

Days of Fear or Days of Awe?

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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 בָּנִים 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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