



Fear and Wonder

*Exploring Uncertainty,
Hope, and Renewal for the
Days of Awe 5787*



The JTS High Holiday Reader is made possible with support from Shelly and Larry Gross, in loving memory of their parents Lillian and Louis Konheim (z”l) and Joseph Gross (z”l).

On the cover:

A liturgical poem for Rosh Hashanah from the Bamberg *Mahzor*, completed in Bamberg, Germany, in 1279. See page 12.

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Introduction

RABBI MIKE URAM, Chancellor, JTS

I am pleased to share with you *Fear and Wonder: Reflections on Uncertainty, Hope, and Renewal* for the Days of Awe 5787.

This year's essays—written by JTS faculty, leadership, and students—engage with the current moment we are living in: a time marked by fear and uncertainty, from rising antisemitism and the ongoing war in Israel to the profound questions raised by artificial intelligence. Drawing on our collective past and shared memories, personal stories, timeless Jewish texts, and the liturgy of the High Holidays, our contributors wrestle with these challenges and offer insight for navigating the present moment. They call upon us to transform what could be Days of Fear into Days of Awe, reminding us that *teshuvah* is always possible and that new beginnings and repair are always within reach.

I am deeply grateful to all of the contributors who bring their wisdom, creativity, vulnerability, and distinct voices to this collection. The variety of forms represented here—from scholarly reflection and personal essays to poetry, music, and images drawn from The JTS Library—reflects the extraordinary breadth and vitality of the JTS community. Together, these voices invite us to encounter the Days of Awe with renewed purpose: to sharpen our sense of what truly matters, and to connect more deeply—and more joyfully—to these sacred days and to one another in community.

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 *Fear and Wonder* accompany you through the Days of Awe, offering moments of reflection, connection, and inspiration—and may it help us all move from uncertainty toward hope and renewal in the year ahead.

Shanah Tovah,



Rabbi Mike Uram, Chancellor, JTS



Healing and *Teshuvah*

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

The Talmud in Masekhet Yoma 86a makes an extraordinary statement:

אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא: גדולה תשובה שמביאה רפאות לעולם, שנאמר: "אֶרְפָּא מְשׁוּבֹתֵם אוֹהֲבִים בְּדָבָר."
 Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: Great is *teshuvah*, as it brings healing to the world, as it is stated: "I will heal their backsliding. I will love them freely." (Hosea 14:5)



While possibly an example of rabbinic hyperbole intended simply to emphasize the significance of *teshuvah*, nevertheless the connection of *teshuvah* (the central spiritual task of the High Holy Days) with *refuah* (healing) is intriguing and inviting of inquiry.

For one thing, what kind of healing is being referred to? Perhaps it is spiritual healing only, and specifically the costly residue of sin. But the text itself neither defines nor limits healing, and the reference seems quite broad. Commentators have understood it to encompass healing of bodily illness or injury, as well as emotional or spiritual woundedness and, indeed, suffering or brokenness of all kinds: whether personal or societal, in the world as we know it, and in mystical realms regarding which we may only sense an inkling.

If so, what exactly is the connection that the Talmud is making here between the spiritual work of *teshuvah* and such a broad understanding of healing?

The Rabbis may be imagining healing as a Divine reward for the spiritual work of *teshuvah*. Personally, that's not a theology I can accept, and it doesn't ring true to experience. I do not believe that illness or suffering is a punishment for wrongdoing, and I do not believe that health or healing is a reward for goodness.

Alternatively, the Rabbis may be suggesting a direct causal connection: healing comes simply as a consequence of improved character and behavior arising out of *teshuvah*. Certainly we can identify circumstances in which this seems true. There are clear and direct causal links between many of the world's woes and human evil or overreach. If we turned from evil and began doing good, many of those woes would resolve, society would function better, and much pain and suffering would be healed. On a personal level, too, this makes sense. Our *teshuvah* may involve changing ways of living that have been harming our bodies. And holding onto guilt, shame, anger, or regret may sometimes manifest in emotional stress and disease and physical symptoms. As we do *teshuvah*, we may experience healing as a result. But it's equally clear that not everything would be healed, because not all pain and suffering—collective or individual, physical or emotional—are directly caused by human behavior in this way.

So I want to suggest that the Rabbis may be suggesting a more intimate connection between *teshuvah* and *refuah*: not that healing comes as a result of *teshuvah*, but that *teshuvah* is itself a healing, and *teshuvah* and *refuah* describe significantly overlapping processes or experiences involving the whole person.

This reading, I believe, opens a more generative and profound understanding of the nature of both *teshuvah* and *refuah*.

There are many translations and connotations of the word *teshuvah*. Translated as “repentance” or “penitence,” it may conjure something judgmental and punitive: We have sinned, and we must repent, making amends concretely, verbally, and relationally. We must pay the price of error, failure, and wrongdoing.

The *teshuvah* the Rabbis envisioned as healing certainly includes taking responsibility for harm we’ve caused. But more than that, it is, by definition, the process that responds to the injurious experience of lost or compromised integrity—not only from specific wrongful actions, but the larger ways in which we are not living in accordance with our deepest held values or perhaps not even aware of them. It involves shedding ways of being or self-images that have never been truly who we are and reclaiming aspects of the self we have lost touch with or banished. This is less about self-flagellating recounting of sin and more about relocating inner truth, inviting us into gentler, more forward-looking understandings of *teshuvah*. Instead of “repentance,” *teshuvah* may refer to an “answer” or “response” (as to respond to a sense of call or mission, something God or the moment demands of us), or to a process of turning or returning (changing our ways and our direction, turning away from one path toward a new one).

Similarly, envisioning *refuah* as intertwined with this work of *teshuvah* moves us to expand our conception of what healing might entail and especially to distinguish healing from cure. The spiritual work of *teshuvah* may or may not have the power to change the concrete life challenges we face, whether it be a devastating illness, heartbreaking loss, or shocking violation of our values or trust. But *teshuvah* always has the potential to change the meaning we make of those challenges; it can alter our suffering, if not our circumstances. The recently published *Siddur Lev Shalem for Weekdays* includes the following note by John Clayton next to our daily prayer for healing:

The spiritual work of *teshuvah* may or may not have the power to change the concrete life challenges we face . . . but *teshuvah* always has the potential to change the meaning we make of those challenges.

What does it mean to speak of healing? Simply to ask the question, to struggle with the question, is to step beyond the curing of disease or undoing of incapacity. Suppose the self that prays simply for healing of flesh finds something different, more important: an opportunity for deepening. A wholeness. May it be so with me. Open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise.

The same can be said of *teshuvah*—stepping beyond atonement for specific sins and asking and receiving forgiveness, the self that engages in *teshuvah* may also find something different and more important: that very same opportunity for deepening. A wholeness.

This is so because both *teshuvah* and *refuah* demand an honest reckoning with what is true—by their very nature they demand that we abandon fantasies of human invulnerability, immortality, immutability, or

perfection. They move us toward a wholeness that does not need to deny failure, deterioration, loss, pain, and even sin, but which instead allows all of us to be the full human beings we are.

In this sense, both *teshuvah* and *refuah* partake of a certain paradox: both are processes of returning not back but forward—not to who we used to be, but to an integral, truer, and more whole self we have always and never yet been.

In times of illness, loss, or brokenness, it's only natural to wish for a restoration of what was, a return to who we once were, or to the life or world we once knew. But, except in the most trivial situations (like the common cold), that return is impossible, and from a spiritual perspective, it is undesirable.

Healing changes us. So does *teshuvah*. Learning to live with serious illness or significant loss, confronting our own inadequacies, failures, and wrongdoing, we will likely encounter previously unknown depths of our vulnerability, as well as our strength and resilience. We may attain new clarity about what matters to us—prioritizing certain values whose significance we previously underrated and freeing ourselves of pressures and stresses once seemingly important but now revealed to be trivial.

Often, our capacity for compassion and connection grows wider and deeper. Inevitably, we emerge with an altered sense of self. This is not to say there aren't losses to be grieved—there are, including the loss of who we used to be. But in both *teshuvah* and *refuah*, we're likely to discover that the self we have become is truer and more whole than the one we used to be. The Talmud (Berakhot 34b) famously quotes Rabbi Abbahu:

דָּאָמַר רַבִּי אֲבָהוּ: מְקוֹם שֶׁבָּעָלִי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין - צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין

“In the place where those who engage in *teshuvah* stand, even the fully righteous do not stand.”

Great is *teshuvah*, as it brings healing to the *world*. *Teshuvah* and *refuah* on the personal level are microcosms of what can happen societally and globally. There is no going back to what was—for a people, a country, or humanity—ever. But if a critical mass of humans have the courage to do the deep work of *teshuvah*, we can be healed forward into a societal vision that is more whole, more conducive to the flourishing of all of us, and truer to the fullness of the human condition.

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Fear, Trauma, and the High Holidays: Reading Ancient Texts with Compassion

RABBI NAOMI KALISH, Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education; Assistant Professor of Pastoral Education



Amid gatherings with family and friends, festive meals, blessings for a good year, and expressions of gratitude, the Days of Awe are often accompanied by unsettling feelings. Our liturgy and customs encourage us to reflect on the year that has passed and imagine what may come in our future. Over the centuries, the haunting prayer of *Unetaneh Tokef* has prompted us to wonder who will die in the year ahead and who will live. We pray to be written and sealed in the Book of Life for the year to come, but the uncertainty of what this means and how it happens can leave some people feeling agitated. In addition to the personal difficulties we may be experiencing and reflecting upon, our feeling of being ill at ease may be intensified by the rise in antisemitism and hate speech and crimes in general.

The story of the Akedah, traditionally read on Rosh Hashanah, is one of our tradition's most powerful and troubling stories of fear, threat, and survival. We often read it as the story of Abraham's test: Will he obey God's command to sacrifice his beloved son? But what happens when we shift our focus from Abraham to Isaac, the child at the center of the story? Through Isaac's eyes, the Akedah becomes not only a story about faith and obedience, but a story about responding to threat, managing fear, and finding the will to survive and heal.

While the text is rich in its description of Abraham agreeing to God's command and preparing to sacrifice his son, little attention is given to Isaac who is portrayed as passive and silent. After three days of quiet traveling, in a startling moment and disruption to the narrative, Isaac breaks the silence and speaks directly to Abraham: "Then Isaac said to Abraham his father: he said, 'Father?' and he [Abraham] said, 'I am here, my son'" (Gen. 22:7).

Some commentaries imagine that Isaac understood Abraham's intention to sacrifice him and specifically called to him as father to prompt him to show the mercy he imagined a father would have for a child (Keli Yakar, Gen. 22:7). Charlie Buchholtz and Tova Hartman describe the tension between Abraham and Isaac at this moment as one between a "spiritual-sacrificial ethic" and an "ethic of love, memory, and relationship" (*Are You Not a Man of God?: Devotion, Betrayal, and Social Criticism in Jewish Tradition*, Tova Hartman and Charlie Buckholtz).

In Isaac's next utterance, he challenges his father: "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" Abraham responds, "It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together. Abraham has evaded the question. The two walk off together, but, we

may wonder, are they together? Is Isaac's silence one of comfort, reassurance, resignation, or terror?

Isaac remains silent for the rest of the story of the Akedah. The sacrificer and the intended sacrifice arrive at the place that God had designated. Abraham builds an altar, lays out the wood, binds his son Isaac, places him on the altar on top of the wood, and raises his knife to slaughter him. Isaac is silent. At this crucial moment, the Messenger of God intervenes, calling out, "Abraham! Abraham!" As with Isaac, Abraham responds, "Here I am."

The scarcity of language regarding Isaac's thoughts, feelings, and language may prompt us to wonder how people have found ways to persevere in harrowing and terrorizing situations.

The plan is disrupted. The Messenger redirects Abraham to offer an animal sacrifice instead. The text lets us know that Isaac has survived. Learning the outcome of a story, especially a harrowing one, can collapse the telling of how the characters lived through it, moment by moment, uncertainty by uncertainty, and how they managed their fear in the face of threat. The scarcity of language regarding Isaac's thoughts, feelings, and language may prompt us to wonder how people have found ways to persevere in harrowing and terrorizing situations.

In our post-October 7 reality, we are learning more and more from those who were abducted and held hostage in Gaza about strategies they used to survive. One story of survival is told by Rachel Goldberg-Polin about her son, Hersh, who was abducted on October 7 and murdered in captivity. As reported by others who were captive with him, Hersh frequently gave voice to how he was carrying with him a central message from a book that he had read. Rachel writes:

Or [one of the other hostages] explained that Hersh had repeated, like a mantra, a line from Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* . . . Frankl riffs on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that when a person has a reason to live, he can deal with any challenge. Frankl said, "He who has a *WHY* can bear any how." Or said Hersh repeated that specific line of wisdom to everyone in that tunnel. "What is your *WHY*?" he kept asking over and over, prompting them to consider what was of utmost importance to them and to formulate their sense of purpose. (Rachel Goldberg-Polin, *When We See You Again*)

The story is told that before deportation to Theresienstadt, Frankl's wife, Tilly, had sewn his manuscript into his coat. But, at Auschwitz the coat was confiscated, along with the manuscript he had just completed on his theory of logotherapy. It was his life's work at that time and a manifestation of his sense of purpose. Bereft, Frankl wrote that his deep desire to rewrite the manuscript helped him survive. At one point he became ill with typhus fever and began to write down notes on scraps of paper to help him reconstruct the work. He wrote, "I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of cardiovascular collapse."

Both Frankl and Goldberg-Polin found ways to stay connected to who they were as unique people with a sense of purpose amid the most horrific and dehumanizing experiences.

Psychologists differentiate between fear as a physiological and often unconscious and reflexive response to real danger in the moment, and fear that is relived from the past after an imminent threat has concluded. After the Akedah, Isaac's story continues as that of a trauma survivor.

Following the Akedah, Abraham returned to his servants, making no mention of Isaac returning (Gen. 22:19). The next we hear of Isaac is when Abraham's servant Eliezer has arranged a marriage for him. When he finds Isaac, the text tells us:

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לִשְׂדֵה לַשָּׂדֶה לַפְּנוֹת עֶרֶב

“Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening.” (Gen. 24:63)

Rabbinic commentators estimate that three years had passed since the Akedah. What did Isaac do during that time?

Genesis Rabbah imagines Shem and Ever (Noah's son and great-grandson) establishing a yeshiva at which numerous subsequent ancestors studied. My teacher Rabbi Morton Leifman, of blessed memory, used to emphasize the special power of the classic midrash that suggests that after the Akedah, Isaac went to this yeshiva to study with his ancestors (Genesis Rabbah 56:11). Rabbi Leifman suggested that Isaac went there following his experience of trauma to grapple with existential questions and to seek healing.

The commentators imagine numerous other ways this verse could be understood. Some envision Isaac seeking solace in the natural world, understanding the Hebrew *lasuah* as connected to *siah*, “vegetation,” and picturing him gardening or walking in nature (Rashbam and Ibn Ezra on Gen. 24:63). Still others understand *lasuah* to mean “prayer,” linking it with the phrase *yishpokh siho*—“pour out his plea” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26b; Ps. 102:1). Still others imagine Isaac turning to study in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever (Genesis Rabbah, see above).

Instead of reading these commentaries as a debate for what the text means, we can understand them as offering different ways one might seek to heal from a terrifying experience.

This year, as we reflect on our joy and gratitude from the past year, may we also find and affirm our own sense of purpose, perseverance, and healing.

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The King Clothed in Majesty: A Rosh Hashanah Page from the Bamberg *Mahzor* (1279)

DR. MARCUS MORDECAI SCHWARTZ, Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections



The Hebrew word *mahzor* literally means “cycle.” Today it usually refers to the prayer book for the High Holidays, but in the Middle Ages a *mahzor* contained the entire yearly cycle of prayers. This magnificent manuscript was completed in Bamberg, Germany, in 1279 and preserves the liturgy of the medieval Ashkenazi rite. Beyond its beauty, it is a witness to centuries of Jewish prayer.

The page opens a *yotzer* (liturgical poem) for Rosh Hashanah attributed to Rabbi Eleazar ha-Qallir. The poem begins with a single monumental word: *Melekh* (“King”). The scribe enlarged the word until it filled the top of the page, making God’s Kingship visible before a single line of the poem is read. Beneath it, an elaborate architectural arch frames the text like the entrance to a palace or throne room. Yet the arch itself seems almost clothed. One column is covered in flowing vines, another in a patterned lattice, while the curved bands above are wrapped in different decorative designs. The architecture appears to wear garments, echoing the poem’s repeated meditation on the divine King who “puts on” majesty, strength, righteousness, vengeance, and salvation.

This imagery draws on an ancient midrash in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which describes God as possessing 10 royal garments, each revealing a different aspect of divine rule. Some garments express justice, and others, mercy; some proclaim glory, while others are worn in moments of war or judgment. Ha-Qallir’s poem develops this tradition line by line, presenting God as a sovereign who clothes Himself differently according to the needs of history and the moral condition of the world.

Rosh Hashanah confronts worshippers with both fear and love. The repeated cry of *Melekh* reminds us that the future is uncertain, that judgment is real, and that human beings stand before a power greater than themselves. Yet this manuscript also tells another story. The margins are filled with notes added by generations of cantors and readers, preserving musical traditions, local customs, and practical directions for worship. Far from being a museum piece, this is a living prayer book, handled, studied, sung from, and cherished for centuries. It bears not only the fear of those who prayed for a favorable judgment, but also the love of generations who returned to these pages year after year, trusting that the same King who judges the world also sustains it with enduring mercy.

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Lessons from the Desert for an Age of AI

DR. LISA SPRINGER, Dean of the Division of Lifelong and Professional Studies and Associate Provost for Continuing and Digital Learning



Artificial Intelligence. What emotions do those words evoke? When I ask my AI-training groups, inevitably, the word “fear” comes up. Some people go further and speak of feeling terror and helplessness.

This is not surprising. The organizational psychologist David Rock, author of *Your Brain at Work*, explains that the brain responds to change as it does to physical danger, activating the same neural circuitry. As an example, even a simple question like “May I offer you some feedback?” can generate a threat response, the kind we feel when hearing footsteps behind us at night. If a single moment of feedback can do that, imagine what AI is doing to our nervous systems. Feedback is something that happens occasionally. It’s a threat that will pass. AI, on the other hand, is continuously present. Every day brings the launch of a new tool and the news of another field disrupted. The alarm we feel about AI has become part of the texture of daily life, exhausting us.

Long before anyone imagined a machine that could write or reason, people were undone by the very same thing: not knowing what was coming.

The scale and speed of AI are staggering. Since late 2022, consumer AI tools have grown from a handful to more than 50,000, with new ones added every day—far more than any person could try or even name. The speed of change has been just as fast. When the telephone was first invented, it took 50 years to reach 50 million users. ChatGPT reached 100 million users in two months.

The sheer pace is only part of what wears us down; underneath it lies something more specific. Rock found that when we cannot predict what will happen next, the brain must spend dramatically more resources just to process each passing moment. Uncertainty is not only emotionally uncomfortable but neurologically expensive. The brain is working overtime just to get through the day. And this is not a modern affliction. Long before anyone imagined a machine that could write or reason, people were undone by the very same thing: not knowing what was coming.

The Israelites, wandering in the desert, knew this despair intimately. Their discomfort with the unknown grew so great that they longed for the years of their slavery. At least in Egypt, they said, they had fish and melons and garlic to eat (Num.11:5). They were ready to turn on Moses and appoint a new leader who would take them back to slavery and a life they could predict. Certainty, even the certainty of suffering, felt safer than an open and unknown future.

Rock’s remedy is deceptively simple: reduce the number of unknowns, even slightly. The whole uncertainty

does not have to be resolved. A single piece of clarity—knowing what will happen next week or naming one thing that is not going to change—is enough to give the brain a moment’s reprieve and to let it stop burning itself out anticipating every threat.

In the Exodus story, the Israelites are led by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that signaled when to move and when to remain in place. They were given no map or view of the distant future—that remained hidden, as the future by necessity always is. What they were given was one visible signal about the very next step. The Torah’s wisdom is that this was enough: not certainty about the destination, but a small, steady sign, given again and again.

These are desert lessons, and they carry over directly to the fear so many of us feel about AI. Three stand out.

The first is that we cannot take it all on. No one can learn, or even track, the full sweep of AI; the volume and pace defeat any attempt at mastery. That is not a personal failure but the nature of the terrain. And freed from the impossible task of keeping up with everything, we can do the one thing actually available to us: choose, deliberately, the few tools worth engaging with meaningfully. That is enough.

The second lesson comes from the pillar itself. We are not going to be handed a map of where AI leads. No one has one, and anyone who claims to is merely guessing. But we do not need to resolve the whole uncertainty to function within it. What steadies us is not certainty about the destination, but a few fixed points along the way: the values that will not change no matter where the technology goes and the questions we will keep asking of it.

The third lesson is that boycotting AI is not a neutral act. It is tempting to treat any engagement with AI as an endorsement of it, to keep our distance in order to keep our hands clean. But the shape of this technology has not yet been settled. What it becomes, what guardrails it carries or lacks, whom it serves and whom it harms—these things are being decided right now, and they will be decided with us or without us. To opt out is not to stay neutral. It is to hand the decision to someone else.

We do not know whether AI will bring remarkable discoveries, genuine harm, or some combination of both. What we do know is that it is already here. We are already in the desert. The question before us, as individuals and as a community, is not whether to make the journey but how: with what values, what vigilance, what willingness to stop when stopping is right and to say so when it matters.

So, too, on the High Holidays, when we stand before a future we cannot control, we are reminded of the opportunity for *teshuvah*—to choose, again and again, who we will be in the face of what we cannot know. Judaism’s answer to uncertainty has never been to eliminate it. It has been to cultivate the kind of people capable of meeting whatever comes.

The decisions that will shape AI are being made right now. We need to make sure the people who care about human dignity and who ask about those who are left behind are among those influencing these decisions. Not because any one of us can steer the whole of it, but because the desert is crossed together, one step at a time, and the direction is set by those who show up.

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Melodies, Memories, and Change

High Holiday Music from JTS Cantorial Students

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



At their best, familiar melodies on the High Holidays serve as a time machine, transporting us to our earliest memories of sitting beside our parents in synagogue or causing us to flash forward to a later life stage, imagining what it might be like to attend services with our own grandchildren. We can feel a sense of profound welcome when we enter an unfamiliar prayer space or encounter a different cantor and still hear our most beloved tunes, enabling us to sing along immediately and effortlessly. Transition and uncertainty are a given, and familiar melodies offer us comfort, stability, and a sense of belonging. New melodies, at their best, are refreshing and breathe new life into familiar words. Yet, new tunes might also feel jarring, robbing us of nostalgia and community, especially in overwhelming times.

Cantors are particularly concerned with this tension during the High Holidays as we balance traditional melodies with new ones. At one extreme, changing the tune for *Kol Nidre* or *Avinu Malkeinu* would certainly be unwise. Furthermore, it is far easier to sing along with familiar melodies. Creating favorable circumstances for engagement and communal participation benefits us all.

However, introducing new melodies in a sensitive way has the potential to enliven different generations within our communities. Using new or unexpected tunes strategically and thoughtfully can deepen spiritual reflection, causing us to experience a prayer in a new way and offering us new insights into our liturgy. New tunes keep our prayer lives vibrant and reflect our living tradition, especially when we expand our services to include melodies from different communities and cultures. Additionally, some of today's new melodies will surely become our next generation's standard tunes.

At JTS, our cantorial students learn how to facilitate communal singing in a way that is engaging and uplifting, whether the melodies are new or old. It is my pleasure to share this musical compilation featuring four seasoned cantorial students leading our JTS community in melodies for the High Holidays: Kelsey Bailey, Toby Banks, Ruth Engel and Brittany Stern. These clips are taken from the students' *Nusah* presentations, all of which are available on JTS's Youtube channel.

Please scan the QR code below to hear *Ve-ye'etayu*, a beloved liturgical poem (*piyyut*) from the *Musaf* service as well as selections from the *Ne'ilah* service at the conclusion of Yom Kippur, including *El Nora Alilah*, a Sephardic and Mizrahi *piyyut* that has been adopted by many Ashkenazic communities. And, of course, *Avinu Malkeinu*. Please sing along!

LISTEN

Music from JTS Cantorial Students
www.jtsa.edu/melodies-memories-and-change



The Past Beneath the Present

SHIRA BODNAR, RS/CS 2030, Tanenbaum Fellow, Beth Tzedec Congregation

This summer my dad turned 81 years old. He was born in Russia and raised in Poland right after the end of the Sho'ah, in which most of his family was murdered. Facing intense antisemitism in Poland when he was growing up, he and his mother traveled by boat to Canada to escape when he was a teenager. That is the extent of what I knew about his childhood for most of my life. He simply did not talk about it. It was too painful. So I grew up feeling unmoored in the world. I couldn't figure out how to move forward when so much of my past was shrouded in mystery and tinged with pain. For years I've asked him to tell me stories from his childhood. His answer is always the same: "We'll see." Or, "I need to find the photo albums." The albums, of course, remain unfound. Beyond wanting to preserve family history for future generations, I have another reason for asking. I began noticing my own reactivity. Antisemitism took not only the lives of my ancestors but also my ability to know them. Their stories



The goal is not to remain trapped in the past, but to give it enough time and attention that it no longer unconsciously determines the present.

and even their names remain hidden. So every headline, every hateful comment, every careless remark lands with disproportionate force. I am not just responding to the present. I am reacting to a past I have never been able to fully grieve.

Reactivity is not born in the moment. It is the activation of something much older and deeper. The work of Elul invites us to trace these activations through *heshbon hanefesh* (spiritual accounting). We often imagine this accounting as a record of our actions: Whom have I hurt? Where did I stray from my values? Where do I need to

make repairs? But before we can answer these questions, we need to ask another: Who is the person answering them? What are the stories that have shaped my soul? The goal is not to remain trapped in the past, but to give it enough time and attention that it no longer unconsciously determines the present.

If Elul is asking us to take inventory of the stories that shape our souls, the Torah offers us a model of how to do it. In Deuteronomy 26, the Israelites receive instructions on what to do when they first enter the Promised Land, beginning with the ritual of the first fruits. They are to take some of each of the first fruits of the land, bring them to the *kohen* (the priest), and recite a declaration that is familiar to many of us.

אַרְמִי אֲבִד אֲבִי יֶרֶד מִצְרָיִם יָגֵר שָׁם בְּמִתִּי מְעַט יְהִי־שָׁם לִגְדֹל עַצְמוֹ וְרַב

"My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation." (Deut. 26:5)

This declaration, which we also read each year in the Haggadah during Pesah, continues on to tell the history of the Israelites and their journey: their slavery in Egypt, their crying out to the Holy One, their freedom by God's hand, and their arrival to this land flowing with milk and honey. The juxtaposition is striking: The Israelites have harvested the first fruits, these symbols of the future emerging from the land that they have been searching for for 40 years. Yet before they can enjoy these fruits, they must acknowledge the journey that has brought them there. But our traumas, like the generational experience of antisemitism, have made this examination increasingly difficult. Our experience of antisemitism, when we let it, disrupts the transmission of Jewish memory, leaving us with inherited grief instead of inherited stories. Many people, like my dad, survive by containing these painful memories and hoping they never surface. But what's kept hidden rarely disappears. Instead, it quietly shapes the way we encounter the present.

Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7 describes the recitation of *אֶרְמִי אֲבִד אֶבְי*, explaining that those who knew the declaration would recite it themselves. Those who did not know it would first hear it recited by another, then repeat it out loud. When I imagine this scene, I see myself and my father in both of these roles. In one sense, I am the one who does not know how to recite, because I literally do not know the story of my family. I need him to recite it first, so I can learn it and begin to recite it on my own. And in another sense, he is the one who does not know how to recite. After a lifetime of repressing his memories, he does not know how to begin reopening them. It breaks my heart to know how much he has carried alone, and that the weight of that pain has also become a barrier between me and my family's history. So I will keep gently nudging him. Every Sunday evening when we FaceTime, no matter what his answer was the week before, I will ask again for a story. I will ask in the hopes that I can tell a story each day as I bring forth my own offerings that include all the pieces that have shaped my soul. Perhaps the work of Elul is this: to give our stories the time and attention they need so they no longer dictate our reactions but instead become sources of wisdom. Only then can we step into our promised land.

Our experience of antisemitism, when we let it, disrupts the transmission of Jewish memory, leaving us with inherited grief instead of inherited stories.

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The Rabbinical School
www.jtsa.edu/the-rabbinical-school



Radical Solidarity: Turning Dread and Fear Toward Meaning, Hope, and Renewal

DR. DAVID DAVAR, Director, JTS Counseling Center

In 1973, singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen was stranded on the Greek island of Hydra, drowning in a deep existential crisis. Profoundly depressed and creatively empty, he believed he had nothing left to say to a fractured world. Cohen would sit staring at his typewriter for hours, completely unable to write, telling his partner that his creative voice was entirely gone, and he had nothing left to say. He felt like a ghost, paralyzed by internal darkness and isolated from humanity.

Today, many individuals find themselves trapped in a similar sense of paralysis, navigating an era marked by existential anxiety, worry, and fear. For Jews—and Jewish university students, in particular—this anxiety is amplified by an alarming surge in global antisemitism. This escalating hostility leaves many feeling isolated, targeted, and deeply fearful within the very spaces and institutions meant to foster safety, belonging, and personal growth.

Jewish tradition during the High Holidays reframes fear (*yirah*) not as an affliction to be cured, but as a sacred instrument for spiritual awakening.

In clinical psychology, this type of anxiety and fear is often treated as a pathology, an emotional dysregulation to be managed and minimized to restore personal autonomy. In stark contrast, Jewish tradition during the High Holidays reframes fear (*yirah*) not as an affliction to be cured, but as a sacred instrument for spiritual awakening. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Days of Awe, fear is deliberately cultivated as a complex emotion—one that holds together the visceral terror of our own fragility with a profound sense of awe before the Divine. The liturgy prompts the community to face mortality together, aiming

to remove earthly illusions, foster deep responsibility, and ultimately turn intense fear into a powerful force for personal and communal transformation (*teshuvah*).

A similar terror occurred in October 1973 when Israel suffered a massive surprise attack on Yom Kippur by multiple Arab armies. The nation faced the raw, immediate threat of being completely overrun, which sent shockwaves of existential concern and dread through the global Jewish community. It was in the depths of this geopolitical and spiritual nightmare that Cohen felt an irrepressible impulse. He left his self-imposed isolation on Hydra and flew directly into the dust-choked desert sands of the Sinai, drawn by an immense desire to connect with and comfort his people.

Upon arrival, Cohen chose proximity over detachment. Travelling from one chaotic army outpost to another, he refused special treatment, ate basic army rations, and slept on the desert sands alongside the troops. Looking into the eyes of young tank crews facing imminent death, Cohen spoke to the Israeli soldiers, reminding them, “We are brothers.”

Through singing, caring, and connecting with the soldiers, Cohen emerged from his personal crisis. His immersion in the collective vulnerability of war resurrected his shattered creativity, serving as the birthplace of his masterpiece “Who by Fire.” The song directly channels both the soldier’s battlefield fears and the High Holiday liturgy of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, which explicitly asks who will live and who will die in the coming year:

Who by fire, who by water,
Who in the sunshine, who in the night,
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
And who shall I say is calling?

Cohen showed that facing uncertainty and fear can strengthen rather than break us. His experience together with the soldiers in the desert sands revealed that meaning and renewal come from helping others rather than dwelling on personal concerns.

Ultimately, we must arrive at the conclusion that turning inward and isolating—as Cohen initially did on Hydra—only serves to increase our despair and amplify our anxiety. When hatred and division loom large, the temptation is to pull away; but like Cohen found in 1973, it is precisely when we feel the most anguish and fear that we must come together. Reconnecting with our Jewish roots, strengthening our community, and deepening our caring offers a pathway through the dark. It is this radical solidarity that turns us from dread toward meaning, hope, and renewal.

**Reconnecting with
our Jewish roots,
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*Scan this QR code or visit www.jtsa.edu/radical-solidarity to see Ayala Gottlieb Alter’s (CS ’29) performance at the Great Synagogue of Stockholm. In this special version, Israeli musician Aya Korem fuses the verses of the original prayer, *Unetaneh Tokef*, with Leonard Cohen’s timeless lyrics.*

WATCH

Ayala Gottlieb Alter’s (CS ’29) performance at the Great Synagogue of Stockholm.
www.jtsa.edu/radical-solidarity



A Roman Rite Mahzor in Print: Preserving a Distinctive Jewish Voice (1485–1486)

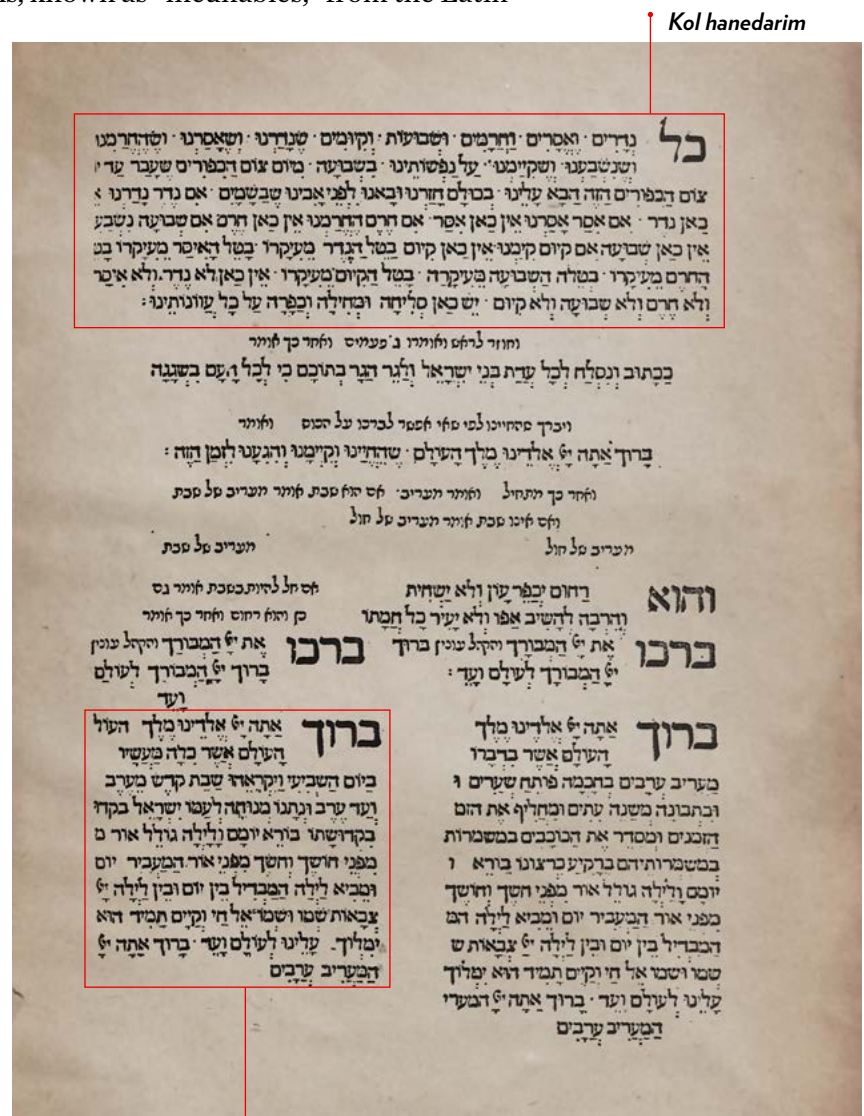
DR. MARCUS MORDECAI SCHWARTZ, Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections



This *mahzor* was printed in the northern Italian towns of Soncino and Casalmaggiore between September 1485 and August 1486. It belongs to the earliest generation of printed books, known as “incunables,” from the Latin word *cunabula* (cradle), because they represent printing in its infancy. While all 15th-century printed books are uncommon, Hebrew incunables are extraordinarily rare. Fewer than 200 Hebrew editions are known to have been printed before 1501—less than one-half of one percent of all surviving incunable editions. Many survive today in only a single copy.

The printers of this *mahzor* were members of the famous Soncino family, pioneers of Hebrew printing. Although the Soncinos themselves were of Ashkenazic background, they produced books for many Jewish communities. This *mahzor* follows the Roman rite, the ancient liturgical tradition of the Jews of Italy, preserving customs that differed from both the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic prayer traditions.

The page shown here preserves two striking examples of those distinctive customs. At the top appears *Kol hanedarim* (All the Vows), the Hebrew



hama'ariv aravim

version of the legal declaration recited before Yom Kippur. Most Jewish communities know this text by its Aramaic opening words, *Kol Nidrei* (All Vows), but the Jews of Italy and Greece continued to recite the formula in Hebrew. At the lower left is another unique feature: the Sabbath version of the evening blessing praising God as the One “who brings on the evening” (*hama’ariv aravim*). Instead of the familiar wording used by Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, the Roman rite preserves an older text beginning, “Who completed His work on the seventh day.” This version is already found in the 9th-century prayer book of Rav Saadia Gaon. Although later authorities argued that the blessing should remain the same on weekdays and Sabbaths alike, the Italian rite faithfully preserved this ancient form.

The page also reminds us that printing did not erase local traditions. Quite the opposite: the printing press became a powerful tool for preserving them. Communities that had depended upon handwritten manuscripts could now reproduce their own customs with remarkable accuracy, ensuring that distinctive liturgical traditions would endure.

This image speaks powerfully to the themes of fear and love. The fear is easy to recognize. The Jewish communities of Italy were minorities within Christian Europe, and the Jews who followed the Roman rite were themselves a minority within the Jewish world. Their traditions could easily have disappeared beneath the weight of larger and more influential communities. The Soncino family knew that insecurity firsthand. Only a generation after printing this *mahzor*, increasing censorship and restrictions on Hebrew books forced Gershom Soncino to move his press repeatedly throughout Italy before finally establishing new Hebrew presses under Ottoman rule in Thessaloniki and Constantinople.

Yet this page is ultimately a testament to love. The Roman Jews cherished the particular language, melodies, and forms of worship they had inherited over many centuries. The Soncino printers, though Ashkenazic themselves, recognized the value of preserving that inheritance in print. This *mahzor* reminds us that Jewish unity has never depended upon uniformity. It has rested instead upon a shared devotion to God expressed through many local voices. The new technology of print became not an instrument of sameness, but a means of ensuring that even the smallest and most distinctive communities could pass their traditions on to the generations that followed.

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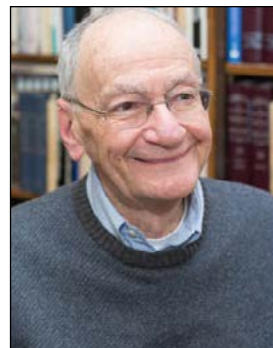
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From Whence to Where?

DR. ISMAR SCHORSCH, Chancellor Emeritus, and Rabbi Herman Abramovitz
Distinguished Service Professor of Jewish History



Yom Kippur turns on a stunning paradox. A prodigious effort at repentance yields but the modest request of one more year to address our failings. Living life from the end is intended to heighten our appreciation of every passing day. The attainment of eternity is not susceptible to a single leap, but only to daily, arduous labor.

It is for that reason that our liturgy begins each morning throughout the year with a brief reminder of our origins. We thank God for restoring us to consciousness or, more poetically, for reuniting our lifeless body with its animating soul. In deeply personal terms, we acknowledge the purity of the soul which God granted us: “You created it, You gave it individuality, You imbued us with it, You care for it daily, and someday

You will take it from me only to restore it to me in eternity.” The words ennoble us as they obligate us. We bear within us a spark of the divine that calls upon us to make the utmost of our lives.

Living life from the end is intended to heighten our appreciation of every passing day.

Rabbinic Judaism, however, was not the first to propound the kinship of the human soul with its divine progenitor. Hundreds of years before, Plato, facing execution, defined immortality as the release of the soul from its beclouding body. Indeed, Plato contended that the philosopher with his lifelong disdain of

pleasure and materialism was the only human who came close to approximating the liberation that came with death. Irrespective of its provenance, the notion that a touch of the divine would inhabit the lifetime of a human would become a beautiful article of Jewish faith.

A 16th-century mystic in Safed named Eliezer Azikri composed an exquisitely poetic Hebrew prayer of reunion predicated on the same existential division of body and soul. While many synagogues today have appropriated *Yedid Nefesh* to introduce Kabbalat Shabbat, the true intent of Azikri’s poem was as a deeply, daily personal plea to God to grace his awakening body once again with God’s elusive presence. Rabbi Jules Harlow’s English translation captures the delicate intimacy of Azikri’s relationship to God. God is indeed his Soulmate, that is, Azikri’s soul derives directly from God’s. Their shared identity is what drives the poet’s tireless love and prompts him to even call himself poignantly the offspring of God’s love. Throughout, Azikri blends his own yearning for reunion with acute awareness of the universal blessing that would attend God’s return to the world.

If Azikri’s allusion to the rabbinic formulation of the soul’s patrimony is elliptic, that by Nahmanides in the 13th-century is full-blown. When Gershom Scholem came to translate Nahmanides’s ramified *piyyut* into German in 1936, he titled it a “Hymn on the Fate of the Soul.” And indeed, the great Sephardi master of Jewish literature depicted in 16 stanzas the fate of a single divine soul through its peregrinations on earth. Upon its return to God,

the soul narrates its journey in the first person (I appropriate and adapt Scholem's lucid and elegant translation to exhibit a few stanzas):

From time immemorial I was kept among God's hidden treasures,
out of sheer nothingness He called me forth,
though at the end of days,
I will be brought before the King again.

My life flows from the abyss of the spheres,
which provides the soul with form and structure.
Divine forces shape and nurture it,
thereafter it will be preserved
in the chambers of the King . . .

I was made out of dust, though Your Spirit hovers in me.
You know that I am like a stranger who goes about aimlessly in the land.
"How long do you have yet to go?
When will you seek to return that you may gain the approbation of the King?"

For the road I must take You gave me a light,
which illumines fully the most remote corners of my being.
And as I departed did you not warn me: "Fear God, the King, my child?" . . .

Loaded with anxiety, I hurry to confess my sinful state
before death will sweep me away.
There my own signature bears witness against me,
who would dare to contest the accusations of the King?

Driven by desire I bestrode the barren land,
till I nearly came upon my own grave among those felled by their lust.
But as I pulled back in deep regret,
I lamented that I failed to heed the words of the King . . .

With You, God, is the grace that covers (Your servant).
With You, God, is the mercy that enshrines him.
With You, God, is the forgiveness that elevates
the deeds (of your servant) to the standard set by the King . . .

I hope the poems by Azikri and Nahmanides will convince you that an idea will not be discarded to the dustbin of Jewish history simply because it comes from outside. The conception of humans as a composite of body and soul, of part earth and heaven, imbues our journey through the cosmos with purpose and nobility, and no less important, renders us all equal.

May you all be inscribed for a life of meaning and contentment.

It's Never Too Late to Atone

ETGAR KERET, Director, MFA in Creative Writing

Yom Kippur was always my favorite holiday. Even in nursery school, when all the other kids liked Purim because of the costumes, Hanukkah because of the latkes, and Passover because of the long vacation, I was hooked on Yom Kippur. If holidays were like kids, I once thought when I was still a boy, then Purim and Hanukkah would be the most popular in class, Rosh Hashanah would be the most beautiful, and Yom Kippur would be a kind of weirdo, a loner, but the most interesting of all. When I think about that now, “a kind of weirdo, a loner, but the most interesting of all” is exactly how I saw myself then, so maybe the real reason I loved Yom Kippur so much is that I thought it was like me. The thing is that even though I’m not a kind of weirdo anymore, definitely not a loner, and grown-up enough now to understand that I’m not the most interesting, I’m still in love with that holiday.



Maybe it's because Yom Kippur is the only holiday I know that, because of its very nature, recognizes human weakness. If on Passover, Moses and God settled accounts with the Egyptians, on Hanukkah Judah Maccabee beat the crap out of the Greeks, and on Israeli Independence day we fought bravely against the Arabs and won

I feel with every bone in my body that there's something very healthy about being compelled to ask for forgiveness.

our country, on Yom Kippur we're not a heroic dynasty or a people, but a collection of individuals who look in the mirror, are ashamed of what demands shame, and ask forgiveness for what can be forgiven. And maybe that was actually the quality that attracted me to Yom Kippur from the very beginning, that it is the most private of all our holidays, a day when you stand alone before your deeds and their consequences without TV, without bustling cafés and restaurants, without stores crammed with merchandise, without all the rest of the day-to-day noise that makes

them more palatable. It's the holiday when you come face to face with your life as it is, and there's no stupid reality show to divert your attention, no news updates, no chocolate-chip ice cream cone to offer you some consolation.

For me, Yom Kippur was and remains *the* holiday, always. That's why, even though it's been years since I've bothered to wish people a happy new year on Rosh Hashanah, or since I've taken the trouble to dress up on Purim, as Yom Kippur approaches, I still apologize to people I feel I've hurt. It doesn't happen too many times, but when I finally call to ask for someone's forgiveness and I'm waiting in embarrassment for the phone to be answered, still praying deep down that no one will pick up so that I can settle for an apologetic message on the answering machine, I feel with every bone in my body that there's something very healthy about being compelled to ask for forgiveness. So, maybe it's easier to love a holiday that commands you to eat jelly

doughnuts than a holiday that requires you to put yourself in a vulnerable, uncomfortable position, but when you're finally done, you feel that, thanks to that weird holiday, you've gotten rid of a burden that has been oppressing you for a very long time without your even knowing how much.

My strangest Yom Kippur apology story begins when I was 4. One of the kids in my new preschool group was a pretty, sweet girl named Noa. She was quiet and smiley, two qualities I was not blessed with, and when I once accidentally touched her thick blonde hair, it felt like sticky cotton candy. I really wanted to play with her but didn't exactly know how to do it, so after six months of looking at her from a distance, I decided to make a move, and one morning, when I saw her running next to me in the yard, I stuck out my foot and tripped her.

Noa fell and hurt herself. She started to cry, and when the teacher ran over to help her, Noa pointed at me and said, "He did it. He tripped me." The teacher, who liked me very much, asked me if it was true, and I immediately said no. The teacher rebuked Noa, "Etgar is a good boy who never lies. Why are you making up such terrible things about him? You should be ashamed of yourself!" Noa, who'd almost stopped crying, started all over again, and the teacher stroked my head and walked off angrily. Right then I wanted to tell Noa I was sorry and confess to the teacher that I'd lied, but I couldn't find the courage. Meanwhile, another girl helped Noa walk over to the fountain so she could wash her scraped knee, and I remained standing in the yard.

Noa wasn't in kindergarten or in elementary school with me. In high school, during a break one day, a girl in my class mentioned Noa's full name and said she was a real grind, studying in the biology track. It was the first month of school, Rosh Hashanah had already passed, and Yom

Kippur was on the way, and when school ended that day, I waited for Noa near her classroom. She was almost the last one out, orange headphones on her head and a Sony Walkman in her hand. She looked completely different from how I remembered her from when I was 4; she barely smiled and had a lot of pimples on her face, but her hair was still thick and blonde and still looked like cotton candy. I went up to her, legs weak. It's always hard to say you're sorry, but saying it after 13 years is especially hard. I wanted to tell her that since that day in the preschool yard I'd tried hard not to lie, and that every time I felt the urge, I remembered her, her hair in tangles, crying and hurt in the yard, and immediately quashed the impulse and told the truth. I wanted to tell her that soon I'd be a man and go into the army and everything, and that when I looked back on my life, what I did to her then, at the age of 4, was the thing I was most ashamed of, and that even though so much time had passed, I wanted to make it up to her somehow: buy her a popsicle, lend her my sports bicycle for a week, or I didn't know what, something.

But instead of all that, the only thing that came out of my mouth was her name, "Noa," in a very shrill voice. Noa stopped, took off her headphones, and studied me. "I'm Etgar," I said, "Etgar Keret. We were once in the same

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preschool together.” She smiled and said she remembered preschool but didn’t remember me. I told her about how I tripped her and lied, and how she cried because of the affront and a little because of the pain, but she didn’t remember any of it.

“It was a long time ago,” she said, half-apologetically.

“But I remember,” I persisted, “and soon it’s going to be Yom Kippur, and I wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize for something stupid you did when you were 4?” she said and smiled that lovely smile I remembered from preschool, then added, “Were you this weird back in preschool, too?” She laughed and so did I, because the truth is I really was weird in preschool. “Apology accepted,” she said after a brief pause, and then put her orange headphones over her ears and left.

I remember going home from school on that day. I rode my bike, the pedals turned easily, the road felt smooth, and even the uphill parts felt like they were downhill. I never saw her again, but since then, whenever I have a strong urge not to tell the truth, I think of her outside her high-school classroom, smiling broadly, her face full of pimples, saying she accepted my apology. Then I take a deep breath, and lie.

Translated by Sondra Silverston

This essay originally appeared in Tablet Magazine (September 30, 2014) and is reprinted here with permission.

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Was Jonah Happy to See the Fish?

RABBI DAVID ZEV MOSTER, PhD, Director, Biblical Hebrew Program

One of the Tanakh's most dramatic scenes takes place when, amid a raging storm, Jonah is tossed overboard and swallowed by a great fish. This story plays out every Yom Kippur at *Minhah*, when the Book of Jonah is read aloud in synagogues around the world.

The Dutch Renaissance painter Dirck Barendsz (1534–1592) captures this horrific moment by depicting sailors feeding Jonah to the great fish as the waves toss their vessel violently.





There are other ways in which the terror of the situation is emphasized. In the stained-glass window attributed to the studio Atelier Lorin of Chartres (c. 1887), Jonah barely escapes from the razor-sharp bite of the terrifying fish. Every stage of Jonah's journey appears tumultuous.

When we studied the Book of Jonah in the JTS Biblical Hebrew Certificate Program, we explored the story of Jonah in a very different light.

We began by looking at Jonah 1:15, וַיַּעֲמֵד הַיָּם מִזְעָפוֹ (and the sea ceased its raging). This is significant because the sea has calmed before the great fish appears. The storm has already subsided. Next we examined the verses that describe Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish. There, Jonah says his troubles

have already passed (2:3): קִרְאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי אֶל־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי ("I called out in my distress to the Lord and He has answered me"). Jonah is not terrified and he is certainly not hopeless. Instead, he is confident that he will make it out alive (2:10): וְאֲנִי בְקוֹל תוֹדָה אֶזְבְּחָה־לָּךְ אֲשֶׁר נִדְרַתִּי אֲשַׁלֶּמָּה ("I myself will sacrifice to you with a voice of thanksgiving, I will pay that which I vowed [to sacrifice]").

According to this analysis, Jonah was happy—not terrified—to see the great fish. The fish was his heaven-sent "ride" back to dry land where he would be able to carry out God's wishes. This may explain why the anonymous illuminator of the Bible of Hainaut (c. 1280) depicted Jonah in such a relaxed manner. In this scene there is no storm, no teeth, and no terror. The fish is smiling, and Jonah rides it as easily as one might ride a horse.





Continuing in this tradition of interpretation, in his 1983 work *Leviathan*, Michael Sgan-Cohen depicts Jonah sitting on a chair and reading a book inside the whale as though he were traveling first class.

Was Jonah glad to see the great fish? The Book of Jonah doesn't say so explicitly, but there are hints that Jonah was not only ready, but eager to return to dry land and carry out his God-given mission to the people of Nineveh.

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Days of Fear or Days of Awe?

RABBI GORDON TUCKER, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement

What's in a name? Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have long been conventionally known in the English-speaking world as the "High Holidays." But for the last 900 years (at least since the time of the German *halakhist* Eliezer ben Yoel Halevi), they have been known in Hebrew as *Hayamim Hanora'im* (the Days of *Yirah*). The Hebrew word *Yirah* has two valences: (i) it can denote fear and terror in the presence of a dire threat, and (ii) it can denote a feeling of awe inspired by the awareness of an extraordinary and transcendent power.



The first meaning gives rise to the understanding of *yirat het* as the fear of the punishment that will result from sin. And indeed, much of my own recollection of the mien of worshippers on these days in my childhood shul are consistent with that perception. The terror of retribution was palpable amid the tears that one saw and heard all around in the synagogue.

The second meaning, by contrast, lends to *yirat het* a very different signification. It is about the awareness of the power that sin has over us and our desires, and thus the need to respect that power as we reach deep inside for our proverbial better angels.

So are these Days of Fear or, rather, are they Days of Awe?

The ways in which so many conflicts and societal dysfunctions today are fueled by fear of the other and fear of the unknown remind us that fear rarely leads to rational or constructive action. And so it is with our experience of the *Yamim Nora'im*. If we associate these days primarily with the terrifying guilt they seek to instill in us, we may come to experience them as a source of fear rather than as an invitation for reflection and change. Worse, that association can become a barrier for many modern Jews, who struggle to connect with sacred days that have the potential to be so profoundly civilizing.

The Talmud (Yoma 86b) first introduced the distinction between *teshuvah meyirah* (repentance out of fear) and *teshuvah me-ahavah* (returning out of love). And thinking of the so-called High Holidays not as Days of Fear but, rather, as Days of Awe can color them with an optimism and joy that more probably was their character in biblical times.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook was among the many theologians who delved into the possibilities inherent in "return out of love." In the 15th chapter of his deeply evocative work *Lights of Teshuvah*, he says the following:

The principal role of *teshuvah* is for the person to return to himself, to the root of his soul . . . This is true whether we consider the individual, a whole people, or the whole of humanity . . . which always becomes damaged when it forgets itself . . . It is only through the great truth of returning to oneself that the person and the people . . . will return to their Creator, to be illumined by the light of life.

It is love of creation, and thus of the Creator, that is crucial here. For that love directs us to the good that has been implanted in each of us by God. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, in a beloved essay (*Likkutei Moharan* I:282), taught this very lesson, that seeking out that goodness is the essence of *teshuvah* as returning out of love. It is not, he said, about finding all the sins and depravities that we can find in fear, but instead it entails searching for all the points of goodness within us. We will surely find them, and when we do, they will emerge as our noble defining characteristics.

The key to this is to believe that *teshuvah* is possible and that crucial belief is the motivator behind a favorite midrash of mine. It concerns the *teshuvah*, mentioned in the biblical book of Chronicles, that was achieved by perhaps the very worst and most sinful of all the kings of ancient Judea, King Menashe. Here's the essence of the midrash, as given in the *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*:

Menashe's prayer rises up from his desperation, and as God is about to attend to this prayer of humility and contrition, the angels indignantly demur. "What? You are going to accept the prayer of this evil person who ruined so many lives and nearly destroyed the religion of Israel? You know he's only doing this out of his desperation, as a last resort!" But God responded as follows: "I must accept his prayer. Because if I don't, I will be slamming the door on those who do repentance for ever and ever. No one will believe in the power of *teshuvah* if Menashe's prayer of contrition is of no avail." And so the *teshuvah* was effective.

Note the divine concern that human beings never lose their belief in themselves and thus in their ability to return to that self in love.

Perhaps the most moving expression of this power within us comes in Rav Kook's 16th chapter:

Even though a person may see no way to repair his past; even though the path ahead may be full of obstacles; still, the will to be good, that is the breeze of the Garden of Eden that blows through the human soul.

What a beautiful image this is, the breeze of Eden. It is especially breathtaking because the Torah mentions such a breeze in Genesis 3, but it is at the very moment of sin, when God is strolling through the Garden in the blowing wind, looking for the sinful Adam who is hiding. Come out of hiding, says Rav Kook to all of us. There is always a channel for *teshuvah* and for change. God saw to that by putting the urge to return into our souls. And that urge is exactly what the cooling, comforting breeze of Eden has always been.

Compare what our sages had to say here about Menashe with what they had to say elsewhere about the notorious apostate of the 2nd century Elisha ben Abuyah. They imagined that there is a heavenly voice that

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continually calls out to God's children, שׁוּבוּ בָנִים שׁוּבִים ("Return to Me, children of Mine who have lost their way"). A beautiful image, for sure.

But Elisha told the following to his teacher Rabbi Meir:

Once I was riding my horse on Yom Kippur that fell on Shabbat, and passed by the space of the Holy of Holies. I heard the echoing voice coming from that holiest of places, saying "Return to Me, children of Mine who have lost their way, except for Elisha ben Abuyah."

On that Shabbat Yom Kippur, Elisha is said to have sworn that the voice he heard included the words: "Except for Elisha ben Abuyah, whom I will not accept." I submit that this was Elisha's final and decisive sin: the sin of not believing in the possibility of return and change, convincing himself that no *teshuvah* was possible for him. It was the abandonment of hope that sealed his apostasy, because no faithful Jew, even one who had committed many bad acts, could deny the power of *teshuvah*, abandon hope, and still call himself a Jew.

So the coming sacred days should be understood as Days of Awe, acknowledgment and acceptance of the awesome power lovingly implanted by the Creator within each of us to return again and again. Indeed, the direct meaning of *teshuvah* may be "return," but its deeper meaning is "hope." If one does not let go of hope, as even Menashe did not, then one believes in *teshuvah*. And if one believes in *teshuvah*, then all becomes possible. Both for us, and for the ailing world for which we pray.

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Not Knowing What to Say When Yom Kippur Ends

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When the day ends and the September sun goes red, paused between the trees like you and I, stopped in the middle of a conversation—two birds, one yellow, the other the color of a peach, perch on an upper branch of a blue spruce. Impossible, no doubt, it must be the glare from a streetlight waking, delight teasing the eye. When we eventually pick up speed under the Chagall-blue sky, the story arrives like a respite, like birds returning: Once there was an ordinary person searching in the Book of God for some word like a sword to slay us. Day after day he fed his horse. Women carried bowls of olives as they passed. A boy played melancholic music on his harmonica. Rain came, washing the evening's blue skin. When words rose like blisters to the tip of his tongue, they burned there until he blurted out: *I once saw a frozen waterfall. Frozen solid. In midflow.* When Yom Kippur ends, we are paused in the middle of a difficult sentence, and the birds reveal the story along the branches—once there was a tyrant searching in the Book of God for words to serve him like a sword to slay us, but instead he came upon a frozen waterfall. A thing of beauty—he wanted to say—how the sight of it made his heart expand with grief, how it was like seeing something no living person was meant to see.



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Affliction and Rejoicing: The Emotional Rituals of the *Haggim*

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On Yom Kippur, we are commanded to afflict ourselves, and on Sukkot we are commanded to rejoice. What is our tradition really asking of us on these days and why?

The Torah's description of Yom Kippur doesn't include most of the practices we associate with the holiday. It certainly doesn't require sitting in shul all day, it doesn't tell us to wear white, and in fact, it doesn't even explicitly mention fasting. Rather, in Leviticus 16:29–31, God states:

And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before GOD. It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a law for all time.

The Rabbis help us to understand that what is required on this holiday is not just a set of specific practices, but the pursuit of a particular kind of communally experienced sensation.

Yoma 74b asks whether this list is comprehensive or if “afflicting oneself” might also include practices such as sitting in the sun until one gets too hot or in the shade until one gets too cold. The conclusion is that it doesn't, because just as the verses in Leviticus command us not to work, so too *inui nefesh* must also consist of things that we *don't* do. Yet the assumption behind the question seems to be that the goal of *inui nefesh* isn't the performance of practices like fasting in order to transcend one's body for the day, but rather that the goal is actually to achieve a state of physical discomfort. It's just that we are only permitted to achieve this state via certain mechanisms (denial of normal physical comforts) and not by means of others (actively seeking out uncomfortable situations). The Torah, then, is asking us to spend a day together in the experience of particularly unpleasant sensations, which the Rabbis of the Mishnah help us understand in more detail: rumbling stomachs, parched mouths, feet exposed to the dirt and the wind, unwashed faces, and lonely bodies.



Leviticus promises atonement and purification from God on Yom Kippur and makes two requirements: first, refraining from work, and second, a practice known as *inui nefesh*, or “afflicting one's soul,” which is not described in further detail. What exactly does the Torah mean by this?

In the Mishnah, the Rabbis break *inui nefesh* down into several parts: refraining from eating, drinking, bathing, anointing with oil, wearing leather shoes, and sexual intimacy. A midrash quoted in Babylonian Talmud

On Sukkot, however, we are required to spend the holiday seeking out the opposite experience: joy and nothing but joy. “You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God seven days, in the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.” (Deut. 16:14–15).

Again, the Rabbis help us to understand that what is required on this holiday is not just a set of specific practices, but the pursuit of a particular kind of communally experienced sensation:

Rabbi Yehuda says: “One should enable each member of his household to rejoice with an item that pleases them, men with what is fit for them and women with what is fit for them.” Rabbi Yehuda elaborates: “Men with what is fit for them, i.e., with wine. And as for the women, with what should one cause them to rejoice?” Rav Yosef teaches: “One should delight them with new clothes, in Babylonia with colored clothes and in Eretz Yisrael with the pressed linen clothes that are manufactured there. (BT Pesachim 109a)

Leaving aside the gender essentialism of this passage for a moment (in my experience, many women also enjoy wine), the Rabbis are trying to make a larger point here: when the Torah tells us to rejoice on Sukkot, it is not just telling us to perform certain practices, such as making the holiday a festive occasion by preparing nice food and drink. Rather, what is being commanded of us is the achievement of a communal experience of joy and pleasure.

Whatever our different individual experiences of loss, frustration, success, and response to global events—for these days, we will be joined together as an emotional collective, operating on rabbinic emotional time.

The idea that we might be commanded to feel certain ways can be challenging, especially when events in our personal lives or in the world don’t seem to align with the emotional mandate for the holiday. Why, then, does our tradition ask us to collectively experience discomfort on Yom Kippur and pleasure and happiness on Sukkot?

I want to suggest that the Rabbis are asking us to locate ourselves in a particular kind of Jewish experiential calendar. For Jews in the early rabbinic period, the calendar was an important locus of group identity, helping to distinguish Jews from other groups like Romans or Samaritans. And I believe that for the Rabbis, the calendar didn’t just regulate the date of Shabbat and holidays—it was supposed to govern a person’s emotional experience of the whole year. This is also why the Rabbis forbade both mourning and marriage on the three pilgrimage festivals: the Jewish emotional calendar was supposed to take precedence not only over competing calendars of other groups, but even over the joys and sorrows of our family’s life-cycle events.

I would like to challenge us all this year to find ourselves in this distinctive experience of collective Jewish identity, to look with empathy at those next to us and let our experiences reverberate. This will mean spending the High Holidays not only davening in shul and sitting at meals in community but also squirming together with the physical discomforts of Yom Kippur, and then, just days later, soaring together into the joy of Sukkot. Whatever our different individual experiences of loss, frustration, success, and response to global events—for these days, we will be joined together as an emotional collective, operating on rabbinic emotional time.

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