (Mahzor Lev Shalem, pp. 158, 162, and 166)

RABBI JAN UHRBACH, Director of JTS's Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts

“Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All the works of Creation were created at their full height; they were created with their full knowledge (*le-da'atan nivre'u*); and they were created according to their final form.” (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a)



The Rabbis taught that Rosh Hashanah commemorates the day humanity was created. Liturgically, the day is seen as more than just an anniversary. After each set of shofar blasts in the Musaf Amidah, we pray together “*Hayom harat olam*”—today the world is born—suggesting that the world, humanity, and each of us individually, is created and recreated every Rosh Hashanah.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching suggests something startling. While the Talmudic text can be read to mean that each creation came into being with full mental capacity, it can be understood to mean alternatively that each one's consent was required; each had a measure of choice in its own formation. Indeed, according to the great Hasidic master the Sefat Emet, at Creation, *le-da'atan nivre'u* means that all creatures chose for themselves—each one its own particular form.

This idea will be familiar to anyone who has engaged in creative work of any kind. At some point in the creative process, the object being created begins to direct its own form. The same is true of human beings. We do not have complete free reign to “self-create,” of course. Each of us is born with particular physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics, and into particular social and familial structures. But the phrase “today the world is born,” suggesting as it does a passive process, is misleading. Within the realm of things under our control, we actively create ourselves on Rosh Hashanah, and indeed every day, through our choices.

As their years of wandering come to a close, God tells the people, “See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live” (19). Why does this verse need to command us to choose life, and what does that really mean? Reading the command in light of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s teaching, we may understand the Torah to be reminding us that *all choices are creative acts*. Each and every one of us creates ourselves constantly through the choices we make. In the end, we are the sum total of our choices; we are beings freely created according to the form we choose, not only at creation, but at every moment.

To choose life we must actively, consciously, and continually choose who we will become. We must choose to create ourselves and our lives, rather than passively allow ourselves to be shaped. At the most basic level, we must choose to choose.

The command to choose life expresses a reality that life energy comes from the exercise and expression of the will, from making choices. We are most fully alive when we are actively, intentionally engaged in the process of choosing who to be. The moment that we allow ourselves to be a certain way simply because we have always

We relinquish our power to choose because we don’t want to bear responsibility for our choices, or don’t know what to choose.

been that way, or because society or a particular person pressures us to be that way, or for any other reason other than a conscious, thoughtful decision to be a certain way—we have died a little. We have chosen death, not life.

This choice itself—to embrace our power to choose; to actively and deliberating create ourselves—is neither intuitively obvious nor easy. The opportunity on Rosh Hashanah to create ourselves anew is a tremendous privilege and also a tremendous responsibility.

The Talmud teaches that three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah. The thoroughly righteous are inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life, while the thoroughly wicked are inscribed and sealed in the Book of Death. The verdict of the *beinonim*, those in the middle, is temporarily suspended, and their actions between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur determine into which book they are ultimately inscribed (Rosh Hashanah 16b). A powerful Hasidic interpretation (Toldot Yaakov Yosef, quoted in *Netivot Shalom*) understands this as follows: “This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe themselves for the coming year.”

As uncomfortable as some of us are with the idea of God sitting in judgment and decreeing life or death, this reading may be even more challenging, because it puts the responsibility squarely on us. We have to choose.

Perhaps this is one reason why we need to be *commanded* to choose life. All too often, we readily relinquish our power to choose because we don’t want to bear responsibility for our choices, or we simply don’t know what to choose. Other times, we do know what to choose, but the right choice feels too demanding; it involves too much work, loss, change, or risk.

And we have many strategies to avoid choosing. Sometimes we’re passive, allowing life to simply happen to us. Other times we’re reactive or reflexive—acting on impulse without self-reflection, thought, and discipline. And often, we avoid having to make choices today by simply sticking with the choice we made yesterday, for

no other reason than that we made it. This particular strategy can border on the idolatrous; we pledge our primary allegiance to our own prior choices and commitments. Ultimately, we are free to choose, but we are not free from the burden of having to choose. To fail to choose is itself a choice, and it is not the choice of life and blessing.

Granted, knowing what to choose is not always easy. But this doesn't let us off the hook. We have to choose to become people who *will* know how to choose. Each choice we make changes us a little. It changes the way we perceive and decide the next choice. With each life decision, we become someone else, and it is that new person who will make the next choice. So our question at each juncture is not only, Who will I be if I make this choice, but, Will making this choice turn me into someone who is better able to make the next choice? What will this choice teach me? Will it increase my courage, my strength? Will it deepen my capacity to love? Will it sensitize me, educate me? Will it help me to tolerate greater depth, rise to the next challenge? Will it shore up my moral footing, or will it make me more susceptible to ever greater ethical compromise? How will this choice not only reflect, but shape, my character?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi imagined plants and animals coming into the world at their full height, in their final form. This is perhaps a difference between the original Creation and our ongoing process of creation, and between humans and other creations. We are not created fully formed. We grow into who we are meant to be, and into our capacity to choose.

Safe in God's Memory

On the Zikhronot section of the Musaf Amidah for Rosh Hashanah (Mahzor Lev Shalem, pp. 160–162)

RABBI MYCHAL SPRINGER, Adjunct Instructor of Professional and Pastoral Skills; Founder and Former Director of JTS's Center for Pastoral Education



The Torah portion read just before Rosh Hashanah, Parashat Nitzavim, contains stunningly beautiful verses which teach us that God's Torah "is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deut. 30:14). The language of the verses is full of rich physical imagery: "It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?'" The Torah's wisdom is not far away; it is not other. It is in each of us.

If we give our hearts the space to be known and embraced, our hearts can share the wisdom that dwells inside. With this space, the wisdom of Torah emerges in new ways. It is not general or abstract; it is very specific to each person and to the challenges and blessings they have encountered in their life.

My mother lived with Alzheimer's disease for many years. It is easy to imagine that as someone's memory dissolves, so too does their wisdom. But I found that with my mother this was not true. Her wisdom continued to dwell within her, and I encountered it most clearly in her gratitude. While she had less and less access to things that make most of us grateful, she had more and more access to simple gratitude itself—for her children, for her health as she understood it, for being alive. Being with my mother was an experience of entering into

gratitude with her, breathing deeply into the reality that existence itself is a gift.

Parashat Nitzavim also tells us, “I make this covenant . . . not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and also with those who are not with us here this day” (Deut. 29:13–14). The commentators say that the reference to “those who are not with us” refers to future generations. I love the idea that we all entered into the covenant together—even those of us who were not yet Jews but would convert one day. But I would like to suggest that there is also another population of people who are both here and not here: people living with cognitive impairments, people whose communication is not linear, people who are often referred to as being “not all there.” For God’s purposes, they are indeed all there. We are called upon to recognize them, to include them fully as participants in the covenant.

On Rosh Hashanah, we place great emphasis on memory—especially in the *Zikhronot* (“remembrances”) section of the Musaf Amidah, the prayer at the heart of the Rosh Hashanah service. While we must remember our past actions so that we can do *teshuvah*, change our ways, the prayer refers to God as “*zokher kol hanishkachat*,” the One who remembers all that has been forgotten. The essential remembering is done not by people but by God. We must each do our share according to our ability, but God is the one who remembers even that which is forgotten—“for there is no forgetting in Your realm,” in words of the *mahzor* (Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 135). We are safe in God’s memory. What we have forgotten is not gone; it is preserved securely with God.

The *Zikhronot* section closes with “*Barukh atah Adonai, zokher ha-berit*”—Praised are You, God, who remembers the covenant.” God remembers that we are part of the covenant, that we were all there, that Torah is planted in each of us. It is in our mouths and in our hearts—and it does not depend on what we remember or are able to put into words.

Life Is Good

On the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings
(Mahzor Lev Shalem, pp. 100–102 and 103–105)

DR. ARNOLD M. EISEN, Chancellor Emeritus and Professor of Jewish Thought

One of the things we look forward to as the holidays approach is the renewed encounter with melodies and rituals, texts and tastes, which we have developed great affection for over the years. It’s like the feeling one has at the sight of old friends coming down a path to greet us, prompting recollections of the good times we have enjoyed together. I feel that way about the Torah portions that we read on Rosh Hashanah. I know them well, after all these years, but as with good friends I still wonder what they will have to say to me this year, and I to them. I am eager to find out.



Here is Sarah in the first day’s reading, laughing with delight at the birth of a son in her old age, and then turning around in anger and demanding the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. There is Hagar in the wilderness, unable to look at what she fears will be her son’s imminent death from thirst and starvation—only to have God hear his cry, open her eyes to the water nearby, and promise that Ishmael will become a great nation. An interlude

of negotiation between Abraham and the local chieftain follows; the Philistine king desires a covenant with the Israelite because he recognizes that “God is with you in all that you do.”

Abraham learns immediately that having God near at hand does not always make things easier. In the second day’s reading we confront along with him God’s difficult and baffling command to take “your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love,” and offer him up as a burnt offering. I tremble anew each time, despite knowing that it is going to turn out okay. Once again the angel of the Lord will appear at the last minute to save one of Abraham’s promised offspring. And as if that were not enough of a triumph for life, the portion concludes with mention of the many children born to Abraham’s extended family.

On one level, the Torah’s strategy in telling these stories—and the Rabbis’ wisdom in having us read them on Rosh Hashanah—seems straightforward. It is hard for mere mortals to grasp the enormity of the world’s creation—one of the themes on which we are meant to focus on these days. It is equally challenging to make sense of God’s sovereignty, given all that happens in the world that is against God’s will, or to plumb the depths of the assurance that God will “remember us for life.” So the text comes along with narratives on the human scale that we can appreciate—parents and children, family tragedies feared but averted. This we can relate to, and each year we do so anew.

The Rabbis teach us to ponder the wonder of creation by conjuring the laughter of parents who live long enough to see promises of new life miraculously fulfilled. They encourage us to doubt the certainties of what cannot possibly come to pass, and to imagine divine pain at the death of God’s creations. The stories are rendered all the more universal, all the more human, because the Abraham and Isaac tale so closely follows the one about Hagar and Ishmael. The latter trauma is bound up with the former—and thus binds us to human beings outside the limits of our particular family sagas. These stories belong to all of us. That is why we breathe a real sigh of relief when things turn out all right, even though we knew that they would. These are not just recitations of events that happened long ago. They tell our lives. And our stories, like the Torah’s, do not always end well.

These Torah readings are not just recitations of past events. They tell our stories.

I confess that I am confounded by the “Binding of Isaac.” The fact that we cannot comprehend it is part of the story’s point, I think, and certainly one key to its power. Its meanings are many and, for me at least, ever changing. Year by year we puzzle over the *Akedah* again and again, as we puzzle over so much else in life, and try to make it fit. Jews whose children were martyred in the Middle Ages sometimes retold the story’s ending to make it fit the awful facts. In their accounts Isaac *is* sacrificed. Anyone attentive to the liturgy of the Days of Awe, a liturgy in which we ask God repeatedly to remember us for life, cannot but realize—if only momentarily—that the children whom we bring to life will (like ourselves) get to hold onto life only briefly. This too figures in our reading. It is hard to dismiss entirely the traditional notion that the story comes to teach and extol submission to God’s will.

But I know that there is more to life than how it ends. Acceptance cannot be all that the story teaches me. I have a hard time, on most encounters with this text, believing that Abraham went up that mountain intending to sacrifice his son; I have never experienced God or Judaism as hungry for such sacrifice of life. Abraham did not leave his homeland, contend with Pharaoh, argue over Sodom and Gemorrah, etc.—all in accord with the will of

his sometimes inscrutable God—just to lose his blessing, his future, his Isaac, in a barbaric act of slaughter. His God knew the plots that entertained ancient Near Eastern divinities and had entirely new story lines in mind. Each year I seize hold of Abraham’s word to the servant boys that “we will return to you” and envision him—a man grown somewhat wise by Chapter 22 of Genesis in the ways of his Lord—waiting with one ear cocked for the angel’s call as he saddles the asses, climbs the mountain, binds the cords, and lifts the knife. We humans often have tests we do not need. Abraham—more intimate with God than most of us—had learned long before this how to endure them.

This reading does not exhaust the story’s depths. There are many layers to these narratives, which is why they make such valuable companions on our life journeys. But in the end these encounters with Torah affirm that life is good. Abraham and Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael, surely felt that way as they left the scenes of our annual visits with them, children in hand. God remembered them for life. So may it be for us.

The Courage to Hope

On Psalm 27, recited daily
throughout the holiday season

RABBI AYELET COHEN, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership



It is not too late. It is early
and about to grow. Now
is the time to do what you
know you must and have feared
to begin.

—Excerpt from “Head of the Year” by Marge Piercy

The span of time from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur represents the place between hope and fear; between transformation and unrealized aspirations. We may have made big promises on Rosh Hashanah, resolving to make significant changes in our lives, entering the year with a sense of excitement and optimism. But on Yom Kippur, we become more attuned to our own shortcomings. So much is beyond our control. Changing old patterns is arduous, the path uncertain. Confronting our own limitations, we can feel afraid and alone. The spiritual work of this moment lies in discerning the difference between acknowledging our limitations and succumbing to fear.

In Parashat Vayeilekh, which we read the week before Rosh Hashanah, the Israelites stand on the cusp of entering into the Promised Land. Like us, they are full of possibility and trepidation. Moses is running out of time. Without him, the Israelites will have to confront the challenges ahead without their constant guide and intermediary to God. We might imagine them, along with Joshua, who is poised to become their leader, feeling untethered and afraid. Moses offers them comfort and reassurance: they are not alone. Joshua and the Israelites are entering a changed world, but Moses assures them: “God will cross over before you” (Deut. 31:3).

Ha'amek Davar, the 19th-century commentary of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv), points out the difference between the phrasing of this verse and a similar verse as the Israelites first left Egypt: “God went ahead of them by day in a pillar of cloud to guide them along the way” (Exodus 13:21). The language in Exodus, according to the Netziv, communicates that the Israelites followed behind passively as God split the sea, whereas “God will cross over before you” means that God’s action is entwined with the Israelites’ action. Once they cross into the Promised Land, the Israelites will actively determine their own destiny, as partners with the Divine.

If we are to create real change in our lives, we cannot wait passively for the change to happen to us. Despite loss and disappointment, we must move forward, repairing what is broken in our relationships and our world. In their first steps out of enslavement, the Israelites followed behind an enormous pillar of cloud. Now, as we begin this new year, we must chart our own journey—just as the Israelites did when they prepared to enter the land. We must seek the Divine inside ourselves.

As we navigate the challenges of an uncertain future, entering the New Year in a time of geopolitical and planetary turmoil, we—like the Israelites—don’t always feel the presence of God. The consciousness of our own limitations and of the very real obstacles in our way can undermine our confidence that we can transform, that we can enter the Land. Fear and self-doubt encroach, making it difficult to remember that we are not alone. When overwhelmed by doubt and fear, the Israelites wished for a moment that they could return to Egypt. In our times as well, there are always those who will wring their hands, saying that our best days are behind us, that we cannot repair what we have broken and move forward.

In this liminal and anxious moment, Moses (aware that he will not reach the land himself) summons a powerful message for Joshua and the Israelites—one that continues to accompany us and guide us: “Be strong and courageous, do not fear or dread them; for it is indeed your God who marches with you: [God] will not fail you or forsake you” (Deut. 31:6). Strength and courage take many forms. According to the 12th-century Midrash Lekah Tov, “be strong and courageous” refers to being strong in Torah and mitzvot, and taking courage in *ma’asim tovim* (responsible and ethical deeds) and *derekh eretz* (treating others with dignity and respect).

We repeat these words in Psalm 27 throughout the holiday season, a kind of mantra that can steel us and comfort us as we encounter the unavoidable fears and doubts that accompany all new beginnings: “Turn to God; be strong and take courage, and turn to God.” The repetition of “turn to God” bookending this verse draws the attention of the commentaries and the midrash. They concede that we repeat these words because sometimes we pray and our prayers are unanswered. The experience of fearing that our prayers are unheard, that our path to change and renewal is blocked, is clearly familiar to both classical and contemporary commentators. They tell us to try again. To look deeper. Not to give up hope.

As we journey through these days that are filled with awe, with their dual meaning of fear and wonder, each of us can consider the ways in which we can fortify ourselves with hope as we move toward our promised lands.

The consciousness of our own limitations and of the very real obstacles in our way can undermine our confidence that we can transform.

The lesson of the High Holidays is to have the courage to keep returning. This season calls us to search for God, not ahead of us—like a pillar of cloud providing obvious and easy markers on our path—but inside of us. We search for all that is intertwined within us: for God, for the strength we can draw from our ancestors, and for the courage to change. Only then can we move forward, knowing that change is possible and that we are not alone.

The Value of Doubt

On *Vekhol Ma'aminim* from the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (Mahzor Lev Shalem, pp 146–148, 319–321)

RABBI JULIA ANDELMAN, Director of Community Engagement

The more one invests in trying to have a meaningful and genuine High Holiday prayer experience, the more one stands to lose if the words of the *mahzor* fall short of one's aspirations. The *mahzor* is conceptually and theologically dense. If one takes the time to meditate upon the assertions of the prayers as they go by, one is sure to eventually encounter a text that rings false, problematic, or even alienating.



The *piyyut* (liturgical poem) *Vekhol Ma'aminim*—written by Yannai, the 7th-century master of classical *piyyut*—features straightforward Hebrew, a regular meter, and, often, upbeat melodies, such that people might end up singing it enthusiastically without reflecting deeply on its content.

And all believe that God is faithful.
 And all believe that God is good to all.
 And all believe that God is omnipotent.
 And all believe that God answers the silent prayer.
 And all believe that God is just and righteous.
 And all believe that God's work is perfect.

This text celebrates universal faith in a beneficent God. But is it really true that “all believe” these statements? While some might experience this *piyyut* as a jubilant affirmation of their theology, its words might stop others in their tracks. After all—it's not even the case that “all believe” in God at all. Even putting aside people with entirely different religious beliefs, or those with no interest in religion—the fact is, even those committed to attending High Holiday services do not “all believe” each of the claims of *Vekhol Ma'aminim*, and the other texts of the *mahzor* that proclaim and assume complete and perfect faith.

While many people feel firmly anchored in religious belief, and see their own faith reflected in the liturgy, there are also many people who bring questions about their faith with them to High Holiday services. Many have had life experiences that awakened a powerful, instinctive belief in God; and yet, they also hear a different voice inside asking if this liturgy can be taken at face value. Most of us—even as we follow some intuitive or learned impulse to attend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services—have had at least some moments of doubt.

What does it mean to sing *Vekhol Ma'aminim* and similar texts knowing that there are people around you whose

faith waivers? Who sometimes doubt God’s omnipotence, or goodness, or very existence? What does it mean to sing this piyyut if you are one of those people yourself?

The Maggid of Mezritch, an 18th-century Hasidic leader, taught: “When a person says the words of prayer so that they become a throne for God, an awesome silent fire takes hold of him . . . as he ascends beyond the world of time.” What a powerful image of prayer! But how often—even on the holiest days of the year—do we experience such all-consuming spiritual connection when reciting the words of the *mahzor*? What if we don’t feel that our words “become a throne for God” when we pray?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“Faith will come to him who passionately yearns for ultimate meaning, who is alert to the sublime dignity of being, who is alive to the marvel of the matter, to the unbelievable core within the known, evident, concrete . . . By foregoing beauty for goodness, power for love, grief for gratitude, by entreating the Lord for help to understand our hopes, for strength to resist our fears, we may receive a gentle sense of the holiness permeating the air like a strangeness that cannot be removed. Our crying out of pitfalls of self-indulgence for purity of devotion will prepare the dawn of faith.”
(*Man Is Not Alone*, 89–90)

But is it not true that one can follow all of these prescriptions and still struggle intensely to find and keep faith?

The private writings of Mother Teresa, published posthumously in *Mother Teresa—Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta,”* reveal her desperate struggle to find the faith that she professed and embodied but did not always feel. “I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer, no, no one. Alone. Where is my faith? Even deep down . . . there is nothing . . . I am told God loves me, and yet the reality of the darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.” Mother Teresa—a paragon of religiously inspired service, who thought of humans as “pencils in the hand of God”—could not have followed Heschel’s instructions more completely. If even she failed in her quest for faith, where does this leave us?

Is doubt potentially healthy and productive for one aspiring to faith?

Perhaps we should flip the question and ask: Is doubt really a bad thing? Or, is doubt potentially healthy and productive for one aspiring to faith? From the biblical Moses to Moses Maimonides, some of our greatest leaders have wrestled with faith. Maybe being a person of faith goes hand in hand with being a person of doubt.

In fact, some of our earliest texts seem to take for granted the phenomenon of failing to find God. We see this in the Psalms. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far from delivering me, and from my anguished sobs? My God, I cry by day, but You do not answer . . .” (22:2–3). And in Psalm 27, recited throughout the High Holiday season: “Do not hide your face from me; do not thrust aside your servant in anger . . . Do not forsake me, do not abandon me.” The Bible seems to understand a despairing, futile search for God as a commonplace, even fundamental, human experience. Perhaps the compilers of our liturgy, who paired Psalm 27 with this time of year, felt that giving voice to the tenuousness of faith was critical to this season.

Contemporary scholars have noted the centrality of doubt for people of faith. American writer Mary Gordon, a

practicing Catholic, spoke about the value of doubt on Bill Moyers’s *Genesis* series: “The ability to question, the ability to take a skeptical position, is absolutely central to my understanding of myself, and my understanding of myself as a religious person.” Gordon even argues that “faith without doubt is just either nostalgia or a kind of addiction.” When asked if doubters have anything to offer believers, she responded: “If it weren’t for atheists and agnostics, there would be no Enlightenment, for example . . . Many of the ideas which I most prize as an American, as a woman, as somebody living in a relatively free society have come to me from people who were agnostic or atheist.”

John Cornwell, an English scholar of religion and a Christian, describes the inevitability of doubt for those aspiring to belief. Reflecting on his own struggles with faith, he writes: “Faith is a journey without arrival, complicated by false turns, breakdowns, dead ends and wheel-changes. Faith, like love, is seldom entirely constant; nor is it irrevocable” (*The Importance of Doubt*). He prefers the novelist Graham Greene’s articulation of faith as “doubt of doubt” over the idea of faith as an unshakeable certainty.

If doubt is an integral part of religious life, then, perhaps passages like *Vekhol Ma’aminim* are not the

How can we approach High Holiday services without the pressure of expressing a faith we may not feel?

uncomplicated declarations of faith that they seem to be. Maybe their inclusion in the *mahzor* is meant to validate and address our intense need for assurance in the face of our doubts. For all we know, when Yannai was writing back in the 7th century, belief in God was no less difficult or complex than it is today.

Still, the endless God-language of the *mahzor* may overwhelm, exhaust, or push away someone who finds themselves in a less faith-full place in their lives. In such a situation, how might we approach High Holiday services without putting on ourselves the burden of expressing a faith that we may not always feel?

Heschel offers an alternative understanding of faith that may answer that question. “To believe is to remember,” he writes. We can look to our prayer services to access not a bedrock of perfect faith, but rather echoes of the moments in our lives that made faith seem possible—even if only momentarily.

“In every man’s life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once . . . experienced the momentous reality of God. . . . But such experiences . . . are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched. The remembrance of that experience and the loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith. In this sense, faith is faithfulness, loyalty to an event, loyalty to our response.” (loc. cit. 165)

How do we access the power of our past “events” of faith, Heschel asks? Not just through private reflection, but by coming together in community. We gather on the High Holidays to remember together the possibility of faith. To create sacred space, sacred time, and a sacred assembly—a *mikra kodesh*, in the words of the Bible—that lets us reaffirm, collectively, the parts of ourselves that want to believe:

“Not the individual man, nor a single generation . . . can erect the bridge that leads to God. Faith is

the achievement of ages, an effort accumulated over centuries. Many of its ideas are as the light of a star that left its source centuries ago. Many songs, unfathomable today, are the resonance of voices of bygone times. There is a collective memory of God in the human spirit, and it is this memory of which we partake in our faith.” (loc. cit. 161)

The Rosh Hashanah liturgy quotes the prophet Isaiah: “A great horn shall be blown; and they shall come that were lost in the land of Assyria, and they that were dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they shall worship the Lord in the holy mountain at Jerusalem” (27:13). Today, too, we return from our dispersal when the horn, the shofar, is blown. We gather in our synagogues to lift one another up spiritually and give each other permission to pray with our complete selves—both the faithful and doubtful parts of us. The High Holidays, then, are the very time for us to wrestle with our faith, to acknowledge and give space to our doubts, rather than shying away from them as we so often tend to do.

Let us experience the High Holidays as an opportunity to hold simultaneously both our doubts and also the faith and traditions that are dear to us. May it be a season of forgiving ourselves for the doubts we may have—and of celebrating those doubts for allowing us to nuance our faith, so that we may rediscover it time and again when we least expect it.

Seeking Forgiveness for Structural Injustice

RABBI STEPHANIE RUSKAY, Associate Dean of The Rabbinical School

How do you ask forgiveness for being part of a system that you didn’t create but from which you benefit? How do you change that system to make it more just? These are some of the questions on my mind in this season of introspection and evaluation.

At the Exodus Transitional Community, a re-entry program in Harlem, New York, I met with members who had been incarcerated. They shared their remorse for their crimes and talked about how they had dedicated their lives to helping to prevent recidivism in themselves and others.

Maimonides emphasizes the importance of naming one’s sin as part of the repentance process: “And what is teshuvah? That the one who sinned abandons their sin, removes it from their thoughts, and resolves in their heart never to do it again . . . And they must confess with their lips those matters that were resolved in their heart” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:2).



This makes sense if you've committed a crime that breaks the law. But what about when your crime, so to speak, is following the law? When you're part of a system that's stacked against some and benefits others, and you are one of those who benefits? How can we do *teshuvah* for systemic injustice—for the sin of racial injustice in which people of color are much more likely to be part of the criminal justice system?

In considering these questions, I look to the Algerian rabbi Yeshua Lalum's teaching on Deuteronomy:

Thus the Torah commands, "Do not harden your heart and do not close your hand." If your heart hardens, your hand will close and your fingers will all appear to be of equal length. In that case you would say, go out and make a living like I do. However, when you open your hand up, you can see that some of your fingers are long and others are short. This is how God created people, great and small, and they are interdependent. (Likutei Aharon, Derashah 17)

Lalum teaches that when you close your hand, you are essentially ignoring structural injustice. All of your fingers *seem* to be equal, having equal opportunity. When you open your hand, you are not only being generous to the stranger, but you can also see that your fingers are of different lengths. They have different advantages. They're not all the same.

As I grapple this holiday season with both forgiving and asking for forgiveness, I am striving to act generously and compassionately as I acknowledge structural injustice. For me, this has meant working daily to create and nurture relationships with people in my community, which sits in Morningside Heights (JTS's neighborhood in New York City) and in Harlem. It means building relationships that put social and economic justice at the center. It means real partnership with the underlying belief that my own humanity is diminished when I live in a world that is unjust. I am naming racial injustice as a sin of 21st-century American life, of which I am part. But the response I hope to be part of is one that is graceful, relational, compassionate, and focused on justice.

Approaching the King

On HaMelekh from Shaharit on
Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur
(Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 69)

CANTOR NANCY ABRAMSON, former director of H. L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music of The Jewish Theological Seminary

On a typical Shabbat, we begin Shaharit, the formal morning service, with the text *Shokhein Ad Marom*—the Exalted inhabits eternity—in keeping with the idea that Shabbat is a taste of the world to come. But on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we begin the Shaharit service a few lines earlier with *Hamelekh*, describing God as the Sovereign enthroned on high. This description of God is taken from the Book of Isaiah: "I beheld God seated high on a lofty throne" (Isaiah 6:1).



The practice of beginning with and highlighting the opening word *Hamelekh*, the King, was established by Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg in the 13th century. Theology is not only about how we understand God but also about how we relate to God. In anchoring our service with *Hamelekh*, we highlight God's sovereignty on the

Days of Awe, but we also contemplate that our king commands us to partner in the act of creation. It is what Martin Buber called the dialogue with heaven. Buber wrote, “The central teaching in Judaism is the idea that human beings can approach the king, the sovereign of the universe, and be heard.”

When we hear *Hamelekh*, we take note of the awesomeness and vastness of God, and we balance that with an awareness of God’s approachability. It is comforting to believe that God listens to us, even if our prayers are not always answered. These sentiments of both awe and intimacy are mirrored in the *nusah*, the musical motif, for *Hamelekh*. The melody is plaintive, exalted, haunting.

As we pray together in our communities on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we must each decide how we will approach God this year. How will we make our dialogue with heaven unique and meaningful? What will we do in our lives to enter the exalted places?

Clay in the Potter’s Hand

On *Ki Hinei Ka-homer* in the Yom Kippur evening service (Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 227)

RABBI JOEL SELTZER, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement

Several years back, my wife and I took a summer vacation on Block Island, a 17-mile sanctuary of beaches, water, and biking off the southern coast of Rhode Island. We checked into a lovely bed and breakfast and made our way down the path towards our secluded beach cottage. The room was tiny, but a mere walk from the beach.

Before dinner, I absently flipped through the pages of the quaint guestbook on the dresser, finding brief greetings from couples celebrating weddings and anniversaries, young families exploring the island, and other visitors. But I was drawn to one page, upon which a guest named Lois had written:

Surrounded by water
Blessed by nature’s bounty
Shaped by the Earth’s great potter,
Peace for all by the sea.

Reading these words, I was mentally transported through time and space to Kol Nidrei night, to the solemnity of the *Selihot* section of the liturgy—the extended prayers for forgiveness appended to the formal evening service. There, nestled among various *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), lies a poem of unknown authorship that begins *Ki hinei ka-homer be-yad ha-yotzer*—like clay in the potter’s hand.

The central metaphor of this poem is of God as the master artisan, who uses the raw materials of humanity to shape the world and each person in it. Like clay, stone, iron, glass, cloth, and silver, we are at the mercy of the artist who molds us, hews us, shapes us, melts us, drapes us, refines us.



The famous opening line and image are drawn from the Book of Jeremiah, where God instructs the prophet to visit a potter working at the wheel. Jeremiah observes how, when a vessel is ruined, the potter simply shapes it into something else as he sees fit. The divine word then comes to him: “O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?—says the Lord. Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel!” (Jeremiah 18:6). In their original context, these words are meant as a stern warning to the people: God decides which nations are built up and planted, and which nations are uprooted and destroyed; only fealty to God’s commandments will ensure that the covenant is preserved.

On Yom Kippur, we turn this metaphor on its head. Instead of a threat about the power in the hands of the artisan, the image is recast as a plea from the lowly raw materials themselves. We, the penitent petitioners, admit that we are powerless in the face of God’s omnipotence, and yet we hope that God will nonetheless see the inherent potential in all of us—not in who we are now, but in who we hope to become.

The poem’s refrain is powerful as well: *La-berit habeit ve’al teifen la-yetzer*—Look to the covenant; do not

The text is imploring God, the artisan, to remember the promise made to the raw materials, the People Israel.

turn towards the Accuser. Here, and perhaps in an air of desperation, the Jewish people are pressing God to remember the covenant, the promise made first to our forefathers and foremothers, then later to the people Israel at Sinai, and turn away from the “accuser,” an angel who, in the rabbinic imagination, prosecutes the Jewish people for their failings.

This refrain is drawn from another biblical verse: “Look to the covenant! For the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of lawlessness” (Psalm 74:20). In echoing

this line from the Psalmist, the poet is imploring God, the artisan, to remember the promise made to the raw materials, the People Israel. Remember how you promised to make us a treasured nation? How you told us that if we followed Your commandments, you would remain faithful to us? Well, here we are on Yom Kippur, trying our best to be like angels—wearing white; refraining from food, drink, and physical intimacy; and gathering in sacred reflection of our faithful covenant to You, God; so please remember us for good. Remember us for life.

This concept, that God should forget the iniquities of the Jewish people on Yom Kippur due to our observable piety on this day, is reflected in a midrash:

“Sin crouches at the door” (Genesis 4:7) . . . Elijah said to [HaSatan, the Accuser]: Satan has no jurisdiction to prosecute on Yom Kippur. From where do we learn this? Rami bar Hama said: the numerological value of HaSatan (חטשה) is 364 (*hey* = 5; *sin* = 300; *tet* = 9; *nun* = 50). 364 days of the year, he has license to prosecute, but on one day of the year—Yom Kippur—he has no jurisdiction.” (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 20a)

The message of this midrash and of our *piyyut* are one and the same. It is too easy to surrender to our helplessness in the face of the Almighty. We are but clay, glass, and cloth in the hand of the artisan, and it is God’s will that will determine our fate. But we are not merely clay, merely glass, merely cloth; for we have agency. We have a role to play in this drama. Unlike raw materials, we can fulfil our potential not only through

the work of the Artisan's hands, but through our own lives and choices as well. By choosing to follow the commandments, by choosing to preserve Jewish ritual, and yes, by choosing to gather in shul on Yom Kippur, we demonstrate to God that we are not merely beings of crude substance, but that we have a spiritual import that is integral to the success of the covenant itself.

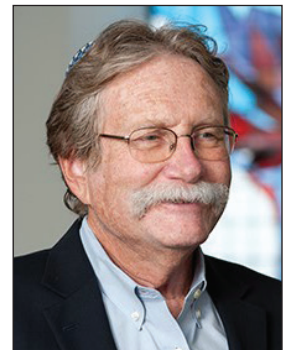
By living lives of mitzvot, morals, and meaning, in partnership with God, we unlock the power of our truest potential as humans.

Confronting Our “Concealed Things”

On Deuteronomy 29:28, recited at the end of *Al Heit* on Yom Kippur (Mahzor Lev Shalem, pp. 221, 238, 268, 310, 385)

RABBI GORDON TUCKER, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement

“**T**he concealed things concern the Lord our God; but with overt matters, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching” (Deut. 29:28).



Standard readings of this quite enigmatic verse, quoted in the Yom Kippur liturgy, include these:

- Don't fret over the fact that we have no control over the sinful thoughts that are harbored by others, or even over the sinful acts committed by others in secret. We should just pay attention to the things others do in our vicinity over which we do have control, and work to right them.
- We are charged with dealing with evil that is done in our presence and is known to us, for “*areivim zeh la-zeh*” means not only that we are responsible for one another's welfare, but that we are also accountable for the behavior of other people in our community and society. Heschel famously wrote that “in a free society, few are guilty but all are responsible.” The concealed things belong to God. They are not your province. Stick to that which is done openly, and that therefore can be addressed and healed to the benefit of all.

There is, however, another reading of this verse, given by Nahmanides (Ramban) in the 13th century, and it is one that forces us to a certain deeper level of introspection at this time of year. The “concealed things” are not sins committed by others, out of our view and thus out of our control, Ramban posits. Rather, they are the sins committed by us, but that are nevertheless out of our view and awareness. As long as we are not aware of them, they will be known only to God. But they are only out of our control because they are not known to us.

Of what infractions are we speaking here? Much, for example, has been said in recent years in our society about “implicit prejudice.” One of the most direct and affecting articulations was given by President Obama, when he was first running for election in 2008. Circumstances involving his pastor impelled him to give a major address

about race in this country in which he made a remarkable admission, describing his white grandmother as “a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of Black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”

How many of us are similarly willing to search out the kind of implicit prejudices that we cannot believe—or do not wish to believe—are living within us? Do we have the moral stamina to recognize the lazy stereotypes that keep us comfortable, but have real consequences for the people we stereotype? We identify someone as an ultra-Orthodox Jew by the way they dress—which is fair enough—but then we may jump immediately, and almost unknowingly, to the easy assumption that this person is religiously coercive, isn’t involved in gainful employment, is certainly not a fan of democracy, etc. Never imagining that just maybe this person is one of the *haredi* Jews, both in the U.S. and in Israel, who live their beliefs and let others live theirs, and whose progressive values lead them to promote secular education, women’s rights, and the institutions of civil society. Our heads, and our experience, should tell us about such people (and they exist in some numbers), but the concealed things in the gut eclipse that common sense and tell us otherwise.

God knows our secrets— even those that we keep hidden from ourselves.

How many times have those of us who would criticize any attempt to lump every member of an ethnic group into one bloc nevertheless reflexively hesitated when seeing a keffiyeh or hijab? We don’t want to believe it is there, but can we be sure without looking more closely? What about people whose bumper stickers or lawn signs reflect a political stance with which we disagree? How much implicit prejudice do we actually have? We assume

others have it when they see our bumper stickers, of course, but can we honestly seek out the traps that we silently and secretly fall into? Can we imagine that we also are prone to implicit racism, even as it seems so comfortably arms-length to suggest that it’s the problem of law enforcement officers, who are, after all, at greater risk than we are when we form our judgments? This is not meant to excuse implicit (and certainly not explicit) racism. It is simply to sensitize us to our tendency to say “it’s them,” never thinking it might be us as well.

And what effect might those imperceptibly unfair judgments have on those who are being judged? In interviews for jobs and schools; in the willingness of the circles with access to social privilege to include them; in our readiness to listen to their narratives as peers, and not as people with an alien agenda?

This is what I love about Ramban’s reading of the concealed things that belong to God. It may look as if he is exonerating us of these implicit prejudices, because the verse says that only God can be expected to know the secret things. But the paradoxical truth is that by telling us that (too often) only God knows the secret things, Ramban is reminding us that they are there to be known, and thus of the grave and urgent fact that we all harbor hidden and secret things, things we would be ashamed to see. They are God’s only as long as they are hidden. But now we are reminded that they are indubitably present, and it becomes our obligation to seek them out, to reveal them.

I believe that we should understand the verse this way: “Those less-than-attractive traits and reflexes that we harbor and hide from ourselves are too often known only to God; but it is an ongoing obligation for us and our descendants to bring them to light, so that we will truly be able to live as the Torah hoped—and still hopes—that we learn to live.”

The *mahzor* that guides us through the Days of Awe confronts us with the Ramban’s reading quite explicitly. On Yom Kippur we seek forgiveness for “the breach of all commandments and prohibitions, whether known to us or not.” These words are a clear reminder that remaining unaware of things we can, by courageous effort, recognize in ourselves, requires forgiveness, atonement, and a commitment to do better in the future, as Jews and as Americans.

Credits

Chancellor Shuly Rubin Schwartz, “The Torah’s Stories—and Our Own”

Published in 2023

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, “Choosing to Choose”

Published in 2021 and adapted for this publication.

Rabbi Mychal Springer, “Safe in God’s Memory”

Published in 2015 and adapted for this publication.

Dr. Arnold M. Eisen, “Life is Good”

Published in 2008 and adapted for this publication.

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, “The Courage to Hope”

Published in 2022 and adapted for this publication.

Rabbi Julia Andelman, “The Value of Doubt”

Published in 2019 and adapted for this publication.

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay, “Seeking Forgiveness for Structural Injustice”

Adapted from Sound Bytes of Torah from JTS (2016). Video available at www.jtsa.edu

Cantor Nancy Abramson, “Approaching the King”

Adapted from SoundBytes of Torah from JTS (2015). Video available at www.jtsa.edu

Rabbi Joel Seltzer, “Clay in the Potter’s Hand”

Published in 2023

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, “Confronting our ‘Concealed Things’”

Published in 2022 and adapted for this publication.

Choice and Change was produced by JTS’s Department of Community Engagement.

***Find thousands of commentaries, videos,
and other JTS content at www.jtsa.edu/torah.***