



Beyond the Sermon: What High Holiday Prayers Offer and Demand

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach is founding director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts. She brings her passion for prayer and teaching to the JTS community. Through her work as director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, she has developed and overseen programs and discussions, as well as prayer services on Shabbat and festivals, for the JTS community and the general public.

Rabbi Uhrbach loves being in the classroom at JTS, where she teaches courses on the meaning of liturgy and a course she created titled The Art of Leading Prayer. She is a religious mentor to many of JTS' rabbinical and cantorial students. She served as Interim Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership for the 2021-2022 school year.

In addition to her role at JTS, Rabbi Uhrbach serves as the founding rabbi of the Gesher | The Bridge Shul in Bridgehampton, Long Island, enabling her to mentor many of JTS's rabbinical and cantorial students in a congregational setting. She has played a key role in the acclaimed Lev Shalem prayer book series, as associate editor of Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat and Festivals, published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2016, and currently as associate editor of the forthcoming Siddur Lev Shalem for Weekdays. She also served on the editorial committee for Machzor Lev Shalem.

A distinguished teacher of Torah, she is also a member of the Wexner Heritage faculty, and has taught and served as scholar-in-residence in many synagogues.

Rabbi Uhrbach was ordained at JTS, where she was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. A graduate of Harvard Law School and Yale University, Rabbi Uhrbach served as Law Clerk to Federal District Judge Kimba M. Wood. She then joined the New York law firm of Satterlee Stephens Burke & Burke LLP, where she specialized in media litigation, becoming a partner of the firm in January 1996.

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REPETITION OF THE AMIDAH

Prayer

Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy.

—ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

God of Our Ancestors

As Jews on a religious quest, we recognize that we are, first of all, inheritors. Our spiritual vocabulary, our values, the lives that we lead are pathways built on markers laid down by those who came before us. Beginning on the roads that they surveyed, we are each able to proceed on our own religious journey. Surely, if we grow at all religiously, we will end up in a different place than they; but as we look back, we will always be reminded that it was possible for us to begin on our way because of the journey they undertook.

We rise as the ark is opened.

As I proclaim God's name, ADONAI, exalt our God.
ADONAI, open my lips that my mouth may speak Your praise.

First B'rakhah: Our Ancestors

Version with Patriarchs:

Barukh atah ADONAI,
our God and God of our
ancestors,
God of Abraham, God of
Isaac, and God of Jacob,
great, mighty, awe-inspiring,
transcendent God,
who acts with lovingkindness
and creates all things,
who remembers the loving
deeds of our ancestors,
and who will send a redeemer
to their children's children
with love
for the sake of divine honor.

Version with Patriarchs and Matriarchs:

Barukh atah ADONAI,
our God and God of our
ancestors,
God of Abraham, God of
Isaac, and God of Jacob,
God of Sarah, God of
Rebecca, God of Rachel,
and God of Leah,
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and creates all things,
who remembers the loving
deeds of our ancestors,
and who will send a redeemer
to their children's children
with love
for the sake of divine honor.

Inspired by the insight of sages
and the teachings of those who acquired wisdom,
I open my lips in prayer and supplication
to entreat the sovereign of all sovereigns,
the supreme ruler.

The ark is closed and we remain standing.

תפילת העמידה – חזרת הש"ץ

We rise as the ark is opened.

כי שם יהוה אקרא, הבו גִּדְל לאלהינו.
אדני שפתי תפתח, ופי יגיד תהלתך.

Version with Patriarchs and Matriarchs:

ברוך אתה יהוה,
אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו
[ואמותינו], אלהי אברהם,
אלהי יצחק, ואלהי יעקב,
אלהי שרה, ואלהי רבקה,
אלהי רחל, ואלהי לאה,
האל הגדול הגבור והנורא,
אל עליון, גומל חסדים
טובים, וקונה הכל, וזוכר
חסדי אבות [ואמהות],
ומביא גואל לבני בניהם
למען שמו באהבה.

Version with Patriarchs:

ברוך אתה יהוה,
אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו,
אלהי אברהם, אלהי
יצחק, ואלהי יעקב, האל
הגדול הגבור והנורא,
אל עליון, גומל חסדים
טובים, וקונה הכל, וזוכר
חסדי אבות, ומביא גואל
לבני בניהם למען שמו
באהבה.

משוד חכמים וגבונים,

ומלמד דעת מבינים,

אפתח פי בתפלה ובתחנונים,

לחלות ולחונן פני מלך מלכי המלכים

ואדוני האדונים.

The ark is closed and we remain standing.

GOD OF ABRAHAM . . . GOD OF SARAH ואלהי שרה . . . אלהי אברהם. The tradition of reciting the names of each of the patriarchs originates with God's own speech: at the burning bush, God begins addressing Moses by saying, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Some congregations add the names of the four matriarchs at the beginning of this *b'rakhah*, because of their significance as founders of our people, and as part of our effort to reclaim and honor women as role models of faith.

INSPIRED BY THE INSIGHT חכמים וגבונים. These lines serve to introduce *piyyutim*, poetic additions to the Amidah, that address the holy day's themes. The reference to "sages" and "those who acquired wisdom" is a relic of the era when adding *piyyutim* was a matter of controversy, which prompted this appeal to the authority of those sages who permitted them. This introduction proclaimed that the Amidah's *piyyutim* are faithful to tradition, in that they are saturated with biblical and midrashic quotations. Its words continue to have meaning as the leader's personal plea for inspiration to guide the congregation appropriately—a poignant reminder of the leader's responsibility as one who represents the congregation before God.

THE READER'S REPETITION OF THE AMIDAH. In the ancient and medieval synagogue, the silent Amidah was repeated aloud by the service leader since individual prayerbooks were virtually unknown through the first millennium. Even as manuscript copies became more available in the latter half of the Middle Ages, they were largely the possession of the wealthy, and most ordinary people still did not have access to one. The reader's repetition was especially important and became an occasion for poetic embellishments of the standard prayer. The Rosh Hashanah additions emphasize the themes of God's sovereignty and the judgment that is effected on this day. Interestingly, Maimonides (Egypt, 12th century) favored abolishing the silent Amidah and retaining only a reader's repetition, since he felt that the recitation of both was prompting too much chatter and disturbance during the repetition.

REPETITION OF THE AMIDAH

Prayer of the Heart

The Hasidic master Mendel of Rymanov used to say that during the time he prayed the Amidah, all the people who had ever asked him to pray to God on their behalf would pass through his mind. Someone once asked how that was possible, since there was surely not enough time. Rabbi Mendel replied: "The need of every single one leaves a trace in my heart. In the hour of prayer I open my heart and say: 'Master of the universe, read what is written here!'"

God of Our Ancestors

As Jews on a religious quest, we recognize that we are, first of all, inheritors. Our spiritual vocabulary, our values, the lives that we lead are pathways built on markers laid down by those who came before us. Beginning on the roads that they surveyed, we are each able to proceed on our own religious journey. Surely, if we grow at all religiously, we will end up in a different place than they; but as we look back, we will always be reminded that it was possible for us to begin on our way because of the journey they undertook.

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deeds of our ancestors,
and who will send a redeemer
to their children's children
with love
for the sake of divine honor.

Inspired by the insight of sages
and the teachings of those who acquired wisdom,
I open my lips in prayer and supplication
to entreat the Merciful Sovereign,
who forgives and pardons sin.

The ark is closed.

תפילת העמידה – חזרת הש"ץ

We rise as the ark is opened.

כי שם יהוה אקרא, הבו גִּדְל לאלהינו.
אֲדֹנֵי שִׁפְתֵי תִפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ.

Version with Patriarchs and Matriarchs:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה,
אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
[וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ], אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם,
אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק, וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב,
אֱלֹהֵי שָׂרָה, אֱלֹהֵי רִבְקָה,
אֱלֹהֵי רָחֵל, וְאֱלֹהֵי לֵאָה,
הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא,
אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן, גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים
טוֹבִים, וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל, זוֹכֵר
חֲסֵי אֲבוֹת, וּמְבִיא גּוֹאֵל
לְבָנֵי בְנֵיהֶם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ
בְּאַהֲבָה.

Version with Patriarchs:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה,
אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם, אֱלֹהֵי
יִצְחָק, וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב, הָאֵל
הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא,
אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן, גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים
טוֹבִים, וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל, זוֹכֵר
חֲסֵי אֲבוֹת, וּמְבִיא גּוֹאֵל
לְבָנֵי בְנֵיהֶם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ
בְּאַהֲבָה.

מִסּוֹד חֲכָמִים וְנְבוֹנִים,

וּמִלְמַד דַּעַת מְבִינִים,

אֶפְתָּחָה כִּי בְּתַפְלָה וּבְתַחֲנוּנִים,

לְחֻלּוֹת וּלְחֻצוֹן פָּנֵי מֶלֶךְ מְלֹא רַחֲמִים

מוֹחֵל וְסוֹלֵחַ לְעוֹנֵינוּ.

The ark is closed.

because of their significance as founders of our people, and as part of our effort to reclaim women's voices and to honor women as role models of faith.

INSPIRED BY THE INSIGHT חֲכָמִים. These lines serve to introduce *piyyutim*, poetic additions to the Amidah, that address the holy day's themes. The reference to "sages" and "those who acquired wisdom" is a relic of the era when adding *piyyutim* was a matter of controversy, which prompted this appeal to the authority of those sages who permitted them. This introduction proclaimed that the Amidah's *piyyutim* are faithful to tradition, in that they are saturated with biblical and midrashic quotations. Its words continue to have meaning as the leader's personal plea for inspiration to guide the congregation appropriately—a poignant reminder of the responsibility that the leader takes on in representing the congregation before God.

THE READER'S REPETITION OF THE AMIDAH. In the ancient and medieval synagogue, the silent Amidah was repeated aloud by the service leader since individual prayerbooks were virtually unknown through the first millennium. Even as manuscript copies became more available in the latter half of the Middle Ages, they were largely the possession of the wealthy, and most people still did not have access to their own. In that context, the reader's repetition was especially important and became the occasion for poetic embellishments of the standard prayer. Additions that are unique to Yom Kippur include the series of *S'lihot* (Forgiveness) prayers and *Viddui* (Confession) prayers.

GOD OF SARAH . . .
REBECCA . . . RACHEL
AND . . . LEAH, אֱלֹהֵי שָׂרָה,
אֱלֹהֵי רִבְקָה, אֱלֹהֵי רָחֵל,
וְאֱלֹהֵי לֵאָה. Some congregations add the names of the four matriarchs at the beginning of this *b'rakhah*

Day In, Day Out

Day in, day out
I swallow
the beauty of the world
this hungering beauty

My God
open windows within me
to let the world enter
calmly and peacefully
that more of the world
enter

the world that I love
cry over
and love again and again
—MIRIAM BARUCH HALPI

ASHREI

Joyous are they who dwell in Your house;
they shall praise You forever.

*Joyous the people who are so favored;
joyous the people whose God is ADONAI.*

PSALM 145

A PSALM OF DAVID.

I exalt You, my God, my sovereign;

I praise Your name, always.

Every day I praise You, glorifying Your name, always.

Great is ADONAI, greatly to be praised,
though God's greatness is unfathomable.

*One generation praises Your works to another,
telling of Your mighty deeds.*

I would speak of Your majestic glory
and of Your wondrous acts.

People speak of Your awe-inspiring deeds;

I, too, shall recount Your greatness.

They recount Your great goodness,
and sing of Your righteousness.

*ADONAI is merciful and compassionate,
patient, and abounding in love.*

ADONAI is good to all,
and God's mercy embraces all of creation.

*All of creation acknowledges You,
and the faithful bless You.*

They speak of the glory of Your sovereignty;
and tell of Your might,

*proclaiming to humanity Your mighty deeds,
and the glory of Your majestic sovereignty.*

Your sovereignty is eternal,

Your dominion endures through each generation.

*ADONAI supports all who falter,
and lifts up all who are bent down.*

The eyes of all look hopefully to You,
and You provide them nourishment in due time.

אֲשֶׁר יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ, עוֹד יְהַלְלוּךָ סֶלָה.
אֲשֶׁר הָעַם שִׁפְכָה לוֹ, אֲשֶׁר הָעַם שִׁיְהוּהוּ אֱלֹהָיו.
תְּהִלָּתְךָ לָעוֹד.

אֲרוֹמַמְךָ אֱלֹהֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְאֶבְרַכְךָ שִׁמְךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
בְּכָל־יוֹם אֶבְרַכְךָ, וְאֶהְלֵלָה שִׁמְךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
גָּדוֹל יְהוָה וְגִמְהָלָל מְאֹד, וְלִגְדֹלְתוֹ אֵין חֶקֶר.
דֹּר לְדֹר יִשְׁבַּח מַעֲשֶׂיךָ, וְגִבּוֹרֹתֶיךָ יִגְדֹּדוּ.
הָדָר כְּבוֹד הָאֱלֹהִים, וְדִבְרֵי נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ אֲשִׁיחָה.
וְעֹזוֹ נִוְרָאוֹתֶיךָ יֹאמְרוּ, וְגִדֹלְתְךָ אֲסַפְּרָנָה.
זָכַר רַב־טוֹבְךָ יִבְיַעַן, וְצִדִּיקְתֶּךָ יִרְנֶנּוּ.
חֲנוּן וְרַחוּם יְהוָה, אֶרְךָ אֲפִים וְגִדֹל־חֶסֶד.
טוֹב־יְהוָה לְכָל, וְרַחֲמָיו עַל־כָּל־מַעֲשָׂיו.
יִדְוֹךְ יְהוָה כָּל־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ, וְחֲסִידֶיךָ יִבְרַכְּכָה.
כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתְךָ יֹאמְרוּ, וְגִבּוֹרֹתֶךָ יִדְבְּרוּ.
לְהוֹדִיעַ לְבָנֵי הָאָדָם גִּבּוֹרֹתֶיךָ, וְכְבוֹד הָדָר מַלְכוּתוֹ.
מַלְכוּתְךָ מַלְכוּת כָּל־עוֹלָמִים, וּמִמְשַׁלְתְּךָ בְּכָל־דֹּדֶר וְדָר.
סוֹמֵךְ יְהוָה לְכָל־הַנִּפְלָאִים, וְזוֹקֵף לְכָל־הַכְּפוּפִים.
עֵינֵי־כָל אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁבְּרוּ, וְאַתָּה נֹתֵן לָהֶם אֶת־אֲכָלָם בָּעֵתוֹ.

PSALM 145. This psalm, which was treasured by the Rabbis, is recited thrice daily. It was in liturgical use during the Second Temple period, as attested by the Dead Sea Scrolls, where it appears with a congregational response attached to each verse: "Blessed is Adonai and blessed is God's name."

Psalm 145 begins and ends with personal verses of praise. In the middle verses, the author affirms God's sovereignty, and then immediately connects that affirmation to God's love and compassion.

For synagogue use, Psalm 145:8 was appended to the end, referring to those who are praying in the synagogue. Two additional verses (Psalms 84:5 and 145:15), both of which begin with the word אֲשֶׁרִי (ashrei, "joyous"), were added to the opening, apparently in imitation of the Book of Psalms itself,

which begins with that word. Originally, P'sukei D'Zimra, the preparatory morning psalms, began here and consisted simply of Ashrei followed by the last five psalms in the Book of Psalms.

Ashrei is an alphabetical acrostic and thus easy to remember, which may help to explain its popularity in Jewish liturgy. Many readers relate to individual verses more than to the literary flow of the whole poem.

MY GOD, MY SOVEREIGN הָאֱלֹהִי הַמֶּלֶךְ. The psalmist addresses God directly, not in the third person, establishing a feeling of closeness. On the other hand, the psalmist speaks to God as הָאֱלֹהִי (ha-melek), "my sovereign." This tension is one that classical Jewish thinkers constantly seek to maintain.

ADONAI IS MERCIFUL AND COMPASSIONATE יְהוָה רַחוּם וְרַחוּם. Confirmed by the proclamation of God's attributes to Moses: "A God compassionate and merciful" (Exodus 34:6). This psalm paints a picture of a loving God, who cares for all creatures.

ADONAI SUPPORTS ALL WHO FALTER לְכָל־הַנִּפְלָאִים. This verse marks a turning point in the psalm. Until now, the poet has praised God's greatness and splendor; now, the focus shifts to God's concern for those in need. Here, God's sovereignty is primarily manifest in love and care.

The Bible describes the experience of God's presence in two different ways. At Sinai the experience is earth-shattering, filled with the sounds and sights of thunder and lightning; but the prophet Elijah returns to Sinai and only hears "the thin silent sound" of God's presence. Denise Levertov's poem suggests that latter sense.

§ The Thread

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,
pulling at me—a thread
or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as
elastic. I haven't tried
the strength of it. No
barbed hook
pierced and tore me. Was it
not long ago this thread
began to draw me? Or
way back? Was I
born with its knot
about my
neck, a bridle? Not fear
but a stirring
of wonder makes me
catch my breath when I feel
the tug of it when I thought
it had loosened itself
and gone.

—DENISE LEVERTOV

Meditations on Malkhuyot

The ark is opened.

The Sovereign on High,
God, who dwells in the heights,
and is wondrous in the heavens,
will display the power of the Divine, and
will rule forever and ever. *La-adei ad yimlokh melekh elyon*

The Sovereign on High
speaks with righteousness,
is clothed in justice,
listens to those who cry out and
will rule forever and ever. *La-adei ad yimlokh melekh elyon*

The Sovereign on High
who is good,
whose goodness is everlasting,
and who fashioned the infinite heavens
will rule forever and ever. *La-adei ad yimlokh melekh elyon*

The Sovereign on High,
the eternal Sovereign,
perceives all that is hidden,
gives speech to the mute, and
will rule forever and ever. *La-adei ad yimlokh melekh elyon*

The Sovereign on High
never sleeps,
is surrounded by tranquility,
holds out a treasured reward for the righteous, and
will rule forever and ever. *La-adei ad yimlokh*
The ark is closed.

*The impoverished earthly sovereign
is chased by exhaustion,
falls into a deep sleep,
and is enveloped in chaos.*

How long can that rule last? *Ad matai yimlokh*

The ark is opened.

But—the Sovereign on High
whose power is eternal,
who is glorious forever,
and who is justly praised forever,
will rule forever and ever. *La-adei ad yimlokh*

The ark is closed.

Meditations on Malkhuyot

The ark is opened.

מֶלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן
אֵל דָּר בְּמָרוֹם, אֲדִיר בְּמָרוֹם, אֲמָץ יְדוֹ תְרוֹם,
לְעַדִּי עַד יִמְלֹךְ

מֶלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן
הַמְדַּבֵּר בְּצִדְקָה, הַלּוֹבֵשׁ צִדְקָה, הַמְאֲזִין צָעָקָה,
לְעַדִּי עַד יִמְלֹךְ

מֶלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן
טוֹב שׁוֹכֵן עַד, טוֹבוֹ לְעַד, טֶפֶח שְׁמִי עַד,
לְעַדִּי עַד יִמְלֹךְ

מֶלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן
מֶלֶךְ עוֹלָמִים, מְפַעֲנָה נַעֲלָמִים, מְשִׁיחַ אֲלָמִים,
לְעַדִּי עַד יִמְלֹךְ

מֶלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן
שָׁנָה אֵין לְפָנָיו, שִׁקֵּט בְּפָנֵינוּ, שֶׁבַח טוֹב בְּמַצְפוֹנוּ,
לְעַדִּי עַד יִמְלֹךְ

The ark is closed.

מֶלֶךְ אֲבִיוֹן
תְּנוּמָה תְּעוּפָנָה, תְּרִדָּמָה תְּעוּפָפָנָה, תְּהוּ יְשׁוּפָנָה,
עַד מָתִי יִמְלֹךְ

The ark is opened.

אֲבֵל מֶלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן
תִּקְפוּ לְעַד, תִּפְאֲרֹתוֹ עַדִּי עַד, תְּהִלָּתוֹ עוֹמֶדֶת לְעַד,
לְעַדִּי עַד יִמְלֹךְ.

The ark is closed.

THE SOVEREIGN ON HIGH קֵלֶךְ עֵלְיוֹן. In the Middle Ages, Jews were under the sway of kings and nobles. The fickle rule of these sovereigns often had terrible consequences for the Jewish communities beholden to them. This *piyyut*, which describes the ideals of divine rule and contrasts them with the corruption of human sovereignty, had, in its context, a subversive quality. In its original form, each stanza describing God's attributes alternated with a stanza describing the failure of human royalty. The *piyyut* was shortened later—probably for reasons of time—and almost all of the stanzas describing earthly rule were removed. While human kings might proclaim that their rule was justified by divine right, Jews, praying in the synagogue, declared that only God's rule had true legitimacy. They thus understood the central meaning of the Malkhuyot portion of the Musaf service to be the acknowledgment that no earthly person or object can lay claim to absolute authority. As we meditate on this section of the service, we, too, might contemplate which values have ultimate claim on our lives.

5 A Meditation on Kol Nidrei

All the vows on our lips,
the burdens in our hearts,
the pent-up regrets about
which we brooded and spoke
through prayers without end
on last Atonement Day
did not change our way of
life,
did not bring deliverance
in the year that has gone.
From mountain peaks of
fervor
we fell to common ways
at the close of the fast.
Will You hear our regret?
Will You open our prison,
release us from shackles of
habit?
Will You accept our prayers,
forgive our wrongs,
though we sin again and
again?
In moments of weakness
we do not remember
promises of Atonement Day.
Recall that we easily forget;
take only our heart's intent.
Forgive us, pardon us.

—ZE'EV FALK
(trans. Stanley Schechter)

Kol Nidrei

I am grateful for this,
a moment of truth,
grateful to stand before You
in judgment.

You know me as a liar
and I am flooded with relief
to have my darkest self
exposed at last.

Every day I break my vows—
to be the dutiful child,
selfless parent, caring friend,
responsible citizen of the
world.

No one sees, no one knows,
how often I take the easy way,
I let myself off the hook,
give myself the benefit of
the doubt—
every day, every day.

On this day, this one day,
I stand before You naked,
without disguise, without
embellishment, naked,
shivering, ridiculous.

I implore You—
let me try again.

—MERLE FELD

Taking out the Torah Scrolls

We rise as the ark is opened.

A meditation while the Torah scrolls are taken out of the ark:

Who can understand the source of our errors?

Cleanse me of secret faults, and restrain Your servant
from willful sins; may they not control me.

Then shall I be innocent of wrongdoing, wholly clear
of transgression.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of
my heart be acceptable to You, ADONAI, my rock
and my redeemer.

*In some congregations, a procession carrying the Torah scrolls marches
around the synagogue while we recite repeatedly as needed:*

Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for those whose
hearts are true.

Or zaru-a la-tzaddik u-l'yishrei lev simḥah.

THE EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY COURTS

This affirmation is traditionally recited three times:

By the authority of the court on high and by the
authority of this court below, with divine consent
and with the consent of this congregation, we grant
permission to pray with those who have transgressed.

*Bi-shivah shel malah u-vi-shivah shel mattah,
al da-at ha-makom v'al da-at ha-kahal,
anu mattirin l'hitpalleil im ha-avaryanim.*

הוצאת התורה לכל-נדררי

We rise as the ark is opened.

A meditation while the Torah scrolls are taken out of the ark:

שְׂגִיאוֹת מִיָּבִין מִמִּסְתָּרוֹת נִקְנִי.

גַּם מִזְדִּים חֹשֶׁךְ עֵבֶרְךָ

אֶל-יְמִשְׁלִיבִי

אֲזֵ אֵיתָם

וְנִקְיִתִי מִפֶּשַׁע רָב.

יְהִי לְרָצוֹן אִמְרֵי-פִי

וְהִגִּיוֹן לִפִּי לִפְנֶיךָ

יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי.

*In some congregations, a procession carrying the Torah scrolls marches around
the synagogue while we recite repeatedly as needed:*

אֹר זָרַע לְצַדִּיק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂמֵחָה.

This affirmation is traditionally recited three times:

בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה,

עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דַּעַת הַקָּהָל,

אֲנִי מַתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֹבְרִינִים.

Kol Nidrei are obscure, during the late Middle Ages it took on special meaning. Conversos, Spanish and Portugese Jews who had kept their religious identity secret, wanted to rejoin their communities on Yom Kippur. The formula "By authority of the court" assured them that they had permission both from heaven above and from the community here on earth to pray with their fellow Jews. This affirmation can welcome all of us who feel burdened by guilt and the sense of being unworthy to join with our community. The Talmud says that, on a fast day, no prayer will be accepted unless sinners join in.

THE MELODY. The opening melodic phrase of Kol Nidrei—at least 1300 years old—bears a remarkable similarity to the French-Sephardic and Iraqi (Babylonian) chant for the beginning of Genesis, בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים. We know that some Babylonian Jews migrated to Spain, and their manner of singing the liturgy spread from there to southern France, and then eastward. While the early Babylonian chant of the Torah was not preserved in Europe, the use of this melody for Kol Nidrei preserves this ancient melody. The contrast between the pleading melody of the traditional Kol Nidrei and the somber legalism of the words points to a larger confrontation we encounter tonight: the sadness of recognizing our own imperfection and finitude, and the gap between what is required of us and our achievements.

הוצאת התורה. A Jewish court is composed of three judges, tonight represented by the *sh'ilah tzibbur* (prayer leader) and two communal leaders. At least two Torah scrolls are taken from the ark and held next to the leader to constitute the court, perhaps signifying that the heavenly court witnesses our liturgical affirmation of Kol Nidrei.

WHO CAN UNDERSTAND שְׂגִיאוֹת מִיָּבִין. Psalm 19:13–15.

LIGHT IS SOWN אֹר זָרַע. Psalm 97:1.

WE GRANT PERMISSION TO PRAY WITH THOSE WHO HAVE TRANSGRESSED אֲנִי מַתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֹבְרִינִים. Yom Kippur begins with the affirmation that whatever our faults and doubts on this night, everyone is welcome in the synagogue. While the origins of this preface to

S'LIHOT: PRAYERS OF FORGIVENESS

S'liḥah

I expect nothing in return
—I love tranquility.
Even windswept chaff of
quarrels
will weigh upon me
like a heavy oil press's
plank.

But I'm open to everyone
and I can admit that I've
erred
and by way of truth's light
I rejoice in it.

I want to receive the
truth from everyone—
and it is not my nature to
hold on, but to listen.
After all, what is a
human being but a
misjudgment.

—THE HAZON ISH
(trans. Aubrey Glazer)

Some congregations omit S'lihot in Shaḥarit and turn to Sh'ma Koleinu, p. 262.

Our God and God of our ancestors:

If we have erred, do not send us away;

if we have made mistakes, do not abandon us.

If we have distanced ourselves, come close;

if we dare come close, do not be distant.

If we cry out, do not shut Your ears;

if we have trespassed, do not punish us.

If we have transgressed, do not hide Yourself;

if we have strayed, do not turn away from us.

If we have been vengeful, do not bear a grudge;

if we have rebelled, do not deem us traitors.

If we have been insolent, do not battle us;

if we have been quarrelsome, do not wipe us out.

If we have sunk to the depths, do not cause us to drown;

if we have fallen short, do not sweep us aside.

If we have done harm, do not harm us;

if we have acted with malice, do not recall it.

If we have been combative, do not upbraid us;

if we have done evil, do not cast us to the wind.

If we call upon You, do not push us aside;

if we are impure, do not abhor us.

If we approach You, do not disdain us;

if we have sinned, do not do away with us.

סליחות

Some congregations omit S'lihot in Shaḥarit and turn to Sh'ma Koleinu, p. 262.

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ [וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ]

אִם תַּעֲשֵׂנוּ לֹא תִתְּעֶנּוּ,

אִם שָׁגַגְנוּ לֹא תִשְׁלָנוּ.

אִם רָחֲקָנוּ קָרֵב נָא,

אִם קָרַבְנוּ לֹא תִרְחָק.

אִם צָעֲקָנוּ לֹא תִעָלִים,

אִם פָּשַׁעְנוּ לֹא תִפְרַע.

אִם עֲוִינוּ לֹא תִסְתִּיר,

אִם סָרְנוּ לֹא תִסּוּר.

אִם נִקְמְנוּ לֹא תִטֹּר,

אִם מְרִינוּ לֹא כִמְרִינוּ.

אִם לָצָנוּ לֹא תִלְחֹם,

אִם פָּחַשְׁנוּ לֹא תִכְלֶה.

אִם יִרְדְּנוּ לֹא תִטְבִּיעַ,

אִם טָעִינוּ לֹא תִטְאֲטֹאנוּ.

אִם חָבַלְנוּ לֹא תִחְבּוֹל,

אִם זָדְנוּ לֹא תִזְכּוֹר.

אִם וּפָחַדְנוּ לֹא תִוְכִיחַ,

אִם הִרְשָׁעְנוּ לֹא תִהַדּוֹף.

אִם דָּפְקָנוּ לֹא תִדְחֶה,

אִם גָּעַלְנוּ לֹא תִגְעַל.

אִם בָּאָנוּ לֹא תִמָּאֵס,

אִם אָשָׁמְנוּ לֹא תִאָּבֵד.

IF WE HAVE ERRED אִם תַּעֲשֵׂנוּ. The form of this poem—with its repetitions, meter, and reverse alphabetical acrostic—gives this piyyut a decisive energy. So does the use of the stronger Hebrew expression לֹא lo ("do not") instead of the more natural אֵל al (which would indicate a request, "please do not . . ."). The poem contains central themes of the S'liḥah: though we have sinned, God's mercy will overcome God's harsh judgment. The last line incorporates the word אָשָׁמְנוּ (ashamnu), "we have sinned," which is the first word of the confession we are about to recite.