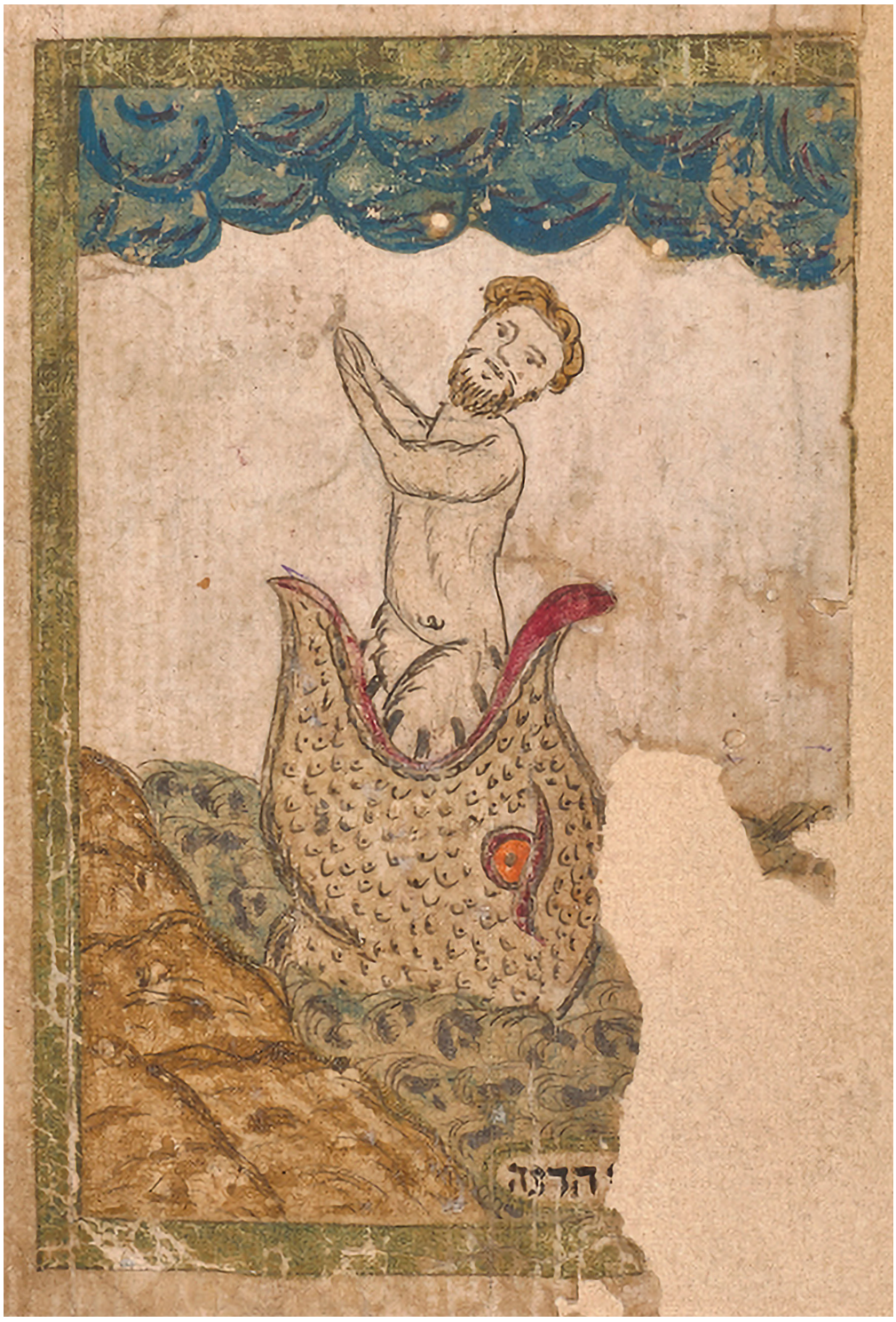
To Be More Fully Human:

Reflections on Hope for the Days of Awe 5786



JTS

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On the cover:

Corfu mahzor. MS 8236. Hebrew.
The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

Introduction

RABBI JOEL SELTZER, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement

I am pleased to share with you JTS's 5786 High Holiday reader, *To Be More Fully Human: Reflections on Prayer and Possibility for the Days of Awe 5786.*

This year's essays—written by JTS faculty, leadership, and students—explore core themes of the High Holy Days: the challenge and beauty of prayer, the ethical power of communal confession, and the call to compassion in a fractured world. Drawing from the liturgy of *Mahzor* and the timeless teachings of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our contributors offer thoughtful interpretations and practical insights to guide your spiritual journey during this sacred season.

I am deeply grateful to the authors for their wisdom and vulnerability. Each piece reflects a personal engagement with the Yamim Nora'im and offers pathways for reflection, connection, and renewal. Whether through the struggle of prayer, the shared responsibility of confession, or the moral courage to embrace the other, these essays illuminate the transformative potential of this time.

I am especially thankful to Shelly and Larry Gross for their generous support of this initiative, which allows us to share these reflections with you. May this guide enrich your experience of the High Holy Days and help you discover your own path of return in the year ahead.

Shanah Tovah,

Rabbi Joel Seltzer
Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement

Prayer Is Hard—And That's the Point

RABBI JAN UHRBACH, Director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts

We come to synagogue on the High Holy Days for many reasons: to affirm our Jewish identity, to be part of Jewish community, to connect with family, and to fulfill our obligations to God, the Jewish people, and Jewish tradition. We come for inspiration, learning, comfort, and challenge.

Whatever our usual reasons, this year we're coming amid uncertain and turbulent times, and most of us are hoping for some guidance and nourishment to help us manage our fears and find hope. A good sermon can certainly do some of that, inspiring us to think and act differently.

But what we're asked to do for most of our time in synagogue is pray. And prayer is a problem. It's a problem generally because prayer is rarely easy. It's a particular problem on the High Holy Days because the services are so long and repetitive, the themes and images of the liturgy are so challenging, and many of us simply don't know how to engage.

But prayer does different work from teaching within a sermon, and it can offer exactly the kind of hope and sustenance we need.

Why Are High Holy Day Services So Long?

Certainly there's a lot of special holiday liturgy to get through. But there's a much deeper, more important reason: authentic prayer, especially transformational prayer, takes time.

Praying is much more than merely reciting words. It involves encountering aspects of ourselves we rarely, if ever, see, shifting our perspective and seeing all things anew, awakening our spirits and sense of wonder. It's about connection: with ourselves, with a community of other seekers, and with Someone or Something beyond ourselves (God, Oneness, or whatever metaphor you choose for "the all-encompassing larger something of which I'm but a part").

And on the High Holy Days, prayer has some additional goals.

First, we're meant to experience and claim the fullness of our humanity. On the humbling side, that means facing our smallness: our vulnerability, our fallibility and actual failures, our powerlessness, and our mortality. On the ennobling side, it means recognizing and embracing ways in which we are made in the image of God: our inherent dignity and unique value, our agency and consequent responsibility, our belovedness, and our resilience and strength. We're reminded that we're not supreme and that we're not alone.

The liturgy and the positioning of ourselves as "pray-ers" facilitates all that. These help us remove or at least pierce our protective armor of ego, self-deception, rationalization, external and internal makeup, posturing,

shame—whatever keeps us from seeing ourselves as we really are.

Second, the arc of the liturgy from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur imagines that our prayer may inspire God to leave *kisei hadin* (throne of judgment) and ascend *kisei harachamim* (throne of compassion/kindness), thereby bringing us forgiveness, life, and a second chance. But whatever we believe or don't believe about God, ideally our prayer will have the same effect on *us*, helping us push past our own harsh judgment (of self and others) and access the gentleness and tenderness within, the place where we feel deeply loved and valued and where we feel most loving of others. That experience may enable us to seek and offer forgiveness of others and lay the foundation for our own growth and change. This, too, brings us life and a second chance.

All of this is part of what makes prayer a religious obligation and service to God. Ideally, those moments of profound encounter that may occur in the process of praying change us, shaping our character, our choices, and our behaviors outside the synagogue.

And all of this is the *real* reason services are long: Moments like that aren't easy to come by, and they don't happen in a few minutes or even a couple of hours. In reality, we could get through the required liturgy in a fraction of the time, but then very little would get through to us. We need time to focus, to get past our resistances, to delve deeper, to connect. In other words, services aren't long because we have a lot of liturgy; rather, we have a lot of liturgy because we need a long service.

Services aren't long because we have a lot of liturgy; rather, we have a lot of liturgy because we need a long service.

How Should I Engage in Prayer?

The most obvious way to engage in prayer is simply to pray the words on the page, along with the prayer leader and congregation, in Hebrew or English or transliteration, silently or aloud. One can do so in a meditative way, losing oneself in the sound and rhythm of the words. Or focus on meaning, taking in the ideas and themes expressed, noting one's reactions, connecting the text to one's own life. It helps to remember that liturgy is poetry, not prose, and it needn't be taken literally to be taken seriously.

At the same time, few of us can stay fully focused and prayerful for a brief weekday service, much less the lengthier davening on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Short-circuiting the process isn't the answer; as with any practice, the key is persisting past distraction or boredom to where the depth of meaning is found. (Think how often psychotherapy, gym workouts, or creative endeavors may seem like a waste of time just before a major breakthrough.) And following along with the congregation is by no means the only way to engage. At different times throughout the day when boredom or distraction strikes, rather than disengaging, try employing one of the following alternative paths to meaningful prayer.

Choose one particular prayer and linger there. Abraham Joshua Heschel compared the prayer book to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, filled with great works of art, too rich and beautiful to take in on one visit. So just as some people go to the Met to spend time with a single painting or in a single gallery, you may find that one or more particular prayers speak especially powerfully to you. If so, don't feel pressured to push forward with the congregation. Stay on that page and allow the text to resonate within you. Explore its many possible meanings

and their connection to you.

Pray in your own words. The formal texts of the confessions on Yom Kippur are merely an opening to help identify the failures and regrets each of us needs to own up to as individuals. Similarly, the formal text of the prayer book isn't meant to substitute for your own concerns, needs, longings, gratitude, and praise. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav stressed the importance of pouring out your heart to God as though you were speaking to your closest friend. You should feel free to put down the book and say whatever's on your mind and in your heart. You can do that silently or quietly, stepping out for a few moments to a private place or taking courage and comfort from the company of the community. And don't worry if you're not sure who (if anyone) is listening; the important thing is to open your heart and see what's there.

The key is persisting past distraction or boredom to where the depth of meaning is found.

Read something else for a few minutes. The Conservative Movement's prayer book, *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, features a wealth of commentary, poetry, and explanations. If you find yourself distracted or alienated, wander into the margins of the page. Some people bring their own reading material relating to the theme of the High Holy Days for additional inspiration. Choose reading that will keep you in a reflective and prayerful mindset—something that will focus you on inner work, not distract you from it, and help you reconnect to the service.

Meditate or sit in silence. Prayer happens not on the page but in the heart, mind, and soul—and not always in words. Feel free to close the book, close your eyes, and open reflective space within.

Sing. Singing—with words or a wordless melody—can be one of the most powerful modes of prayer there

Taking time to prepare in advance can enhance your synagogue experience of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The following book recommendations, curated by JTS leaders, Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, and Rabbi Gordon Tucker, offer meaningful pathways into the liturgy, themes, and emotional landscape of this sacred season.

- **Days of Awe: A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holy Days**, ed. S.Y. Agnon (Schocken, 1995)
- **This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation**, Alan Lew (Little, Brown, 2003)
- **Prayers of Awe** (multivolume series), ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010–2016)
- **Beginning Anew: A Women's Companion to the High Holy Days**, eds. Judith Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1997)

You might also read in advance some of the commentary in *Mahzor Lev Shalem* (ed. By Rabbi Edward Feld, Rabbinical Assembly, 2010), the High Holy Day prayerbook used widely across the Conservative movement and beyond. With its rich commentary, poetry, and interpretive texts, it invites multiple paths into prayer and meaning. Page numbers from *Mahzor Lev Shalem* are noted throughout this reader to help you explore the liturgy more fully. (It is available for purchase at rabookstore.org.)

is. Singing can do for the heart and soul what a therapeutic massage does for the body, loosening up places of pain and tension, and allowing us to be more in tune with ourselves. Singing has a way of bypassing some of our defenses, and we may encounter parts of ourselves we rarely see (including our childlike side). So just join in. It doesn't matter if you know the tune or you don't, if you sing the words or just hum or chant along, if you stay on pitch or not. The point is not to sing well; the point is to sing.

As you listen, allow yourself to feel part of the prayer community, uplifted and embraced by the sounds of prayer, and imagine the needs, concerns, joys, pains, fear, and gratitude those sounds express.

Listen. We hear a lot about participatory services, by which we usually mean congregational readings and singing. That's all great. But the participation that really counts is inner engagement. For some, that happens best through active listening. So you may choose to simply listen for part of the service, perhaps closing your eyes and letting all the sounds of prayer wash over you—melodies, words, mumblings and murmurings, sighs, page rustlings. Active listening can take you out of your own concerns and connect you with something larger. As you listen, allow yourself to feel part of the prayer community, uplifted and embraced by the sounds of prayer, and imagine the needs, concerns, joys, pains, fear, and gratitude those sounds express. See if you can feel a moment of capaciousness, the ability to hold more love and compassion for those you know and those you don't.

Prayer is worth it, especially in these turbulent, uncertain times. Where else can one do such a deep soul dive in the privacy of our hearts while buoyed by the company of others doing it too? What else offers not only the thought but the experience of being tethered to something so much vaster than ourselves, anchored by an ancient and loving tradition, held by a caring community, with mutual obligations toward others? And what could be more important in the face of dehumanization than the challenge and opportunity of confronting and reclaiming the fullness of our humanity?

May you be blessed with a moment of genuine prayer on these High Holy Days.
May your heart open, your soul soar, and your tears flow.
May you lose yourself and find yourself, heal and be healed.
And may you and we be renewed.

To learn more from Rabbi Jan Uhrbach in our High Holiday webinar series, *Standing Together: Prayer, Presence, and the Power of Community*, visit www.jtsa.edu/event/beyond-the-sermon

A Single Band: The Universal Call of the High Holidays

The Uvekhen Prayers (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 87, 149, 258, 321)

DR. DAVID KRAEMER, Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS

The Amidah—the standing, silent prayer—is the central prayer of rabbinic tradition. During its 18 recitations on the six days of a normal week, it has an essentially unchanged form. But on Sabbath and holidays, the prayer changes, omitting the centrally placed daily requests and adopting a form appropriate to the occasion. These changes help us understand how the rabbis understood the nature of the holidays and other special times.

The Amidah for the High Holidays commences its central section—for any service on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur—with a single formula: three paragraphs known for their opening words "and so" (*uvekhen*, a short word that is difficult to translate exactly).

The first of the paragraphs reads as follows:

> **And so,** place Your fear, Lord, our God, upon ***all*** Your works, and Your awe upon ***all*** You have created; and ***all*** works will fear You, and ***all*** creatures will bow before You. And they will ***all*** form a single band to do Your will with a perfect heart. For we know Lord, our God that dominion is Yours, strength is in Your hand, might is in Your right hand. and Your Name is awesome over ***all*** You have created. [Emphasis added.]

Oral performances, such as prayer, often emphasize their central theme through repetition, which the reciter or listener can't help but notice. Unmistakably, the theme of this paragraph is that *all* creatures are God's creatures, which leads to the hope that one day, at least, all creatures will unite in a single whole, in recognition of the single God. No Israel, no nations, just a single, unified humanity, embraced by and embracing the whole of God's creation. It is difficult to imagine a more universalistic expression, one thoroughly appropriate to the day on which we celebrate the birthday of the *world* and everything in it.

The second paragraph assumes a very different focus:

> **And so,** grant honor, Lord, to Your people, praise to those who fear You, good hope to those who seek You, and ease of speech to those who yearn for You, joy to Your land, gladness to Your city, the sprouting of promise to David, Your servant, and an array of light to the son of Jesse, Your anointed *Mashiah* [Messiah], speedily in our days.

This paragraph is about the Jews, the Promised Land, and Jerusalem. It anticipates the messianic redemption, when Jews will be honored for their loyalty to the true God. Given its narrowness of focus, is this an abandonment of the universal tone of the first paragraph in favor of a particularistic sensibility, one more appropriate for a *Jewish* holiday?

The third paragraph makes it clear that the triumph of the Jews and their Messiah is not the hoped-for end:

> **And so,** the righteous will see [this] and rejoice, and the upright will be jubilant, and the pious will exult with joyous song; corruption will close its mouth, and all the wickedness will vanish like smoke, because You will remove the rule of evil from the earth.

The hope is for a universal reunification, the formation of a single band, bound together by our common creatureliness.

In this vision of the perfected, redeemed world, it is not Jews who will rejoice at the downfall of evil, but the righteous, the upright, and the pious. Any person can attain this status, especially in the messianic stage of history. Yes, Jews will, in this world, be relieved of their humiliation, but so will others who do what is right and just. And Jews who do evil will find no more place in this world than evildoers of other peoples. In the end, as at the beginning, there will be only one humanity.

Why is this theme emphasized on the High Holidays? The answer lies in the recognition that the High Holidays are a New Year festival, commemorating and celebrating the creation of the world in its entirety. On its birthday, the world—and everything in it—faces judgment. Sins committed during the prior year must be erased and the world cleansed anew. Rosh Hashanah is the occasion of judgment; Yom Kippur, the occasion for mercy, the time when God forgives repentant sinners and purifies the world of their sins. This cleansing accomplished, the world may rejoice, as Jews do on the "time of our joy," Sukkot. And though it is Jews who perform this drama, it is the whole world who are its subjects. Jews on these holidays perform a universalistic function.

The three "and so" paragraphs offer a quick outline of the progress of this history: The world begins as one. It then divides into tribes and families, some of whom dominate and some of whom suffer humiliation. The hope is for a universal reunification, the formation of a single band, bound together by our common creatureliness. Perhaps this is what the lulav is meant to symbolize: the binding together of our many types into a single, inseparable whole. This would be a fitting symbol, indeed, for the end of our yearly New Year festival.

Whether or not we read the symbolism of the lulav this way, the words of the High Holiday Amidah demand that we view the world this way. Today we may be divided against one another. But we were once one, and it is to that oneness that we long to return. It is our sins that divide us. We must struggle to leave those sins behind to forge a new unity. When we return (*teshuvah*), we will return to ourselves.

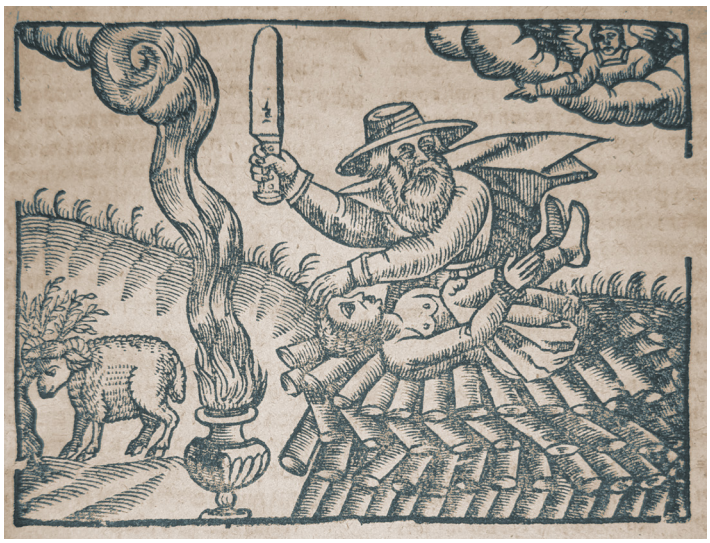
To learn more from Dr. David Kraemer in our High Holiday webinar series, *Standing Together: Prayer, Presence, and the Power of Community*, visit www.jtsa.edu/event/beyond-the-sermon

The Akedah (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 103–105)

A Knife Raised, a Page Left Blank:
Reflections on the Akedah and a Woodcut in The JTS Library

RABBI MARCUS MORDECAI SCHWARTZ, Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections; Assistant Professor, Talmud and Rabbinics

The most terrifying moment in the Binding of Isaac comes just before it ends. Abraham has built the altar. He has bound his son. He has lifted the knife. And then—suddenly—a voice from heaven calls, "Do not stretch your hand against the boy. Do nothing to him."



Talmud Bavli: Seder Qodashim. RB68:15. Hebrew. The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

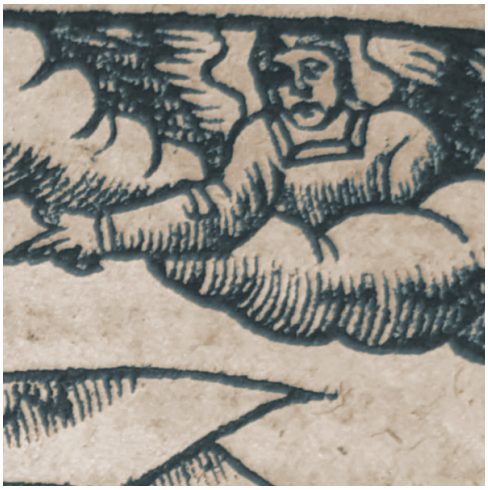
The Akedah stands at the heart of Rosh Hashanah, not only as story but as liturgy. In the *Zikhronot* section of the *Musaf* service, we remind God not of Abraham's belief, but of his submission—his impossible willingness to sublimate paternal love and fulfill a terrible command. We ask God to do the same: to sublimate divine anger, to restrain the strict demands of justice, to turn away from what is deserved and toward what is merciful. Abraham turned from love to duty. We ask God to turn from judgment to compassion.

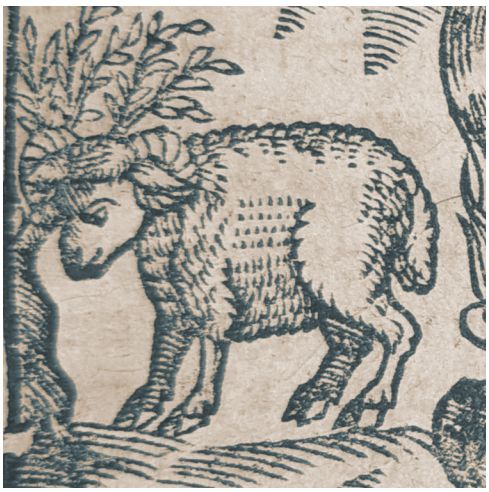
At The JTS Library, a rare woodcut of the Akedah is tucked into a 17th-century volume of Seder Kodashim. It appears not in a prayer book or Bible, but between two Talmudic tractates on Temple offerings—*Zevahim* and *Menahot*. It fills what would otherwise be a blank page, a silence in the structure of the book. On the left side of the image, a ram is caught in the thicket. On the right, Abraham stands over Isaac, knife raised. Smoke rises toward heaven. And in the upper corner, an angel leans out of a cloud.

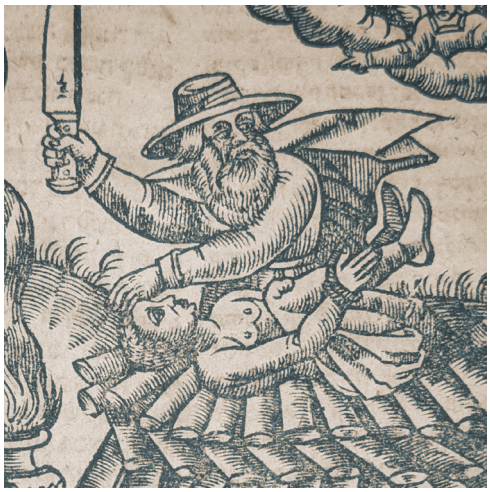
The artist meant to draw logs beneath the altar—fuel for a burnt offering. But they resemble the pages of a book. Perhaps that's coincidence. Perhaps not. Books, after all, are made from wood. And sometimes they are burned. In rabbinic memory, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon was wrapped in a Torah scroll and set alight. As the flames rose, his students asked him what he saw. He said, "The parchment burns, but the letters fly upward."

Isaac was spared; Rabbi Hanina was not. The *olah* (burnt offering) is not always interrupted. The Greek word *holocaustos*—consistently chosen by Septuagint to translate *olah*—means "wholly consumed." Rosh Hashanah asks us to remember a sacrifice that did not happen and to draw merit from the willingness nonetheless. Abraham offered more than faith. Isaac offered more than submission. They offered the human will—restrained, terrible, and transcendent.

When we open the book to that old woodcut, we see wood shaped like pages, fire shaped like prayer, and memory shaped like mercy. The knife is raised. The angel speaks. The sacrifice is paused—but not forgotten.







A Hineni from a Fractured Heart

Hineni (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 140, 312)

HAROLD NATHAN AARONSON, RS 2029

Hineni begins the Musaf *service of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and describes the seemingly impossible task of the* shaliah tzibbur*: to stand before God as a messenger for the prayers of the community. In Israel as part of his rabbinical studies at JTS, Harold Aaronson reflects on how the themes of Hineni reflect the tensions facing the Jewish people today.*

הנני *Here I am*. Behind me: thousands of stickers plaster a concrete wall, covered with eyes—eyes of those gone forever and those still waiting to return. In front of me: ruins. Mounds of concrete, heaps of rubble—the only evidence that Beit Hanoun once stood in Gaza.

Hineni reminds us that to come before God with these desperate pleas is a daunting task, one that requires us to scrutinize our feelings, our actions, and our words, and to elevate the best within ourselves—even when it feels impossible.

העני ממעש, נרעש ונפחד מפחד יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל *I, poor in deeds, tremble and quake from fear of the One who is enthroned upon the praises of Israel*. I walk through the remnants of Nir Oz. Bullet holes, shattered windows, burned homes. Flags fly quietly in front of each house, marking the fate of those who once lived there: alive or dead, captive or free. באתי לעמד ולהתחנן לפניך על עמך ישׂראל (I have come to stand and plead before You, On behalf of Your people Israel). I look at the father rooted in the ashes of his living room telling his story. We stare upon the wreckage of his neighbor's house, scattered toys in the yard. On the afternoon of October 7, when finally freed from their safe room, his son went to play with those toys and wait for his friend to emerge and join him. Like any other afternoon. But his friend Ariel would never come.

And as the father speaks, the ground shakes with the constant *thrum* of shells landing in Gaza.

היה נא מצליח דרכי אשר אני הולך לעמד ולבקש רחמים עלי ועל שולחי *Please, let my path that I am walking—to stand and request mercy for myself and for those who sent me—be successful*. The sun beats down as I look upon the faces on the signs surrounding me. Young couples, building new families, creating new worlds—futures gone in an instant, a graveyard erected where they danced. In the distance, I watch as new soldiers rise in formation with our national song of hope dancing on their lips: עוד לא אבדה תקותנו (Our hope is not yet lost).

Fewer than 10 miles away, an 18-year-old trudges through this same heat, wearing 50 pounds of combat gear and making split-second life-and-death decisions. We keep asking the impossible of him; perhaps we feel compelled to do so because it seems the impossible has been asked of us. But the reality remains. He returns

to Gaza again.נא אל תפשיעם בחטאתי ואל תחיבם בעונותי *Please do not punish them for my sins, nor make them liable for my transgressions*.

"My heart is cold," he tells us, as he assesses the situation with broken eyes. And I understand him. Hamas commits wanton violence against civilians by design, starving our hostages with intent. Their hate is so consuming that they prefer a world without us to a world of freedom for themselves—even at the expense of their people. The world watches in self-righteous judgement as if it were simple. The walls that isolate us grow.

Yet doubts also gnaw at me. Some realities are too simple to ignore, hunger among them. Each day I see children starving, houses destroyed, families broken. ואל יכלמו בפשעי ואל יבשו הם בי ואל אבוש אני בהם (Let them not be disgraced because of my offenses, nor be ashamed through me, and let me not be ashamed through them). Is our compassion yet another casualty of the war?

No matter the double standards or culpability of others, Hineni is about our actions, our thoughts—not theirs.

We have erred. We have transgressed. There is nuance; there is context. But in endless complexity we neglect the obvious: rationalizations do not feed a family. No matter the double standards or culpability of others, Hineni is about our actions, our thoughts—not theirs. Must we not demand more from ourselves than this?

וכל צרות ורעות הפך נא לנו ולכל ישראל לששון ולשמחה לחיים ולשלום *Transform all troubles and hardships for us and for all Israel into joy and happiness, into life and peace*. To bare your soul before God on our holiest day—the vulnerability, humbleness, and courage required to reflect honestly and openly in judgement—is a demanding request. But it is a necessary one if we are to ask to transform our troubles and hardships into joy and happiness. This moment requires that resolve from us all: To openly and honestly assess ourselves and our actions. To do what's right—for our own sake as well as for others.

כי אתה שומע תפלת עמך ישראל ברחמים. ברוך אתה שומע תפלה *For You hear the prayer of Your people Israel with compassion*. Blessed are You, who hears prayer. We appear before You with prayers that have held our hearts captive for nearly two years, prayers that are new reflections of ones that have bound us for millennia. Grant us the wisdom to judge justly, the power to do what is necessary, and the strength to refrain from cruelty. Do not harden our hearts. Grant us the will to protect our people in body and in spirit.

We may not know how—but we know we must. הנני *So here I am.*

From Listening to Leading: Four Pathways into Prayer

Ohila La'el (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp 153, 325)

CANTOR SHOSHI LEVIN GOLDBERG, Director, H. L. Miller Cantorial School

As a spiritual leader dedicated to communal singing, I sometimes struggle with the sections of the High Holiday Mahzor that are written for the cantor or prayer leader to sing solo. The liturgical poem (*piyyut*), Ohila La'el, found in the repetition of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is a short but thought-provoking example. Ohila La'el is of unknown authorship and was likely written in the 6th century CE or earlier. This *piyyut* comprises four lines, followed by three biblical verses. Though the poem is brief, each of these four lines can offer us a method of engaging with moments in our liturgy that may be challenging.

Our first approach which highlights the importance of showing up, can be found within the opening line of this *piyyut*:

אוֹחילה לאל אחלה פניו

"I pray to You, God, that I may come into your presence"

Attending synagogue or tuning into a livestream is sufficient, because listening can be true prayer. Witnessing prayerful moments of the service leader, as if attending a performance, is indeed one way to pray, simply by being present. Yet while many people appreciate performative moments in prayer, that modality can be uncomfortable for others.

The second line encourages us to try active listening as an alternative:

אשׂאלה ממנו מענה לשׁון

"Grant me proper speech"

Difficult words and melodies in our *mahzor* can serve as a barrier to engagement. Here, the poet acknowledges this challenge, and the line can be understood as an invitation to hum or tap along, perhaps mouthing the Hebrew or engaging with the translation or supplementary readings. This, too, is authentic prayer.

Sometimes, even active listening isn't enough, and a congregational tune is needed:

אשׁר בקהל עם אשׁירה עזּו

"For I would sing of Your strength amidst the congregation of Your people"

There is nothing quite like singing together and hearing the voice of the community, which is far greater than the sound of one voice. This experience brings us together and can be deeply moving, especially during these fraught and divisive times. And yet, there is still one additional level of what is possible in prayer—co-creating the service, along with the leader:

אביעה רננות בעד מפעליו

"And utter praises describing your deeds"

There is nothing quite like singing together and hearing the voice of the community, which is far greater than the sound of one voice.

When we feel our voices connecting both to our community and to the Divine, individuals have the power to serve as co-leaders of the service. This prayerful presence is palpable.

When it comes to connecting with our services, performative elements are not the only parts that can prove challenging. There are many reasons to wrestle with prayer in general or with specific sections of our liturgy. Sometimes the words are difficult to read or pronounce. Other times, the melodies are hard to sing. And often, the content of our prayers is emotionally challenging. And yet, it is in that very struggle—with words, melodies, and meaning—that we often discover the most honest and transformative moments of connection.

Scan this QR code to hear Cantor Shoshi Levin Goldberg with her spouse, Cantor Ethan Levin Goldberg, sharing a favorite congregational melody for Ohila La'el.

Guiding Our Broken Hearts into the New Year

Rosh Hashanah *Musaf*: Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, Shofarot Services (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 153–166)

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

We approach the New Year in a time characterized more by brokenheartedness than anticipation. It is a time of fear and loss and moral reckoning for the Jewish people. While many of us feel spiritually shattered this year, our tradition and our liturgy can guide us on this journey through our brokenness into a new year.

Three ancient sections lie at the core of the Rosh Hashanah *Musaf* service: Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot. Each consists of a series of biblical verses, framed by liturgy and punctuated by the sounding of the shofar. The Mishnah and Gemara dictate that verses describing divine fury or punishment are not appropriate for Rosh Hashanah liturgy. The verses are not intended to scare us but rather to help us connect to God and explore the internal work we each need to do.

The first section, Malkuyot (Sovereignty), is about the wonder of creation, God's sovereignty over the earth, and our smallness in the universe. While some contemporary Jews find this aspect of God alienating, Malkhuyot may be easier to access in times like these when we are so in touch with our own powerlessness over global forces, when there is so much that we cannot control and fear we cannot change. But we do not dwell in that powerlessness.

We turn the page to Zikhronot (Remembrances) like a comforting voice from a safer time. While Zikhronot is associated with divine judgement, it draws on biblical verses that tell of God remembering our ancestors in times of suffering. As Jews, we carry the memory and the legacy of tragedy, antisemitism, and exile. The *mahzor* reminds us of the good. We awaken to the possibility of God's lovingkindness, which can keep us from succumbing to despair and callousness even as we continue to witness and experience terrible things.

This is where the act of remembering intersects with the work of *teshuvah*. We perform an accounting of our souls as we consider where we are in comparison to years past. Nearly two years into the Gaza war and nine months into the current US administration, Zikhronot invites us to examine what we have learned and what choices we will make in the year ahead to try to repair the brokenness in ourselves, our people, and our world. It urges us to take action to bring more lovingkindness into our relationships and in the world.

The final section, Shofarot, represents the fusion of voice and action necessary to move forward with hopefulness. The call of the shofar accompanied revelation. In broken times it is the cry that accompanies war,

but it can also represent laughter and joy. It is the voice we need to amplify that will sound one day for peace, justice, and redemption.

We can hear this message in the words of Rabbi Akiva in a foundational talmudic story set in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabban Gamaliel, R. Elazar ben Azariah, R. Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were standing together near the ruins of the Temple, when they saw a fox running from the wreckage where the holy of holies once stood. The first three Rabbis began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughed. Stunned, his colleagues asked how he could laugh. Rabbi Akiva asked them, "Why do you weep?"

"How can we not weep," they said, "when we see the curse from the book of Eicha (Lam.) enacted before us?[1]

Our *mahzor* guides us to draw from the pain of our past, remember the Divine and human capacity for generosity and compassion, and choose to act for a better future.

"That's why I'm laughing," answered Rabbi Akiva. "Before these terrible prophecies came to be, we were afraid to believe the visions of good from our prophets; but now, since we see all of these things coming to pass, can we possibly doubt the eventual fulfillment of the consolation of Zion?" And his friends were comforted.[2]

As Jews, we are realists who recognize brokenness in the world and ourselves. Our tradition also asks us to have faith. Our *mahzor* guides us to draw from the pain of our past, remember the Divine and human capacity for generosity and compassion, and choose to act for a better future. The wisdom and courage of Rabbi Akiva, which allows him to laugh even in devastating times, teaches us that though terrible things may happen, we can promote goodness and justice in the wake of the wreckage.

The Israeli writer David Grossman once wrote, "The battle lines today are drawn not between Israelis and Palestinians, but rather between those who are unwilling to come to terms with despair and those who wish to turn it into a way of life."[3] Later, eulogizing his son, Uri, who was killed in 2006 in Lebanon War, Grossman said:

> I learned from Uri . . . that we need to defend ourselves, but in two senses: to defend our bodies, and not to surrender our souls. Not to surrender to the temptations of force and simplistic thinking, to the corruption of cynicism. Not to surrender to boorishness and contempt for others, which are the really great curses of the person who lives his entire life in a disaster area like ours.[4]

Grossman's words are apt for Shofarot, which refuses to come to terms with despair. Its verses urge us to find the courage to be hopeful. Hope comes easily in simple times. But Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot remind us to be hopeful in the midst of real suffering and fear and to cultivate the strength we so desperately need to build a more just and compassionate world.

[1] For the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walked upon it." (Lam. 5:18)

[2] Based on BT Makkot 24b

[3] Grossman, *Death as a Way of Life: From Oslo to the Geneva Agreement* (New York: Picador, 2004), xi.

[4] Excerpted and adapted from the translation by Haim Weizman, printed in the *Washington Post*, Sunday, August 27, 2006.

The Voice You Can See:

Reflections on *Shofarot* and a Musical Pictogram in The JTS Collection

The Shofar Blasts (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 158, 162, 166)

RABBI MARCUS MORDECAI SCHWARTZ, Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections; Assistant Professor, Talmud and Rabbinics

Aside from the human voice, the shofar is the most ancient sound in Jewish ritual—and the most complex. It cries out across meanings: as alarm, as elegy, as anthem, as coronation. The same raw note that thundered at Sinai now trembles in the synagogue. It announces a sovereign. It proclaims a people. And it mourns. On Rosh Hashanah, we gather all those meanings into a single trembling call—and we let it speak.

In a 15th-century Spanish siddur preserved at The JTS Library (MS 4366), an anonymous scribe tried something extraordinary.

The folios for Rosh Hashanah include the blessings of shofarot—the final section of the Musaf Amidah, where we recall the shofar of Sinai, the shofar of judgment, the shofar of hope. But in this manuscript, the sounds aren't only named, they are pictured. A long, straight line marks the *tekiah*, the steady unbroken blast. Three short vertical strokes stand for *shevarim*, the broken sigh. A trembling wavy line marks *teruah*, the staccato cry.

These aren't musical notes—they're more elemental, a kind of sacred pictogram. The shofar's voice is turned into a graphic symbol—not to notate pitch or rhythm, but to make sound visible, to let the eye hear what the heart already knows.

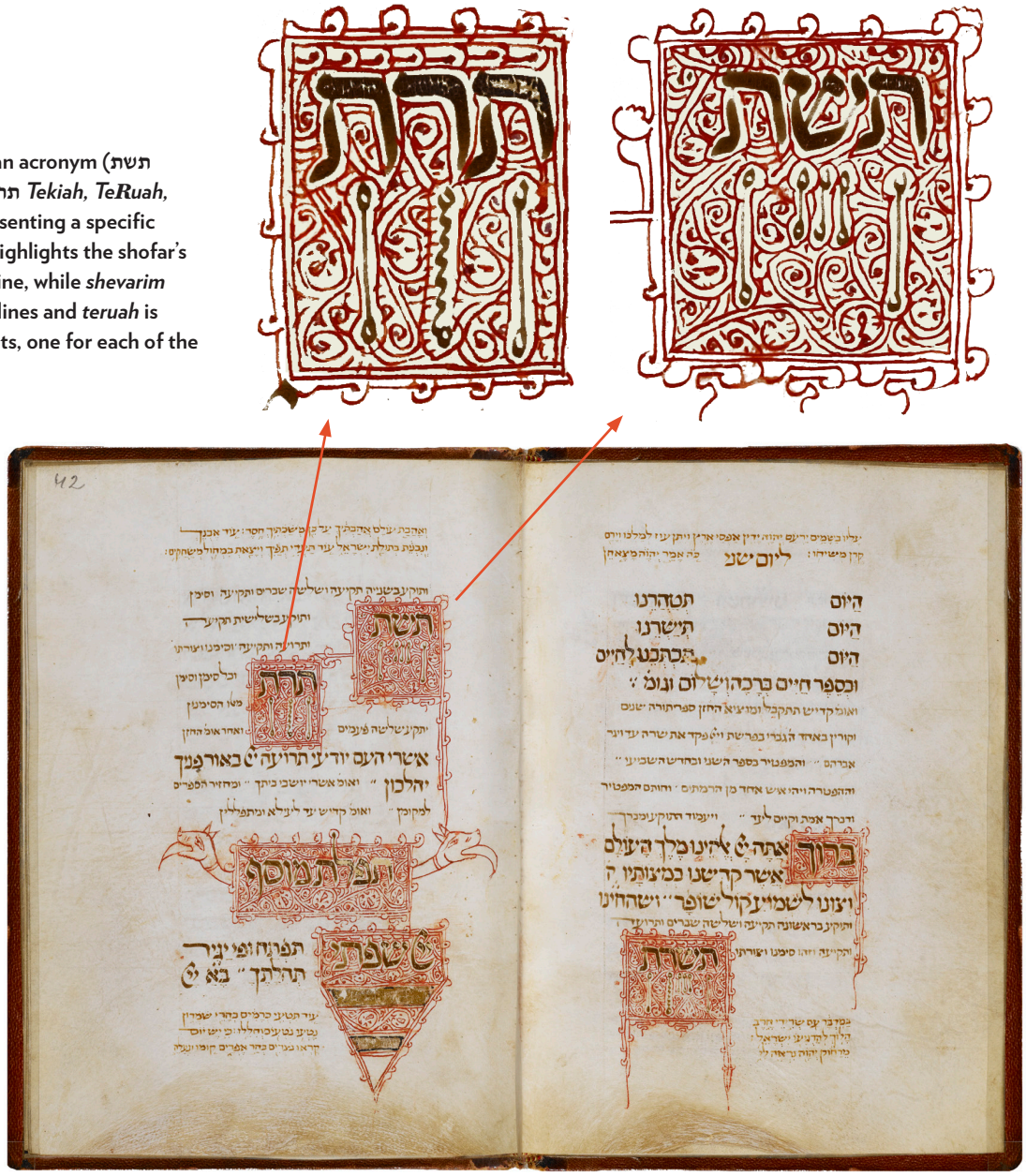
The 20th-century linguist Roman Jakobson wrote that certain sounds carry inherent meaning—that sound can evoke feeling before words ever begin. He also described the poetic function of language: when the shape of what's said becomes part of what it means. This manuscript lives at the intersection of those two ideas. The scribe doesn't just describe the shofar, he traces its voice. In black and red ink on parchment, he renders sound as symbol—thunder, groaning, glory.

And what are we meant to hear?

The answer is ancient. At Mount Sinai, the Torah tells us, "All the people saw the *kolot*" (Ex. 20:15). *Kolot*—thunder, voices, blasts. That paradox—sound made visible—is the secret of Revelation. The shofar echoes that thunder. It is not speech. It is not language. It is the voice beneath language—the sound of truth too vast to say. The voice you can see.

In the manuscript, that voice is simple and stark. Its straight lines and tremors tell us what kind of cry to make. But they also remind us of the cry we are already making. The cry of memory. The cry of longing. The cry of grief. The cry of return.

The shofar is a trumpet, but also a mourner. It crowns God, but it also weeps. It announces a world that could be, even as it grieves the world that is. In this manuscript, the voice of the shofar is made visible so that we do not forget how much is held in a single breath.



The letters in each box forms an acronym (תשת *Tekiah, Shevarim, Tekiah and* תרת *Tekiah, TeRuah, Tekiah*). Under the letter representing a specific sound is a small drawing that highlights the shofar's sound. The *tekiah* is one long line, while *shevarim* is indicated with three smaller lines and *teruah* is shown on one line with nine dots, one for each of the staccato blasts in this note.

[Tefilot le-Fesah, Shavu'ot, ta'aniyot, ye-Rosh ha-shanah ve-Yom kipur ke-minhag Sefarad] — The Schloss-London Siddur. JTS MS 4366. Spain?, 15th century. The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

When *Teshuvah* Feels Impossible

NOAM BLAUER, RS 2026

Are we really being set up for success for this whole *teshuvah* business? We might commit to doing all the preparation—journaling, going to shul, talking to therapists, chatting with rabbis, calling up hurt family and friends, New Year's resolutions, etc.—and it *still* feels inadequate. *Am I actually morally transformed?* I am some infinitesimally small fraction of a hypermodern, global, complex network. My actions bear consequences for people on the other side of the globe I will never meet and whose names I will never even know. I still need to bring *teshuvah* to bear on my most intimate relationships, but is this millennia-old process suitable to the messiness and uncertainty of modern moral life?

This seemingly modern plague of angst and cynicism is actually described in ancient Jewish texts, albeit in different terms. A halakhah in Tosefta Bava Kamma (10:14) reads:

> הגוזל את הרבים חייב להחזיר לרבים. חמור גזל הרבים מגזל היחיד, שהגוזל את היחיד יכול לפייסו ולהחזיר לו גזילו, הגוזל את הרבים אין יכול לפייסן ולהחזיר להן גזילן.
>
> One who steals from the masses is obligated to return [the object] to the masses. Stealing from the masses is more severe than stealing from just one individual, because one who steals from just one individual is able to appease that individual and return to him his stolen object. [In contrast,] one who steals from the masses is unable to appease them and to return to them their stolen objects.

This text addresses the severity of stealing from a broader community, which consists of many unknown people. Here are some contemporary examples: using an accessible parking space without a placard, holding onto a library book indefinitely, and riding the subway without paying the transit fare. These cases constitute theft from the masses in the broad sense—I don't know my victims and have no idea how to make proper amends.

But once we identify the essential quality of this wrongdoing against unknown—and unknowable—victims, we can find more frequent occurrences than these. For instance, active or tacit engagement in political causes that, I've realized upon reflection, have actually had adverse impacts on others. Consumption of products that were produced in unethical and harmful ways. Actions taken that led to needless environmental devastation, felt by communities thousands of miles away. In trying to fathom the sheer number of unknown victims of my actions, whether in my own neighborhood or anywhere in the world, I might be convinced that I am truly awful and unworthy of *teshuvah*, thereby succumbing to an intense moral nihilism about my impact and the broader world.

Another passage from the Tosefta (Bava Metzia 8:26) has something powerful to say about this kind of response:

הגבאין והמוכסין תשובתן קשה, ומחזירין למכירין, והשאר עושין בהן צרכי רבים.

> "Charity and tax collectors—their *teshuvah* is hard. They return [stolen objects] to the people whom they know, and as for all the rest, they put it toward public needs."

When this passage is cited in the Talmud (Bava Kamma 94b), Rashi makes clear that these are charity and tax collectors who defrauded the public and have no record of who they have wronged. The text affirms that their *teshuvah* is indeed hard. This simple wording from the Tosefta may be exactly the language we are looking for to describe our own situation: in modern society, *our teshuvah* is also hard. While not an endorsement of outright nihilism, there is a healthy acknowledgment of legitimate despair concerning living a righteous life in the face of moral complexity. Being in relationship with so many unknown people around the world is unfathomably hard; and despite our most serious efforts, *teshuvah* in that context is very hard, too.

I can positively and constructively engage in a moral act that will *help* people I don't know and will never meet.

Without dismissing or belittling this challenge, the Tosefta tempers this despair with a necessary measure of optimism. Even when *teshuvah* is hard, we must nonetheless return stolen items to the people whom we can identify as victims and give back broadly to public need. Rashi describes an example of the latter in which an individual helps build a cistern to provide fresh water to the community. While it may fall short of repaying the people I've specifically wronged, it enables me to engage in a kind of reparative mirror; I can positively and constructively engage in a moral act that will *help* people I don't know and will never meet. This is a far cry from the heroic righting of wrongs I nobly imagined when I first embarked on this process. But it is something I *can* do and a deeply positive action worth holding onto.

In the spirit of these texts, bring this nuanced mindset entering into this holiday season: pursue *teshuvah* for all your wrongdoing, *while* being honest about the inexhaustible nature of this work. Be kind to yourself when acknowledging the many constraints and limits that lead to some moral failures and make up for them—however imperfectly—through heartfelt gestures of communal involvement and civic action. In short, turn *teshuvah* into a sacred opportunity to humbly affirm all the inherent joy *and* pain of what it means to live as human.

Kol Nidre (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 204–205)

The Meaning of Kol Nidre:
Human Frailty, Inclusive Community, and the Gravity of Words

DR. SHIRA BILLET, Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and Ethics

The Kol Nidre service, with its solemn choreography and somber traditional melody,[1] ushers in Yom Kippur with a sobering reminder of the gravity of speech and the importance of honoring our words, setting the tone for a long day of fasting, repentance, and communal prayer.

The centerpiece of Kol Nidre is a confession to having errantly made vows we could not keep and a prospective annulment of vows we worry we might mistakenly make in those inevitable moments of weakness, rashness, and failure that are the fate of mortals. There is something powerful and also troubling about the possibility of escaping the trap of words wrongly uttered. Over a long history, Jews have been deeply invested in ensuring that this power be channeled for the good and never abused or misused. This complex legacy lends profound significance to Kol Nidre's place as the opening service on this holiest of days.

There is something powerful and also troubling about the possibility of escaping the trap of words wrongly uttered.

To appreciate the deeper meaning of Kol Nidre, we must take a holistic approach, understanding the annulment of vows in the context of the complete Kol Nidre service.[2]

For hundreds of years, the confession and annulment of vows in the Kol Nidre service has been prefaced by a poetic statement attributed to 13th-century Tosafist Rabbi Meir (Maharam) of Rothenburg, explicitly inviting sinners into the prayer community on its holiest day:

בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה, עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דַּעַת הַקָּהָל, אָנוּ מַתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֲבֵרָיְנִים׃

> By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of the court below; with the consent of the Omnipresent and with the consent of the congregation; we grant permission to pray together with transgressors.

[1] The sixteenth-century melody traditional amongst Ashkenazi Jews.

[2] I focus on the Ashkenazi liturgy, although this analysis has bearing on all traditional Kol Nidre liturgies, given the significant overlaps (alongside key differences).

With Maharam's poetic preface to Kol Nidre, the Yom Kippur liturgy opens with a vision of an inclusive Jewish community. In aiming to improve as individuals and as a community, in seeking God's forgiveness, in looking ahead to a better year, we include all Jews in the "we" of the community, including those whom we perceive as having made poor choices or gravely erred. The source of Maharam's poem is a Talmudic statement that boldly states that a fast day that does not include sinners is no fast day at all. The Jewish people are compared to the holy incense that cannot achieve its beautiful smell without the inclusion of some foul-smelling ingredients.[3] By extension, a Jewish prayer community cannot be complete or achieve its aims without including individuals understood, in some capacity, to be sinners or wrongdoers.

The centrality of inclusive community to the Kol Nidre service is further emphasized in what immediately follows.[4] Immediately after the eponymous "kol nidre" paragraph, a biblical verse (Num. 15:26) is loudly proclaimed six times—three times by the hazzan and three times collectively by the congregation:

וְנִסְלַח לְכָל עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלַגֵּר הַגָּר בְּתוֹכָם כִּי לְכָל הָעָם בִּשְׁגָגָה׃

> May the entire congregation of the people Israel be forgiven, including the stranger who dwells in their midst, for all have erred [unwittingly (*bishgagah*)].

So much of human wrongdoing—our own and that of others—emerges out of weakness or fear or even mistaken good intentions rather than a desire to do wrong for its own sake.

With the emphatic public proclamation of this verse, the prayer community declares that the atonement and forgiveness we seek on Yom Kippur includes the Jewish community—and our sinners—plus "the stranger."

Forgiveness and reconciliation have a wide scope. To achieve the aims on Yom Kippur—self-improvement, reconciliation with God, and the hope for a better year ahead for our community—we must see ourselves as part of a broader Jewish and human community to which our fate is intimately tied.

So prominently placed is this verse in our Yom Kippur liturgy that Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) repeatedly declared it to be the "motto" of the entire Yom Kippur liturgy. He focused particularly on the final four words of the verse, emphasizing the unwitting nature of sin and wrongdoing as the word *shegagah* came to be understood in rabbinic thought.[5]

So much of human wrongdoing—our own and that of others—emerges out of weakness or fear or even mistaken good intentions rather than a desire to do wrong for its own sake. This is true, as well, for promises and

[3] On the history of Kol Nidre, see JTS's own Prof. Israel Davidson, "Kol Nidre," *The American Jewish Year Book* vol. 25 (1924/5684), pp. 180-194.

[4] Talmud Bavli Keritot 6b.

[5] See, for example, Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 217, 223.

commitments we fail to uphold. This doesn't make it right, and we must indeed recognize these as mistakes, take responsibility for them, atone for them, and take real steps to avoid them in the future. Nevertheless, recognizing human frailty as a central part of the wrongs we have done and those done to us by others is a crucial step toward making forgiveness and reconciliation possible.

Rabbi Michael Friedländer (1833–1910), famed translator of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, identified three fundamental messages of the Kol Nidre service. We should:

> 1. ... *[A]lways be disposed to forgive those who, in the heat of strife, ... have offended us; 2. ... [B]e careful with regard to vows... ; 3. ... [R]eflect on human weakness, and consider that what we believe to be able to do to-day may prove impossible for us to-morrow. This reflection would... inspire us with humility*."[6]

On this Yom Kippur, let us experience the magic and power of Kol Nidre by recovering the deeper meaning of the full service: the prayer community that seeks forgiveness and repentance for a better future must be an inclusive human community, and all human communities are irrevocably implicated in human frailty and *shegagah*. At the same time, we should never lose sight of the complex history of Kol Nidre. Recognizing human frailty can never excuse us from the task of being ever more careful with our words, and never becoming flippant about the commitments we make. This recognition motivates us not to resort to complacency and excuse, but to work ever harder to ensure that our words and our actions always reflect who we are as individuals and as a community.

Recognizing human frailty can never excuse us from the task of being ever more careful with our words, and never becoming flippant about the commitments we make.

[6] M. Friedländer, *The Jewish Religion* (London: Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900), p. 408n1.

In the Plural: Communal Confession and Ethical Clarity

Ashamnu (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 235, 264, 348, 382, 421)

RABBI GORDON TUCKER, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement

At least since the time of King Josiah in the 7th century BCE, Pesah was the great national holiday, when you renewed your membership in the Jewish people by participating in the Paschal sacrifice. In fact, the Talmud (Pesahim 64b) teaches the following:

> Our Masters taught: Once King Agrippa wished to estimate the size of the Jewish population, so he directed the High Priest to see how many Paschal offerings were brought, and there were twice the number of those who left Egypt [i.e., 1.2 million], and there wasn't a single sacrifice that served fewer than 10 people [i.e., the population must have exceeded 12 million people].

The numbers are no doubt exaggerated, but what is clear is that if you wanted a sense of how many Jews there were, this was the moment that gave you the most accurate total.

You can sense it as people gather and are reassured that all is well, even as they notice and mourn the absence of those who are no longer present.

And yet, history somehow conspired to make Pesah into the private home holiday and the Days of Awe when the largest numbers of Jews come together. Indeed, with respect to renewing membership, it is precisely the time of year—in anticipation of Rosh Hashanah—that synagogues send their yearly dues bills.

There is, on the Days of Awe, a palpable need to be with others. You can sense it as people gather and are reassured that all is well, even as they notice and mourn the absence of those who are no longer present. You see it in the ways people express their seating preferences for the holidays. Whom they are surrounded by is significantly important to them.

Now the communal complexion of the Days of Awe is augmented by the collective plural used in the liturgy and especially in the confession in which we say Ashamnu ("*We* have sinned," not "*I* have sinned") and Al Het Shehatanu ("For the sin *we* have committed"). This is often cited with great support. There are two reasons for this:

1. We generally applaud the idea that each individual is taking responsibility for and to the community. This reminder that our individual failings are hardly the whole picture forces us to consider the ways in which we are complicit in larger systemic injustices. As Heschel memorably wrote, "In a free society, few are guilty, but all are responsible."

2. In his collection "On Repentance," Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik commented on the upbeat melody of Ashamnu, which seemed out of step with the penitential mood of the confession. He felt that the individual *as an individual* is not assured of forgiveness unless and until the heart is broken and true inner repentance is achieved. But for that same individual *as a member of the Jewish people,* the very act of communal confession—of being willing to identify with the Jewish people as a whole—assures one, at least on the communal level, of complete reconciliation with God. Identify with the eternal covenant with the Jewish people, and you are part of Israel's solidarity with its God.

As inspiring as this is, however, it is not entirely unproblematic, and I now raise two issues to consider and take to heart.

For all its healthy prompting of communal responsibility, there is a danger lurking in the plural voice of the confession, "We have sinned." Let me make the problem vivid: Did you know that *together*, Derek Jeter and I have 3,465 major league hits? That statement is unassailably true, but of course, the truth is that all the hits are *his*. Now, in the same way that hiding behind the plural can allow us to claim some credit for things we had no part in, it can also allow us to evade responsibility for those things we actually *do* have a part in. "*We've* sinned, *we're* guilty" allows us to say, "Yes, we have, but it's really the other guy's doing." We should be careful not to submerge our responsibilities in the plural.

For all its healthy prompting of communal responsibility, there is a danger lurking in the plural voice of the confession, "We have sinned."

And then there's the second issue we should not avoid. Soloveitchik's beautiful and inspiring idea is that we are part of an eternal covenant, because of which we can expect—and even demand—reconciliation and renewal with God. This is a form of what is known in Jewish thought as the "Davidic Covenant," the essential, unconditional commitment God made to David that no matter what he or any of his descendants might do, there would be temporary consequences but never an abrogation of the pact. Contrast this with the covenant at Sinai, of which we are reminded in the Torah reading just before the Days of Awe that violating it egregiously and repeatedly would bring with it an *end* to the relationship with God.

I love the upbeat nature of Yom Kippur and the major key of the Ashamnu as much as anyone, but we should

consider this: there is a covenant that sets explicit and honest conditions for its validity and continuation, and thus forces us to confront our failings and the expected consequences. And there is another that assures us—as Psalm 89 does—that if David and his descendants do not live by God's rules, they will suffer some punishment, but God's steadfast love for them will never be abandoned. Which of these is more civilizing? Which is more likely to produce ethical responsibility?

And now a final point and a real concern: Soloveitchik's beautiful assurance that connection with the Jewish people gives us participation in an unconditional relationship with God—was both inspiring and even necessary during the centuries when communal Israel had no real power of action. In those days, justice or injustice was largely done *to* it and not *by* it. But we are now in a time in which there is a Jewish state with vast power over others. There is thus cause for concern that the anxious soul-searching, confession, and need for repentance that we apply to the individual may not automatically be applied to the people and the nation.

These are some thoughts to accompany our confessions in the plural key.

If David and his descendants do not live by God's rules, they will suffer some punishment, but God's steadfast love for them will never be abandoned.

The Book of Jonah (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 367–371)

No Shade for Jonah: Engaging the Other in Challenging Times

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

I love that our biblical forebears are depicted not as superheroes but as flawed individuals whose jealousies, rivalries, powerplays, and desires are evident, even as we find admirable qualities to emulate. On Yom Kippur afternoon, we read an entire book of the Bible—Jonah—about a particularly flawed prophet.

Jonah is given an assignment by God to warn the gentile people of Nineveh of their impending devastation if they don't repent. Jonah actively refuses to accept this mission; he flees and boards a ship. When Jonah's presence on the boat leads God to whip up a storm that endangers not only Jonah but all the sailors on board, Jonah is sleeping in his cabin, seemingly avoiding accountability. To his credit, when Jonah realizes that his flight fueled God's wrath in the form of a raging sea, he implores the sailors to throw him overboard to end the storm and save their lives. He famously lands in the belly of a huge fish and prays for deliverance—as he was supposed to instruct the people of Nineveh to do. Only after enduring all of this, does he heed God's directive and warn the people of Nineveh. Lo and behold, they take his warning to heart. The people—and even their beasts—fast and cry out to God, leading God to renounce the impending punishment.

We generally assume that this dramatic example of forgiveness is the reason we read this story on Yom Kippur afternoon. We hope our repentance will merit God's complete forgiveness. But I think there is another reason why we read Jonah at this point in the process of repentance, for the story doesn't end there.

In chapter 4, a postscript to the repentance narrative, we learn that Jonah feels angry and upset by the success of his mission. He felt it vindicated his initial impulse of bolting, for, as he had expected, God's compassion overrode God's impulse to punish. Feeling betrayed, Jonah asks God to take his life. In response, God again tries to rouse Jonah from this self-pitying posture. Once Jonah finds a place east of the city where he can observe what was going on from a distance, God provides Jonah with a ricinus plant to "provide shade for his head and save him from discomfort" (4:6). The next morning, God creates a worm that causes the plant to wither and then brings an east wind. When the sun rises, it beats down on Jonah causing him to feel faint. Jonah again tells God he wants to die, but this time God offers a withering critique:

You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than

one hundred twenty thousand human beings who do not know between their right hand and their left and many beasts? (4:10–11)

God attempts to provide some perspective, to zoom out and help Jonah see beyond his personal suffering. As the poet Thomas John Carlisle expresses in "Coming Around":

> And Jonah stalked
> to his shaded seat
> and waited for God
> to come around
> to his way of thinking.
>
> And God is still waiting
> for a host of Jonahs
> in their comfortable houses
> to come around
> to His way of loving.

In times of personal suffering, it can be difficult to maintain an awareness of what others are going through.

As Carlisle notes, in helping Jonah see the expansiveness of God's love, God offers a new way of thinking, a new perspective on the vastness and depth of God's dominion and concern.

In times of personal suffering, it can be difficult to maintain an awareness of what others are going through. And in times of collective suffering and struggle—a time such as now, when the precipitous rise in antisemitism has exacerbated our sense of vulnerability—we, as a people, can struggle to remain open and connected too. Understandably, we feel a deeper affinity with those who may share our sense of upset, betrayal, and fear—people who share our values, culture, and beliefs. Many Jews are now feeling a need to turn to one another for support and validation even more acutely.

Yet, in the face of this, the story of Jonah reminds us that it is precisely in our most challenging moments that God invites us to move beyond our comfort zone and show compassion, concern, and understanding for others, just as God wished Jonah had done with the plant and with the people of Nineveh. Building bridges of understanding and caring in our global and interconnected world with members of other faiths, cultures, and political allegiances honors our recognition of God's love for all and of everyone's potential to achieve redemption. It also gives us new opportunities for finding common ground with those who are different from us, who can work alongside us toward a better future.

As Jews, we have experienced, throughout our history, many moments of uncertainty, fear, and suffering, but also many times when Jews and Judaism flourished because of the strong ties we built with those around us.

Just as Jonah found unlikely allies in the sailors who hoped to save him and in the fish that gave him respite and a fresh start, so, too, must we look for allies—even in unlikely places.

At the end of the book, Jonah doesn't respond to God's critique, but I like to imagine that he's mulling it over as he processes all that he's just been through. As we listen to this story being chanted near the end of the Days of Awe and our own period of contemplation and reckoning for our relational missteps, we can appreciate the importance of both internal reflection and engagement with others. This year, I pray that we be granted not only forgiveness for our shortcomings but also the fortitude to engage more generously with others to improve the lot of all of God's creatures.

As Jews, we have experienced, throughout our history, many moments of uncertainty, fear, and suffering, but also many times when Jews and Judaism flourished because of the strong ties we built with those around us.

To learn more from Chancellor Shuly Rubin Schwartz in our High Holiday webinar series, *Standing Together: Prayer, Presence, and the Power of Community*, visit www.jtsa.edu/event/no-shade-for-jonah

The Gates of Tears Are Never Locked

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A hallmark of the High Holiday liturgy is the recitation of liturgical poems (*piyyutim*). As a genre and spiritual practice, *piyyut* first appeared in the Land of Israel in late antiquity. Many of the earlier poems still embedded in the Ashkenazi prayer book date back to this time and place, while others were written in Europe in the Middle Ages. One of the most popular forms of *piyyut* is the *seliḥot*—penitential poems recited along with the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy listed in Exodus 34:6–7. Although a relatively late form of *piyyut*—one that originated not in the Land of Israel, but in Babylonia—*seliḥot* spread quickly to various regions of the Jewish diaspora, such that by the end of the first millennium, poets from around the world had authored dozens—if not hundreds—composing them for a wide array of occasions.

In contemporary liturgy, *seliḥot* are most familiar from the weeks leading up to the High Holidays and from the prayers of Yom Kippur. A *seliḥa* by Amitai ben Shefatia, who wrote in Italy around the turn of the 10th century, is found in many versions of the Ashkenazi prayers for Yom Kippur as part of the repetition of the Amidah during *Minḥah* or *Ne'ilah*. The *seliḥa* is short—it contains 16 lines in four stanzas, the first letter of each stanza combining to spell out the poet's four-lettered name. But despite being brief, it movingly ties together several key themes of the High Holiday season and its prayers:

> "I remember, God, and I grieve" (Ps. 77:4)
> as I see every city built on its hill;
> and the city of God is thrown down to the deepest hell,
> and yet we are for the Lord and our eyes turn to the Lord.
>
> The attribute of Compassion—flow down over us,
> and lay your plea before your Creator;
> ask compassion for your people,
> for every heart ails, every head is ill.
>
> I have pegged my tent with the Thirteen Words,
> and with the gates of tears that are never locked,
> and so I have poured out words to the Examiner of Hearts;
> I am secure in these and in the merit of the three fathers.

May it be Your will, the One who hears cries of weeping,
that You place our tears, to be in your flask,
and save us from all of the cruel decrees,
for our eyes are turned only to You.[1]

When recited toward the end of the Day of Atonement, this *seliḥa* is a last-ditch effort on the part of those who have prayed together over Elul and the High Holidays. In response to the utter despair described in the first stanza, the second stanza reaches out not to God, but to the attribute of Compassion itself. The author implores that *it* plea to God on behalf of the "pray-ers"—splitting divinity in a fashion that has proven scandalous for Jews over the centuries.[2] The climactic third stanza highlights three mechanisms that are guaranteed to work when all else fails: According to the Talmud, one who recites the Thirteen Attributes "will not return empty-handed" (b. Rosh Hashanah 17b), and even if the Gates of Prayers have closed, preventing prayers from reaching God in Heaven, the "gates of tears have not been closed" (b. Berakhot 32b). And lastly, at various points in rabbinic literature, recalling the forefathers is described can result in prayers being answered.[3] After reminding God—and those praying—that there is yet hope, the final stanza ends with a request that is comparatively simple: a direct appeal to God, asking Him to hear our prayers and to save us from the cruel decrees.

When recited toward the end of the Day of Atonement, this *seliḥa* is a last-ditch effort on the part of those who have prayed together over Elul and the High Holidays.

More precisely, Amitai ends not by asking that God hear our prayers, but by asking Him *to collect our tears*. At first glance, this can be read as just a metaphor for prayer. But Amitai specifically focuses on the eyes throughout the *seliḥa*: it is a vision that instigates the prayer, when the poet witnesses the dire physicality of Exile and states that nevertheless "our eyes turn to the Lord." Of the three mechanisms of mercy mentioned in the third stanza, the central one is that the "gates of *tears* . . . are never locked." It is thus fitting that the *seliḥa* ends with a prayer that God collect our tears, and then by again reminding Him that "our eyes are turned only to You."

Amitai focuses here on the embodied nature of prayer, as tears are the physical manifestations of our most exasperated prayers—the prayers that come with weeping, the prayers that come from seeing the sorry state of the world around us. But we can still rely on a certain belief in prayer's efficacy or perhaps even the continued evocativeness of poetry that has been recited by Jews for over a millennium. Amitai's insight to us is that we stay connected to the ground—we peg our tents—by finding some semblance of certainty wherever it may be.

[1] The translation here is based on that of R. Jonathan Sacks in the Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor.

[2] In several prayer books, this stanza is therefore modified slightly so as not to present a prayer directed to one of God's attributes.

[3] For more on this theme, see Solomon Schechter, "The *Zachuth* of the Fathers: Imputed Righteousness and Imputed Sin," in *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 170–98.

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