

LEHRHAUS

Over Rosh Hashanah

Vol. 11, Issue 1 • 29 Elul 5786 / September 11, 2026

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The Jewish Calendar: Mirrors & Doubles

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The Jewish calendar consists of eight holidays which are, in fact, two sets of four holidays.

Organizing the holidays into these two groups reveals the underlying theological structure of the Jewish year. Once this structure is apparent, a person traveling through Jewish time will better understand the holidays' intertwining themes and how a year of Jewish celebration creates a distinctly Jewish worldview.

Before I describe the two groups of four holidays each, let me concede that perhaps there are a few ways to group Jewish calendrical observances into

categories. For example, one hears of the "High Holidays" of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There are also the "pilgrimage holidays" of Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot. There are the "fast days," including the major fasts of Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur and the minor fasts of Tzom Gedaliah, Taanit Esther, and others. Other categories are available, too, and these groupings are helpful. In assembling the Jewish holidays into types, certain important aspects of a holiday are revealed. These aspects serve to distinguish particular categories of holiday from the rest of the yearly festivals, adding to any holiday group's religious meaning.

Yet none of these tempting classifications provides a comprehensive analysis of the calendar's structure as a whole. The fact that Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot were once agricultural pilgrimage holidays in the land of Israel does add to our understanding of these holidays' origins and

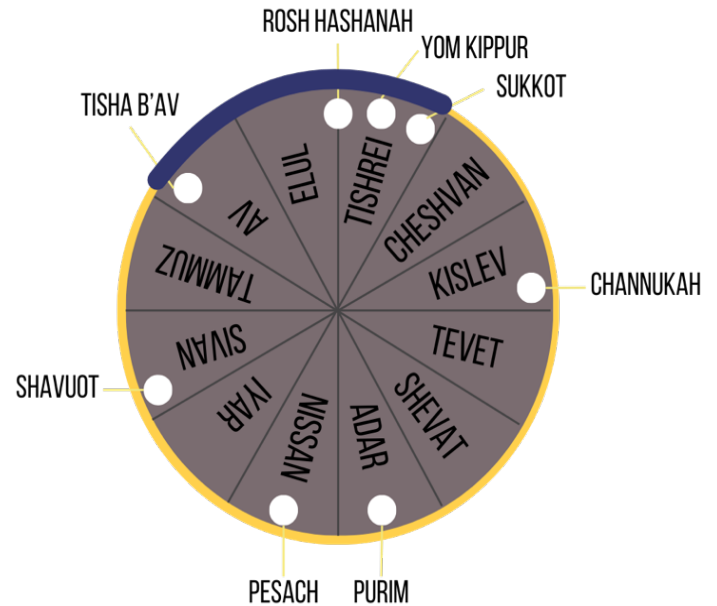
development, and can certainly provide layers of meaning to the holidays' theological resonance. But it does not offer insight as to how these holidays fit into the calendar as a whole, and how each category of holidays relates to another whole category.

A different organization is needed; a complete classification of the entire annual holiday set can offer a new understanding of the Jewish calendar as a whole, and offer new insight into the experience of celebrating a full cycle of Jewish holidays year after year.

The eight annual holidays of the Jewish calendar are Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot ¹, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, Shavuot, and Tisha B'Av. These are the eight holidays designated by Leviticus, by other books of Tanakh, or by other Second Temple literature. Any other holidays in the Jewish calendar are later additions.²

These eight holidays can be divided into two sets of four each. The first set of four holidays, which I'll call the "Tishrei Movement," begins at 1) Tisha B'Av, and then seven weeks later, is followed by three holidays in quick succession: 2) Rosh Hashanah, 3) Yom Kippur, and 4) Sukkot. The Tishrei movement lasts just shy of three months.

The second set of four holidays spans the remaining nine months of the year. These holidays are 1) Chanukah, 2) Purim, 3) Pesach, and seven weeks later, 4) Shavuot.



Let the parallelism of each holiday set containing a "7 weeks" serve as a hint: there is a purposeful symmetry to the Jewish year.

Each holiday in a set can be matched to a holiday in the other set. There are four perfect pairs between the two sets of four holidays. Rosh

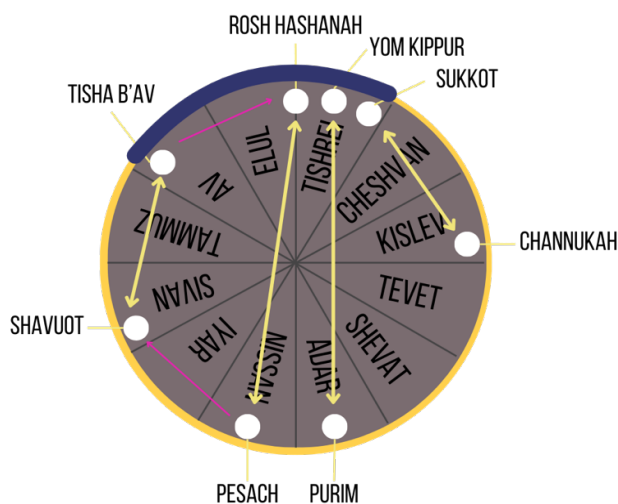
¹ I am including Shmini Atzeret, which is indeed a Torah holiday, as part of the Sukkot holiday. My reasoning will be elaborated in the Sukkot section of this essay.

² There are, of course, other holidays that occur during the Jewish year. These too are indispensable parts of Jewish religious life and modern Jewish identity. However, these are

not the original holidays; they are later additions to the calendar. Two holidays that fit this description are Tu B'Shvat and Simchat Torah. The modern Jewish calendar also includes other recent additions like the Israeli holidays Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzmaut, and Yom Yerushalayim. These holidays have gained prominence over time, but they are not part of the original calendar.

Hashanah matches Pesach; Yom Kippur matches Purim; Sukkot matches Chanukah; Tisha B'Av matches Shavuot. Each pair of holidays is matched in terms of theme, and sometimes also in terms of ritual.

Each pair of holidays is matched in order of when they occur. The holiday sets are continuous and uninterrupted by any holiday in the second set. Across each set, the holiday pairs do not refer to each other diagonally across time, but are matched in chronological order.



In this rendering, the blue line represents the Tishrei Movement, and the yellow line represents the rest of the year. The yellow arrows show the pairs between the two holiday sets. The pink line shows that each set contains a counting of seven weeks.

Once the calendar is visualized in this way, it is impossible not to see the purposeful organization of the Jewish year. The Jewish calendar is structured so that every holiday operates as a perfect mirror image to another holiday.

The question is: why?

To uncover the purpose of this mirrored structure of the Jewish year, I compare four sets of paired holidays: 1) Rosh Hashanah and Pesach; 2) Yom Kippur and Purim; 3) Sukkot and Chanukah; and 4) Tisha B'Av and Shavuot. Comparing these holidays reveals how each pair operates around a shared theological question, and how the pairing offers two contrasting visions of some of religion's most profound topics. These shared theological themes are often also accompanied by similar rituals between the two holidays.

1. Rosh Hashanah // Pesach

Is Jewish time universal or particular?

Let's start at the beginning.

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year. It is a celebration of creation, the birthday of the world and the beginning of all time. Its paired holiday is Pesach. Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, and celebrates the particular story of Jewish emancipation, freedom, and self-actualization. Pesach is also a holiday of new beginnings. Both holidays are commemorated through sequences of hands-on rituals performed in a special order.

The dates of the two holidays underscore their intrinsic relationship. While Rosh Hashanah is considered "the Jewish New Year," it is, in fact,

Pesach which occurs in the first month of the year. Pesach occurs in the month of Nissan, and Rosh Hashanah occurs in the month of Tishrei. Tishrei is the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, and it is curious that the Jewish New Year should happen on the first day of the seventh month of the year. (As opposed to, say, the first day of the first month, as the secular calendar does with January 1!)

Indeed, the first month of the Jewish year is the month of Nisan. The ordering of the months is stated clearly in the Torah: “The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.”³ This verse comes at the momentous occasion of the Jewish people standing at the precipice of the Exodus from Egypt.

In designating this particular day as the first day of the first month, there is a significant theological implication: the Exodus from Egypt is the beginning of Jewish time. This implication is so significant, in fact, that Rashi’s first comment to the first verse of the Torah raises this exact predicament. [Rashi](#) specifically asks:

IN THE BEGINNING — Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah which is the Law book of Israel should have commenced with the verse (Exodus 12:2) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months” which is the first commandment given to Israel.

Here, Rashi offers his own candidate for what could have been the Torah’s first verse: instead of beginning with the beginning of all time, the Torah could have started with the beginning of Jewish time. Wouldn’t the establishment of Jewish time be a better beginning for this book that is ostensibly for the Jews and about the Jews? Rashi imagines that the Torah could have started with the Exodus from Egypt instead of the creation of the world. In offering this alternate draft of the Torah’s first verse, Rashi points out two contrasting visions of how to understand the beginning of time. Creation emphasizes the beginning of all time, while Exodus accentuates the beginning of Jewish time. The holiday that celebrates the former is Rosh Hashanah, and the holiday that celebrates the latter is Pesach.

As such, Rosh Hashanah and Pesach are both New Year holidays.⁴ They each celebrate a certain theological understanding of the beginning of

³ [Exodus 12:2](#)

⁴ By the Mishnaic age, the sages propose that there are in fact four dates that could be considered a “New Year,”

adding the first of Shevat and the first of Elul. This is not relevant to the Rosh Hashanah and Pesach connection I outline here, but worth mentioning nonetheless!

time. The Pesach season marks the beginning of *Jewish* time, the first day of the first month of the Jewish calendar. Six months later, halfway through the year, situated in direct opposition, we have the first day of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, the remembrance of the moment when *all* time began.

The first of Nissan marks the beginning of Jewish time. It is in Nissan that we were freed from slavery, that we left Egypt, that we were free to be our own people. We started on the journey toward our own land. There we'd be able to establish our own culture. Our calendar and our sense of time would be a centerpiece of that culture. As Rashi's comment astutely points out, Exodus 12:2 is not a descriptive statement; it is a *mitzvah*, a commandment, to begin marking time. The opportunity to be Jewish begins NOW, with the opportunity to observe mitzvot. Pesach is, in some sense, a celebration of this opportunity to be a people with *mitzvot*, the most particularly Jewish thing of all. This is what we are celebrating: the beginning of the time of mitzvot. The beginning of time for us was our first chance to behave in our particular way, the first day of becoming ourselves.

The first of Tishrei, on the other hand, marks the beginning of all time. There is evening and there is morning for everyone who lives under the sun. Days end and begin again; time moves forward for all life. Another year is infinitely added to the

count. The Jews may have their own particular calendar cycle, but even so, the Jews also exist in universal time. We too were created along with everyone else. As [Rashi's opening comment on Genesis 1:1](#) goes on to say, our Torah begins with this story so that neither we nor anyone else ever forgets the origin of all existence. God created us all, all at once.

Rosh Hashanah and Pesach offer two opposing ways to understand Jewish existence. Either we are inherently part of a universal story, or we are inextricably part of a particular story that is ours alone. Jews live with both world views in tension.⁵ Pesach celebrates our freedom and the beginning of our destiny as a nation of our own, but we can never take that special independence for granted. Seven months after Pesach, Jews face a yearly reminder that we come from the same place as everyone else.

And we will end up in the same place as everyone else, too. The book of life is now open – just in time for Yom Kippur.

2. Yom Kippur // Purim

Is fate determined by chance, or can we change our destinies?

The Yom Kippur and Purim pairing is the most explicit of the four holiday mirrors. Yom HaKippurim is often translated as “The Day of

⁵ The debate over these two theologies is captured in the Kiddush, which switches without warning between sanctifying Creation and sanctifying Redemption.

Atonement.” Articulated with a different – homiletical – emphasis, the holiday name can be rendered as Yom Ke-Purim: “The Day That is Like Purim.”

It might appear that no two Jewish holidays are more different than Yom Kippur and Purim. Yom Kippur is a solemn day; Purim is a day of rejoicing. Yom Kippur is marked by fasting; Purim by feasting. Yom Kippur is a day when sins are recited in a clearly organized list; Purim is a day when the distinction between good and evil is blurred. The two holidays are exact opposites.

In their opposition we find that the two holidays are each grappling with the same existential question: is destiny determined by chance or is it shaped by human action?

The Jewish story that is most obviously about chance versus human action is the Purim narrative found in The Book of Esther. In this story, Haman, advisor to the Persian king Ahasuerus, plots revenge against the Jewish people. Haman decides when the day of vengeance will fall by drawing *purim* - lots. The plan is set in motion by a game of chance. And yet, through the coordinated human action of Esther and Mordechai, *nahafoch hu!* – the opposite happened.⁶ The improbable crescendo of the Purim story is that a destiny determined by lottery can indeed be overturned. Purim shows that these existential lotteries need not always be final.

⁶ [Esther 9:1](#) – “...the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, **the opposite happened...**”

On the other hand, Yom Kippur is the day when fates are sealed. The process of *teshuva*, repentance, that began on Rosh Hashanah reaches its dramatic conclusion on Yom Kippur as a person’s fate for the upcoming year is finalized. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed,” we recite in the U’Netaneh Tokef prayer. The day of reckoning is here:

You open the Book of Remembrance and it reads itself; every man’s signature is in it. The great shofar is sounded, and a still, soft voice is heard; the angels tremble, fear and dread seize them, and they exclaim: the Day of Judgment is here!

-Unetaneh Tokef, from the High Holiday liturgy

Yom Kippur’s rituals demonstrate the severity of what is at risk. There is no eating, no drinking, no life affirming actions. The decree is being decided and “sealed” during this fast, so this is the last moment to avert a bad fate.

These are the rituals familiar from today’s Yom Kippur, and they are obviously connected to the holiday’s big questions about a person’s ability to affect existential outcomes. But Yom Kippur’s biblical origins as described in the Torah make the connection even more plain. The biblical Yom Kippur was a day when atonement was made *for* the Jewish people by the high priest, not by the

Jewish people on their own behalf.⁷ The process by which expiation was made for the Jewish people by the high priest is laid out in detail in [Leviticus 16](#). To summarize, the high priest chose two goats. He designated one goat for God, and one goat for “Azazel.” The goat for God was offered as a sin offering, whereas the goat for Azazel carried the people’s sins into the wilderness.

Which of the two goats was offered for expiation and which was sent to the wilderness was determined by drawing lots. The game of chance is played here too with existential consequences. Who will live and who will die? Both options are available.

Purim and Yom Kippur are both holidays that pay tribute to the fact that death is utterly possible, just awaiting its details. In the narratives of these holidays, the details would be determined through lots, *purim*. Fate is, on every level, out of our control. Paradoxically, even against the odds, both holidays offer hope. Yom Kippur offers a chance for atonement which will avert the bad decree. Purim remembers a time when the decree was indeed overturned. The Jewish people do, indeed, live.

Fate is out of our hands and yet there is always something that can be done to effect change. Both holidays put our vulnerability on full display because death can be drawn from the lottery. But indeed one must cope with this inherent

vulnerability. The holidays offer hope that somehow, death still can be overturned. Yom Kippur and Purim demonstrate that fate is a game of chance, but at the same time, encourages the religious imperative to survive nonetheless.

3. Sukkot // Chanukkah

Can the House of God ever be permanent?

The first need of survival is the building of shelters. Shelters guard from the elements and defend against outsiders. These are the homes that protect people. At later stages of development, communities erect physical structures to buttress their social institutions and to showcase their stability. These are the homes that keep a people intact. With all of this charge built into their walls, houses are erected to be permanent. A house’s inevitable vulnerability is the foundational concern of both Sukkot and Chanukah.

Chanukkah celebrates the Hasmonean victory over the Seleucids in the 3rd century BCE. The Seleucid Greeks brought havoc upon Judaea, abolishing Jewish customs and defiling the most important Jewish place: “... [Antiochus] entered proudly into the sanctuary, and took away the golden altar, and the candlestick of light, and all the vessels thereof, And the table of the shewbread, and the pouring vessels, and the vials, and the censers of gold, and the veil, and the

⁷ [Leviticus 16:30](#): “For on this day atonement shall be made **for you** to purify you of all your sins.”

crown, and the golden ornaments that were before the temple, all which he pulled off.”⁸ The Temple in Jerusalem was ravaged and ruined. Therefore, upon their victory, the Hasmoneans focused on restoring the Temple to its rightful state as the ever-lasting home of the Jewish people. They rededicated the Temple and proclaimed a new annual festival: Chanukkah.

On that first Chanukkah, a mighty celebration was had! Not only did the Hasmoneans declare a one-day festival but, in fact, Chanukkah would be celebrated as eight days of rejoicing. As we read in the Book of Maccabees: “They celebrated a festival to Hashem for eight days, just as the days of the *Sukkot* festival.”⁹

In creating their new holiday, the establishers of Chanukkah immediately embedded within Chanukkah a connection to Sukkot. The Midrash tells us that this connection was an effort to make up for some of the Greeks’ harshest assimilation efforts:

According to a *Midrash*, the Greeks issued a decree forbidding the Jews to observe the *Sukkot* festival, and they were unable to bring the sacrificial offerings of *Sukkot* in the *Beit Hamikdash*. Hence, Hashem said, “You wanted to abolish the eight days of *Sukkot*; I will therefore give them an additional festive period of eight days — *Chanukkah*.”¹⁰

While living under the Seleucid policies, The Jewish people had been forbidden from performing the sacrificial offerings of Sukkot. So, the midrash tells us, God provided a correction: not only would Sukkot return to the cycle of Jewish holidays, but there would also be an additional holiday added to mirror Sukkot and amplify Sukkot’s prominence.¹¹ Chanukkah is this extra eight-day festival.

When the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple, they made up for the Sukkot celebration that they had missed. The Book of Maccabees describes how

⁸ [First Book of Maccabees 1:23](#)

⁹ [Second Book of Maccabees 10:9](#)

¹⁰

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2829847/jewish/The-Chanukah-Sukkot-Connection.htm

¹¹ Indeed, the importance of the parallelism of “eight days” between Sukkot and Chanukah indicates that indeed Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret are considered one eight-day long holiday in the structure of the Jewish calendar.

the rededication of the Temple was celebrated in a manner reminiscent of what had been forced to be skipped. Into the Temple they brought Sukkot-like plants: “willows of the brook” and “branches of the palm.”¹² Chanukkah was a redo, a pseudo-Sukkot at the first opportune moment. The eight day festival of Chanukkah was indeed an eight-day festival of Sukkot – the full celebration of both Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret – performed in the rededicated Temple as the ultimate Sukkah.

And yet there’s a deep contradiction at play when the Hasmoneans reconsecrate the Temple modeled after a sukkah. For, of course, the main conceit of Sukkot is the building of temporary structures. The Sukkah is a tribute to the booths erected by the Jewish people immediately following their exodus from Egypt. These booths were the Israelites’ first dwelling places but certainly not their final ones! One can imagine that the act of mimicking a sukkah inside the newly rededicated Temple could have one of two very different implications. Either the celebration was an insistence that the Temple itself becomes the final permanent sukkah, or perhaps, the celebration is an admission that all houses are like a temporary sukkah. Even the Eternal House itself.

This powerful question, and indeed the entire connection between Chanukkah and Sukkot, has been muted over time. Without the Temple in

Jerusalem still standing, the original relationship between Sukkot and Chanukkah becomes less plain. One does still find traces of the original connection between these two holidays in Rabbinic literature. For example, in the famous debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai about how to light the holiday candles, Shammai argues that the candles should be lit in descending order to mirror the descending number of bull sacrifices offered on Sukkot. This is a fine idea, and yet it does not win. The tradition of lighting ascending amounts of candles does nothing to remind us of Sukkot’s themes amid today’s Chanukkah celebrations.

Yet the underlying religious concern remains. Jews long for a home base: a house, a synagogue, a Temple, a land. Sukkot and Chanukkah celebrate these home structures despite the fact that all our houses are inevitably vulnerable, temporary and ever-changing. A sukkah only stands for seven days, but tradition commands the sukkah to be beautified nonetheless. The Chanukkah candles are kindled to remember the rededication of the Temple even in a world without the Temple. It is all we can do in a world where shelters are temporary, and those that cannot be rebuilt need to be reimagined.

And so these two holidays prompt a challenging proposition: Which elements of our tradition need

¹² Second [Book of Maccabees 10:10](#)

to be unrelated to place in order to last?

4. Tisha B'Av // Shavuot

How do we experience nearness to God?

Tradition holds that both the First and the Second Temple were destroyed on the 9th of Av. The commemoration of these catastrophic destructions, as well as many other preceding and subsequent catastrophic events in Jewish history, is marked by the fast of Tisha B'Av. Tisha B'Av is a day of mourning. The Book of Lamentations, which depicts the destruction of the Temple, is recited yearly on this day. Chanted in a unique elegiac tune, the book's words of sorrow pierce the ears of the congregation: "Zion's roads are in mourning, Empty of festival pilgrims; All her gates are deserted. Her priests sigh, Her maidens are unhappy— She is utterly disconsolate!"¹³

With the destruction of the Temple, Jerusalem was emptied of "festival pilgrims." There were three Biblical holidays which required pilgrimage to Jerusalem: Pesach, Sukkot and Shavuot. In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, these three holidays were forced to adopt new rituals and new narrative significance. No holiday went through this transformation more acutely or more famously than Shavuot.

Shavuot is originally described in the Torah as a holiday of the wheat harvest: "You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering."¹⁴ Once it became impossible

to "bring" anything to the Temple, Shavuot was at risk of losing its meaning. The biblical Shavuot was a festival which relied fully on *place*. A Judaism without place – without Jerusalem, without the Temple – is a Judaism which cannot uphold the rituals of Shavuot.

Therefore, in post-Temple Judaism, Shavuot was transformed. Shavuot became a holiday that celebrated the Revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah. This reconfiguration was possible because of a creative adaptation of Shavuot's date. Shavuot comes as the very next momentous occasion after Pesach and the Exodus from Egypt. Counting 7 weeks from Pesach, Shavuot's timing was perfect. Instead of a pilgrimage festival based on the agricultural calendar and reliant on bringing offerings to Jerusalem, the updated Shavuot imagines a new form of religious worship centered on Torah. In so doing, Shavuot proposes that closeness to God does not rely on physical proximity at all.

Adapting Shavuot as a celebration of Revelation was not only calendrically convenient, but it was also theologically astute. In a world without Jerusalem and without the Temple, Jews had to imagine a religion that could be observed anywhere and whose center of worship could be portable. As opposed to the Temple, the Torah is not connected to any one place. The Midrash teaches that the Torah was given to the Israelites in the wilderness, instead of in the Land of Israel, intentionally:

¹³ [Lamentations 1:4](#)

¹⁴ [Leviticus 23:17](#)



“The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” – it is, that anyone who does not render himself like a wilderness, accessible to all, is unable to acquire wisdom and the Torah. That is why it is stated: “In the wilderness of Sinai.”

- [Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7](#)

The Torah is revealed in the wilderness, in no place, in any place. One might have thought that Torah *should* be revealed in the Temple, or in Jerusalem, or in the Land of Israel, at least! But, in fact, the wilderness location comes to teach that wilderness is itself a metaphor for revelation. The giving of the Torah cannot occur in a defined place because one cannot receive its wisdom when there are any boundaries between oneself and revelation. Therefore, Torah can only be received in open space. Not only no Temple walls needed: no walls allowed at all.

Shavuot is an answer to the mourning of Tisha B'Av. In a world where the Temple is physically demolished, Judaism's center became spiritual. In this way, a relationship to God can never be destroyed even when all the obvious mechanisms to reach God are torn down. The celebration of Revelation could not exist without Tisha B'Av, or at least, would not hold the same significance. Shavuot's theological power relies on Tisha B'Av because the ritual prominence of Torah occurred in the wake of the destruction of the Temple.

The connection between these two holidays is woven into the fabric of Jewish practice. A few examples jump to mind. First, Shavuot is a metaphor for the marriage between God and the Jewish people. At every Jewish marriage, a glass is broken to commemorate the destruction of the Temple. This is to say: the revelation and the destruction are part and parcel of the same experience. One must never forget, even in joy, about the ever-present possibility of danger. Second, Tisha B'Av is the only holiday of the year where the study of Torah is forbidden. This too comes to teach about the inextricable qualities of revelation and destruction: the two experiences are so interlinked, that one must make special effort to disentangle them for the one day a year in order to fully simulate the devastation of Tisha B'Av.

These ritual connections are a bit dismal, but they do not symbolize despair only. There is a message of hope in this holiday pairing. The Jewish people received revelation at Mount Sinai in the middle of the Book of Exodus, chapters 19 and 20. The rest of the book of Exodus details the instructions for the building of the mishkan. The giving of Torah is directly related to the structure that the Jews are meant to erect. The mishkan is the original, transportable dwelling for God – a dwelling which eventually turns into the Beit HaMikdash in its fixed place in Jerusalem. If Tisha B'av tells the sad end of this house-building story, then perhaps one can understand that the permanent Beit HaMikdash has not yet been erected. Perhaps we

are still in the Torah-giving moment of revelation, still learning how to read the instructions for how we are supposed to live and create the world where the Beit haMikdash can stand.

In this way, the destruction commemorated during Tisha B'Av is as loaded with possibility as revelation itself. A holiday which commemorates destruction requires the religious response of grappling with what destruction reveals. After Tisha B'Av comes the reckoning. This is the order of events: Tisha B'Av is not only the day of mourning the Temple, it is also the long beginning of the "Tishrei Movement." After Tisha B'Av, the calendar counts 7 weeks until Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Alan Lew writes in his book about Tishrei, *This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, that the destruction of the walls of the Temple can be seen as a metaphor for the 7-week process that Tisha B'Av initiates. The process of Teshuva that occurs in Tishrei starts at Tisha B'Av because "The walls of our soul begin to crumble and the first glimmerings of transformation – of Teshuva – begin to seep in."¹⁵ The Tishrei Movement begins with Tisha B'Av as a day of mourning that lays one bare, leaving a person spiritually unguarded and without walls, ready to repent.

For a Jew to experience Teshvua, to be a person oriented toward the world the Torah describes, to be really engaged with the Torah at all, one has to experience Tisha B'Av as a kind of Shavuot experience: to make oneself into one's own

Wilderness of Sinai, ready to receive. Only through destruction can revelation ensue.

Tisha B'Av opens the possibility to receive for all the revelations that Tishrei has to offer, making Tisha B'Av into a pseudo-revelation holiday: the Tishrei Movement's own version of Shavuot.

In observing¹⁶ the full Jewish calendar cycle, one will experience the following:

- Eight annual holidays: Tisha B'Av, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, and Shavuot.
- A rapid bunching of four holidays in short succession from Tisha B'Av to Sukkot. This "Tishrei Movement" is then followed by four stand-alone holidays that span the rest of the year. These are two holiday sets of four holidays each. One might consider the Tishrei Movement to be a "mini" year, a three-month microcosm of the rest of the Jewish calendar.
- Each holiday in the Tishrei Movement is matched by a "mirror holiday" in the rest of the year: Rosh Hashanah/Pesach; Yom Kippur/Purim; Sukkot/Chanukah; Tisha B'Av/Shavuot.
- Each holiday is matched according to theme, raising similar theological questions as its pair does.

¹⁵ Alan Lew, [*This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*](#). (63)

¹⁶ When I say observing, I do mean both senses of the word: observing in terms of following the holiday rituals, and observing in terms of really paying attention.

Each partner in a holiday pair offers a different theological possibility.

Rosh Hashanah and Pesach ask the question: “When does our story begin?” Rosh Hashanah answers, “on the day we were all created.” Pesach rebuts: “For Jews, time starts when we became a nation.”

Yom Kippur and Purim press the issue: “How is our fate determined?” Yom Kippur offers a humbling response, “our deaths can come this very year.” Purim replies loudly, “death can be averted.”

Amid this existential vulnerability, Sukkot and Chanukkah proclaim the value of building protective structures. And yet both holidays are celebrated against the awareness that these structures are temporary. Sukkot admits: Everything is fleeting,¹⁷ even our homes. Chanukkah rededicates the hope of erecting an everlasting House.

Tisha B’Av and Shavuot face the challenge of building a relationship with God without the boundaries of physical structures. We mourn on Tisha B’Av for the destruction of our holiest place. We celebrate on Shavuot for our holiest gift, the Torah, given to us in no place at all.

Each holiday in the annual Jewish calendar cycle elicits a theological investigation. Performing

holiday rituals brings each holiday’s big question to the forefront of our minds at particular moments throughout each year. Then, at another point in the year, the calendar circles back on the same question via a “mirror holiday,” this time providing an opportunity to engage with an answer opposite to the first holiday’s supposition. In any given year, the religious observer might find greater meaning in one of the holiday pair’s solutions to each theological dilemma. In another year, the opposite might feel more fitting. In a whole year, either theological reality is available for meaning-making and for shaping a world view.

For every action there is an equal but opposite reaction. The calendar provides two solutions to Judaism’s big religious questions. Two possible answers are available, and through the holidays, engaging with either answer is at our disposal. Two religious truths are revealed cyclically through time each Jewish year. Travelling linearly forward in one’s chronological life, either answer might be better suited to one’s current religious disposition. With a calendar system that constantly repeats, infinite possibility is exposed.

This paradox is woven into the fabric of the Jewish concept of the calendar year. The word for year in Hebrew is *shanah*. *Shanah* is a Hebrew contranym – a word which means both itself and its opposite.¹⁸ *Shanah* means both change and repetition. Changing and repeating are two

¹⁷ Traditionally, the Book of Ecclesiastes is read on Sukkot. The book begins: “Utter futility!—said Koheleth— Utter futility! All is futile!”

¹⁸ Hebrew is rife with contranymy. Other good examples: *gimmel/resh*, which can mean both being at home and not being at home; *ayin/resh/mem*, which can mean both nakedness and shrewdness.

opposite concepts which are so inextricably linked to each other that they can only be signified by identical grammatical roots. Living out the repeating Jewish year over the course of an ever changing life, different theological options are made available. One year, one might possess a world that aligns with the Pesach theology of particularism. Years later, one might believe something more closely aligned with Rosh Hashanah's universalism. Both are available in any given year.

This is a comforting idea, I think. It is intellectually interesting that two opposites necessarily exist in tension with each other and, in fact, that no one thing is complete without its converse.¹⁹ There is great virtue in such pairings: pairs enrich and explain each other. The way we know good is through the absence of evil; this is how we see light and dark; change is only relevant in the context of repetition. We need both, and in fact, can't have one without the other. The Jewish calendar is complete by offering paired answers to Judaism's great religious questions.

And yet.

One cannot ignore that there is imperfection in this necessity.

Two is, in fact, not better than one; one is the perfect number! In perfection, duality would become unnecessary. One *should* be able to understand things phenomenologically as they are without needing an opposite to clarify the issue. Thesis and antithesis need only exist until we can reach synthesis! At the point of synthesis, opposites would fade away. True perfection lies in the effort to consolidate the world into oneness.

This world is not perfect. We cannot pull off perfect oneness. The time we experience in this world is full of unknowing. The Jewish calendar hedges our not-knowing by providing two options, two avenues into experiencing different possible religious truths.²⁰ We need these avenues because, in this world, we do not know the truth. In this world without answers, we need a year that offers both Rosh Hashanah AND Pesach, both Yom Kippur AND Purim, both Sukkot AND Chanukkah, both Tisha B'Av AND Shavuot.

The "twoness" of the Jewish calendar was built on purpose. We are meant to experience the Jewish holidays as the constant navigation between two answers. This is an ongoing effort to eventually work toward one answer that would transcend current reality. There should be a balance between the two mirrored holidays or, maybe,

¹⁹ I am reminded here of God's earliest piece of advice: "It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him."

²⁰ There are other ways that Judaism provides two ritual options when one truth is not available. For example, there

are two Seders in the diaspora where we cannot know the true start date of Pesach. There are two Shabbat candles to represent our not knowing whether God instructs to "observe" or to "remember."

one of the pair ends up standing alone. We experience both mirror holidays each year in the here and now, but in another more perfect reality we would understand better.

The Jewish calendar contains glimpses of this other reality, too. In fact, it is the most common, regular, and important element of our calendar. Our most frequent holiday. It is Shabbat.

Shabbat is the first²¹ and the ultimate Jewish holiday. It is the only original part of our calendar which stands alone. Shabbat has no pair. It stands for an enactment of perfect time, when all is complete and oneness is real. This is why we learn in the Talmud that Shabbat is a microcosm of the world to come.²² Shabbat is a glimpse of perfection. We are gifted the opportunity to experience that perfection on repeat, once a week, even as we travel through a full year of imperfection.

Shabbat is a weekly reminder that oneness is possible. Throughout the year, the holidays still stand in twos. But in future time, all the mirrored holidays will disappear.²³ Eventually, answers will be revealed to the great theological questions and paired holidays will no longer be needed. The

baseline of the Jewish sense of time is the hope to return to one. Unity will be achieved. Shabbat will be all time.

Until then, we exist with two versions of reality holding itself in fragile balance. And since this is all we have, we celebrate.

Finding Humanity in the Akeidah

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When I was a teenager, my father asked me a question late on a Friday night. It was Parashat Vayera, and the following morning we would be reading the story of the binding of Isaac, *Akeidat Yitzchak*, in synagogue. My father asked me if I thought I would be capable of sacrificing my child the way Abraham was prepared to do to his beloved son, Isaac. Flippantly, I told him that if God told me to do it, that would be a hard thing to resist; then I changed the subject.¹

Now, after becoming a father, I'm embarrassed by

²¹ [Leviticus 23:3](#)

²² [b.Berakhot 57b](#)

²³ [Midrash Mishlei 9:1](#) hints that the sages said that in the world-to-come "all of the holidays are to be nullified in the future." This, obviously, deserves fuller treatment!

¹ I'd like to thank my father, Jay Hollander z"l, for always pushing me to think critically and challenge conventional ways of looking at the world. I'd also like to thank Ruthie Hollander, Rabbi Tori Greene, Rabbi Zach Beer, Elli Klein-Treisman, and Esti Klein for their feedback and support on this piece.

the answer I gave to mine.

My firstborn daughter was born with a rare allergy, and was rehospitalized the night we brought her home from the hospital. I have vivid memories of doctors poking and prodding my screaming newborn baby, and I can still remember the urge I had to punch the doctors who were “hurting” my baby. If my father were to ask me the same question today, my answer would be a resounding no, regardless of who told me to do it. I’d be lying if I said this new perspective didn’t taint this foundational story of Jewish tradition we read every year. *Akeidat Yitzchak*, remembered by much of Jewish and Christian philosophical tradition as a great act of piety and faith, has morphed into something terrifying in my eyes. And I am not the only one: even Abraham’s most ardent defender, 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who labeled Abraham as a knight of faith for this teleological suspension of the ethical, admitted that he both admired and was appalled by Abraham.² 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant went so far as to say Abraham was wrong for his decision to slaughter his son.³ Furthermore, contrary to the Jewish philosophical thinkers like Rambam, Ramban, and Sa’adiah Gaon, who predominantly seek to justify and praise Abraham for his show of religious piety in his willingness to carry out this divine command, midrashic literature and Biblical exegesis seem more invested in showing a different, more human, side to Abraham,

depicting a man that was hesitant about, if not disturbed by, the commandment he was given.

The 12th century work *Yalkut Shimoni* records a battle of wits between Satan and Abraham, the former doing everything he can to convince the latter not to go through with sacrificing his son. However, Abraham rebuffs every argument Satan throws at him:

Satan met him on the way and appeared to him in the guise of an old man. He (Satan) said to him (Abraham), “Where are you going?” He said, “To pray.” Satan said, “Why would someone on his way to pray have fire and a knife in his hand, and carry wood on his shoulder?” He said, “In case we stay for a day or two, then we shall slaughter and cook and eat.” Satan said to him, “Old man! Was I not there when the Holy One, blessed be He, said to you, ‘Take your son ...’? Will an old man like you then go and kill a son given to him at the age of a hundred?! Have you not heard the saying, ‘That which he had, he threw away; now he asks from others’? And if you suggest that you might have another son – will you then obey the accuser, by destroying a life for which you will

² Kierkegaard, [*Fear and Trembling*](#), 89, as described by Dr. Kenneth Seeskin.

³ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, quoted in Jerome Gellman, [*The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire*](#), 3

be held guilty by law?!” He said to him, “It was not the accuser, but the Holy One, blessed be He. I will not listen to you.” Satan left him and took on the guise of a young man, and stood to the right of Isaac. He said to him, “Where are you going?” He answered, “To study Torah.” Satan asked, “Alive or dead?” He said, “Can one study after he is dead?!” Satan said, “Unfortunate one, son of an unfortunate one! How many fasts did your mother fast until you were born; now this old man has lost his mind, and he is going to slaughter you!” He said: “Nevertheless – I shall not go against the will of my Creator nor against my father’s command.” Isaac then turned to his father and said, “My father, see what Satan said to me!” He said to him, “Pay no attention to him; he came only with the intention of wearing us down.”⁴

While the Midrash here records a literal debate between Satan and Abraham, Rabbi Yehuda Amital, former Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion,

interpreted this text as representative of the powerful inner tension Abraham felt as he approached Mount Moriah. The Satan who appears in the Midrash was actually “Abraham’s own sense of morality, outraged by the command,” wrote Rabbi Amital, concluding: “This is not a simple, easy story, but a sharp tale that emphasizes the humanity of the servant of God. Even the fear of God that fills his heart cannot blunt his humanity.”⁵

A passage in Genesis Rabbah captures this conflict starkly, imagining Abraham sobbing, stretching out his hand to slaughter his son, while at the same time brimming with love for God and excitement to fulfill His commandment.⁶ Another passage in Yalkut Shimoni imagines Abraham as tearfully, and perhaps hopefully, saying, “my son, since you have already expressed your readiness to relinquish your blood, your Creator will find a different sacrifice in your place.”⁷ The Mishnah in Tractate Taanit claims Abraham uttered a prayer at Mount Moriah without specifying what the prayer was.⁸ In the Talmud Yerushalmi, Rabbi Bibi Abba suggested that Abraham prayed that God would remember the lengths to which Abraham went to obey the word of God, and apply the merit he received with this act towards the Jewish people in the future.⁹ But Rabbi Amital imagines

⁴ [Yalkut Shimoni 1:101](#)

⁵ [When God is Near on the High Holidays](#), Rabbi Yehuda Amital, Maggid Press, 2015, 175-176

⁶ [Genesis Rabbah 56:8](#)

⁷ [Yalkut Shimoni 1:101](#)

⁸ [Mishnah Taanit 2:4](#)

⁹ [Yerushalmi Taanit 2:4](#)

Abraham's prayer to be a different one.

In Rabbi Amital's reading, Abraham's prayer that God answered on Mount Morah was a plea to not sacrifice his son. "Could Abraham go off happily and gladly to bind his son?" He asked. "Abraham is still a human being, plagued with doubts, the doubts of a father who loves his son with all his being."¹⁰

These texts ease modern sensibilities, and they reflect a horror at the idea that a man might gleefully sacrifice his beloved child. They also reveal a similar discomfort and sensibility in our ancestors who authored these texts in response to the story of the *Akeidah*. However, these interpretations of the story aren't so easily identifiable in the text itself. As far as the straightforward reading of the text is concerned, all we know is that Abraham was commanded to do something unthinkable, and set off to fulfill God's will the following morning. I'd like to offer a reading of this story and Abraham's emotional experience that might ground this humanizing view of Abraham in the text of the Torah and the story as we've received it.

The morning after Abraham received the

command from God to "take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you,"¹¹ the Torah describes the way Abraham set out on his journey: "Abraham rose up early (*vayashkeim*) in the morning."¹²

Jewish tradition doesn't see this as a simple description of his morning routine, but as a description of the *nature* of Abraham's actions. Rashi, citing a passage in Tractate Pesachim, claimed he woke up early, rushing to fulfill God's word out of religious zeal.¹³ However, this word the Talmud associates with religious fervor — *vayashkeim* — doesn't only appear in the *Akeidah*. In Genesis, the Torah uses the word *vayashkeim* to describe a number of risings:

1. The state in which Abimelech woke up the morning after dreaming God had scolded him for taking Sarah from Abraham to be his wife,¹⁴
2. the way Jacob arose after having a vision of God and the angels in Haran realizing how awesome the place he had slept truly was,¹⁵
3. the manner in which Laban woke up and

¹⁰ *When God is Near on the High Holidays*, 178

¹¹ [Genesis 22:2](#)

¹² Genesis 22:3

¹³ [Rashi on Genesis 22:3](#)

¹⁴ [Genesis 20:8](#)

¹⁵ [Genesis 28:18](#)

kissed his family goodbye once he caught up to them after they fled from his house a few days earlier,¹⁶

4. the way Abraham woke up the day after God told him to send Hagar and Ishmael away,¹⁷
5. and the state in which Abraham arose the day after he argued with God to save Sodom, looking to see if God had actually destroyed the city.¹⁸

In Exodus, the Torah uses the word *vayashkeim* to describe the way Moses woke up the morning he was intended to ascend Mount Sinai,¹⁹ as well as the morning he was to ascend Mount Sinai again after the sin of the Golden Calf.²⁰ What links these events, I believe — and what might give us a new perspective on what Abraham was feeling the morning he set out to sacrifice his son — was a sense of unease or fear, rather than any sense of alacrity or excitement like Rashi's commentary on Abraham at the Akeidah would lead us to believe.

Disturbing experiences, either the day before or planned for the day ahead, can make it hard to sleep, such that we wake up early in the morning. What unites these instances is an element of dread: Abimelech waking up after God threatening him with death; Jacob waking up “shaken” with the realization that he was sleeping

on holy ground; Laban's stress the night he caught up with his children and grandchildren — after waking up a few days earlier to find that his family had deserted him — perhaps afraid they'd flee from him again while he was asleep. Moses may well have been fearful of the awesome experience of ascending Mount Sinai the first time, and all the more so the second time, after the Israelites sinned with the Golden Calf. Not knowing the final decision of God to spare Sodom, Abraham might have woken up early to see if his fears had come to fruition and the city his nephew lived in had been destroyed. And finally, Abraham might have woken up the morning after receiving the command to sacrifice his son, burdened by the weight of the task he was given.

However, I think Abraham's fears may have run deeper than only the loss of his son. Perhaps Abraham could not sleep that night — rose early, after a sleepless, restless night — because he started to question the goodness of the very God he had dedicated his life to. Earlier in Genesis, God promised Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of the heavens in the aftermath of the great war Abraham participated in. Once the blessing was conferred, the Torah says, “And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”²¹ Rashi assumed the being that was calculating merit was God, praising

¹⁶ [Genesis 32:1](#)

¹⁷ [Genesis 21:11-14](#)

¹⁸ [Genesis 19:27](#)

¹⁹ [Exodus 24:4](#)

²⁰ [Exodus 34:4](#)

²¹ [Genesis 15:6](#)

Abraham for putting his trust in Him, but Ramban thinks it was Abraham who put his faith in God and saw God as righteous. This moment is a powerful one because, after all the trials and tribulations. It was a moment of affirmation of Abraham's trust in God and his belief that God was righteous. However, a few chapters later, Abraham will challenge this belief when God tells him that He will destroy Sodom. Abraham says, "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"²²

According to Ibn Ezra, the word *tzedakah*, righteousness, in Abraham's declaration of trust in God was a synonym for justice (*mishpat*). Abraham's belief was shaken when he realized that God could destroy a city, leading him to question the fundamental definition of God he had lived with until that point. Suddenly, the God of love and life Abraham had devoted his life to was capable of terrible destruction. After spending all day negotiating with God, Abraham arose early the next morning to the destruction of Sodom, and very possibly the destruction of his theological worldview.

This shakiness seeps into the rest of his life, too. Over the course of his life Abraham goes through tremendous challenges, but in the beginning of his story he seemed to rise to the occasion valiantly,

bravely leaving the familiar setting of his father's house to go to a foreign land; fighting in the war of the four kings versus the five kings to save Lot; rushing to greet new guests despite being in pain from his circumcision. He never hesitated.

And yet, after the destruction of Sodom, Abraham begins to hesitate.

When told to send away Hagar and Ishmael, instead of agreeing to it like he did the first time Hagar was sent away,²³ he questioned the decision and was distressed by it. When he made a pact with Abimelech at Beer-sheba, he was not strong enough to prevent Abimelech's servants from seizing his well.²⁴ In the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom, Abraham is a shaken man, less capable of defending himself, less sure of his decisions. He doesn't even protest the killing of his son like he did protest the destruction of Sodom.

But nothing can compare to the command to sacrifice Isaac. Dr. Kenneth Seeskin highlights the inner turmoil Abraham may have felt as he prepared for the journey, noting that Abraham strangely neglected (as far as the narrative goes) to tell Sarah where he was going, and was cryptic when he told his servants what he and Isaac were going to do at the top of the mountain: "Then Abraham said to his servants, 'You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.'"²⁵ Seeskin

²² [Genesis 18:25](#)

²³ [Genesis 16:6](#)

²⁴ [Genesis 21:25](#)

²⁵ [Genesis 22:5](#)

posits that Abraham must have known how horrific the command was, and couldn't bring himself to tell his wife or his servants what God had commanded him to do. ²⁶

This reading of the story doesn't answer the biggest question of all — why God would command Abraham to sacrifice his own son — but it does highlight the humanity of Abraham. As in life, we will not understand the greater *whys* of the story; but we might see something about the character of Abraham in the way he rises that morning: so disturbed by what is about to happen that he cannot sleep. Like others recorded in the Torah, he wakes up early, fearful of the task ahead. Abraham may still be the knight of faith Kierkegaard regarded him as, but we shouldn't forget that he was still a human being, complete with love, fear, doubts, struggles, and heartbreak. He was one of us.

The Akeidah of Shmuel ibn Abbas

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It is easy, as an outsider, to condemn parents who

alienate their own children over a disagreement. Even if their grown children choose a lifestyle of which they disapprove, even if they leave religious observance or choose an unsavory occupation or do anything to profoundly injure their parents' sensibilities, the thinking goes, how can parents ever break the bonds of love and closeness with their own children?

It is much harder to consider that these parents might actually love their children just as much as the rest of us, and that the pain of their children's decisions is just somehow greater than their love. It is haunting, even, to imagine the unimaginable: that even those of us who believe ourselves to be the right kind of parents, who would never forsake their own children, may react similarly if we were to encounter this kind of pain. Does every parent have their own version of disappointment, including a threshold at which it becomes unbearable? These questions come to my mind in Elul, when I am reminded of the life of R. Yehuda ben Shmuel ibn Abbas.

Yehuda ibn Abbas was a twelfth century *dayyan* (judge) and poet from the community of Fez, Morocco.¹ In 1163, his only child, Shmuel, a respected mathematician, astronomer, and physician, converted to Islam. Shmuel is known to history as Al-Samawal ibn Yaḥyā al-Maghribī,

²⁶ [*Thinking about the Torah: A Philosopher Reads the Bible*](#), Kenneth Seeskin, Jewish Publication Society, 2016, 61

¹ [*"R. Yehuda ben Shmuel Abbas"*](#) [Heb.], *National Library of Israel*.

author of the anti-Jewish polemical work *Ifhām al-Yahūd* (*Confutation of the Jews*).²

Many have speculated that the ordeal of Shmuel's apostasy inspired Yehuda ibn Abbas' composition of a liturgical *piyyut* called [Eit Sha'arei Ratzon](#) ("The Time of the Gates of Favor").³ The *piyyut*, incorporated into the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgies of multiple Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions and set by each tradition to a different melody, describes the episode of *Akeidat Yitzhak* (the Binding of Isaac, [Bereishit 22](#)) with great pathos.⁴ Of course, the *piyyut*'s choice of subject matter is far from unique; poetic treatments of the *Akeidah* narrative form a centerpiece of the *Selihot* liturgy for all Jewish communities. But something feels unique about *this* poem.

I have been drawn to *Eit Sha'arei Ratzon* ever since I heard it performed, in the Libyan melody, by Livnat ben-Hamou and Oriyan Shukron in Yafo just weeks before October 7, 2023, in our final moments of comprehensible reality. It was strange and powerful to my Galitzianer ears, punctuated by a stage-setting refrain: *okeid ve-ha-ne'ekad ve-ha-mizbei'ah* ("the binder, the bound, and the altar").

According to the Israeli musician and songwriter Ehud Banai, what makes *Eit Sha'arei Ratzon* so moving is its sharp portrayal of the pain

experienced by the father Avraham, the son

Yitzhak, and the heavenly angels in the fateful moments of uncompleted sacrifice. In Banai's telling, ibn Abbas has rendered his personal pain over the loss of his son to Islam into the language of the *Akeidah* story.⁵ When read this way, one line of the *piyyut* stings especially. As ibn Abbas' version of Yitzhak questions his father over his failure to bring along a sacrificial lamb (Cf. [Bereishit 22:7](#)), he challenges: "*ha-at be-yom zeh datekha shokhei'ah*" — "have you, on this day, forgotten *your* religious law?" 'Your,' and not 'our.' The son no longer shares a religion with his father.

Why, though, would ibn Abbas choose the *Akeidah* story as a metaphor for his own, very different, loss? Sure, some of the basic narrative elements match up. In both stories, a father is forced to lose his son against his will—Avraham prepares to lose Yitzhak to God's will, although he is spared from the loss, while ibn Abbas loses Shmuel to Shmuel's own will. The location of the *Akeidah* on Mount Moriah, centrally sacred to both Jews and Muslims, may provide another link that drew ibn Abbas to fold his tragedy into the tragedy of Avraham and Yitzhak.

It seems likely to me, however, that what drove ibn Abbas' choice of the *Akeidah* is his hope to merit

² Ehud Banai, "[Fathers and Sons: On the Poem Eit Sha'arei Ratzon](#)" [Heb.], National Library of Israel.

³ See, e.g., Richard F. Gyug, [Medieval Cultures in Contact](#) (Fordham University Press, 2002), 123; Banai, *ibid.*

⁴ See [Eit Sha'arei Ratzon](#) [Heb.], National Library of Israel.

⁵ See Banai, *ibid.*

the same ending as that experienced by Avraham and Yitzhak. Of course, in *Bereishit* 22, the father does not ultimately lose his son, at least not exactly.⁶ God intervenes, and Yitzhak lives to see another day. Ibn Abbas, too, wants his son to return to him. In Banai's interpretation, the poem, and indeed ibn Abbas' life, represent a plea for Shmuel to return to the fold of Judaism.

I am tempted, though, to reach for a different, possibly anachronistic, reading. Maybe just as Avraham accepts the unthinkable and agrees to sacrifice his son, ibn Abbas seeks to signal that he has made peace with his own loss and prepares to re-accept his son on those new terms. Shmuel has transgressed everything his father believes in and yet remains his father's beloved son. Yehuda ibn Abbas will not accept Shmuel's decisions, but he will accept Shmuel.

One of the poem's strangest features is its use of the first-person singular in its opening stanza: "*ana zekhor na li be-yom hokhei'ah / okeid ve-ha-ne'ekad ve-hamizbei'ah*" — "Please recall for me on this day of reckoning / the binder, the bound, and the altar." Traditional representations of the *Akeidah* often include a request that God protect us in the merit of Avraham and Yitzhak's sacrifice.⁷ Here, however, the speaker seems to be speaking only for himself. He pleads, "Please recall *for me*," the one who has made the same sacrifice as Avraham, the story's meritorious ending. He wants that ending for himself.

⁶ But see Aaron Koller, *Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah in Modern Jewish Thought* (JPS, 2020) ("As far as

Later in life, Yehuda ibn Abbas relocated from Fez to Aleppo. His final recorded act was traveling from Aleppo to Mosul to visit his son Shmuel. The journey was undoubtedly painful for Yehuda. We can never know for certain what sort of reconciliation, or confrontation, he planned; he died on the way. We know that Yehuda yearned for the son that he loved and that had been taken from him.

The author's wish for an Avraham-Yitzhak ending may have motivated the composition of *Eit Sha'arei Ratzon*. For us, however, the denial of this wish makes the verses even harsher. All that is left, for the sake of Yehuda ibn Abbas, is to hope and pray that parents and adult children who live in conflict today find their way to peace and reconciliation.

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we know from the biblical text, Abraham and Isaac never speak again.")

⁷ See Koller, *ibid.*, 2-6.