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HAAZINU

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TESHUVAH, FROM THE (DIS)COMFORT OF YOUR OWN HOME

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Haven't you also thought, even for a moment, that it's time to run away from home? Sure—six months into the covid-19 pandemic, the living room sofa is feeling comfortable (by now it bears an indent in the shape of your back), making fresh lunch is better than packing it in the morning, and you've really gotten to know your quarantine buddies. But the restlessness is starting to set in, or maybe it's been gnawing at you since April—no more lockdown, or shutdown, or hunkering down, or all the feeling down that comes with feeling cooped up. Just to get out, to leave everything behind and breathe in some fresh air in a faraway place, to be somewhere that isn't here—you're starting to feel a deep, existential need for a vacation.

I have never been to Uman, and any responsible epidemiologist would have told you that going this year would pose a major public health threat. But as the policy conversations between Israel and Ukraine unfurled, I found myself pausing to consider what it would mean, for all of us, to escape our living rooms for just a few days on a penitential escapade, to break free of the monotony to which we're rapidly growing accustomed and to rediscover ourselves somewhere else.

This is because *teshuvah* is an essentially spatial experience, figuratively and literally. Repentance means to change, to bring oneself to a different 'place,' and that process, [Maimonides teaches](#), is facilitated by physically journeying away from home, an embodied experience of change that allows our souls to follow suit. Consider how you think more clearly, more reflectively, on a long flight or train ride, or when you're hiking through the mountains or strolling through the woods. By fleeing 'elsewhere,' a practice [R. Nachman of Breslov](#) calls *hitbodedut* ("seclusion"), we can break free from our lives and ourselves in order to gain a fresh perspective and start anew.

In this respect, Uman—like the airplane seat or hiking trail—is what [Michel Foucault would call a 'heterotopia'](#): a real place whose very function is to stand, so to speak, 'outside of the world,'—a place standing in contrast to, and in conflict with, all the real places that fill

the rest of our lives. A place designed for escaping, for fleeing, for taking refuge from what real life holds in store back at home. Heterotopias, Foucault claims, are the places away from home where we go in moments of crisis, when we feel that the world cannot handle us—nor can we handle the world—leaving us with no choice but to step outside of the world, regain our footing, and start over again.

But we're at home this year. There is no traveling for the holidays—maybe not even synagogue services; no contemplative train or plane rides, and no visits to Rebbes or other sacred spaces. As we face the crisis of *teshuvah* this year, when we are most in need of escape—of heterotopias—we are stuck within the confines of our own homes. How, then, will we repent this year? If we cannot run away, what will our *teshuvah* be?

To this end, I believe we can find inspiration in the teachings of Sefat Emet (R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847-1905), who offers—in contrast to R. Nachman's *hitbodedut*—penitential models better suited for at-home repentance. What follows is three *torot*, each suggesting that *teshuvah* is not about running away from home or one's self; rather, it has some alternate relationship with self and with home. Each of these *torot* stands independently, and Sefat Emet did not clarify if and how they relate to one another. Yet they all seem to draw on the same motif, *teshuvah* from the vantage point of home, even as each points in an alternative spiritual direction. Perhaps for this year's at-home *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* (the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), the wisdom of Sefat Emet can guide us to new kinds of *teshuvah* that resonate with our shared homebound experience.

Cleaning Up the House

The laws of the appointment of judges (Deut. 16:18-20) follow the laws of the festivals (Deut. 16:1-17), for the judges represent Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur following the three festivals. [This is because] the locus of the festivals is the Temple, while Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are focused upon 'all your gates' [i.e. the localities where judges are appointed]. (Sefat Emet, Shoftim, 5654)

Religious pilgrimage, though hardly practiced among Jews today (save, perhaps, by those who journey annually to Uman), is familiar to the Torah. Three times a year, we are commanded to ascend to Jerusalem and appear before God in the divine abode: the Temple. What's striking though is that on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, among the holiest days on the calendar and just days before the start

of Sukkot, there is no pilgrimage obligation. Were the Temple to be standing today, no one would be expected to show up in Jerusalem in time for Rosh Hashanah. True, this could be practical; it would be taxing to make the trek three times in a month or to stay in Jerusalem for all of Tishrei. But Sefat Emet seems to think that staying home for the penitential season is associated with the geography of the judicial system. The Torah demands that each city and town have its own court to deal with local issues that arise. Justice, which Sefat Emet goes on to identify as both the settling of interpersonal squabbles and personal reflection regarding one's deeds, needs to happen at home. If what needs to be fixed or resolved arose between you and me, then the work of resolution needs to happen here, right where the problem lies.

Teshuvah is an act of introspection, an honest accounting of our lives, including all of our faults and failures. Penitence isn't about looking up to the heavens or down into the *mahzor*, but straight into the mirror. The family that needs my love, the community institutions waiting for my support, the dry cleaner whom I forgot to pay, the *mishnayot* I never learned—all of that is right here, at home. [Maimonides](#) (borrowing from the statement of R. Yehuda in [Yoma 86b](#)), in his formulation of what it means to be a penitent, does not allow us to suffice with trying better next time in a similar situation. *Teshuvah*, or what Maimonides calls “real *teshuvah*,” means confronting the same person, at the same time, in just the same place you were before. Still echoing in that very place is the memory of the mistake you made last time, and fixing it here means not only engaging in change but also confronting the past in order to move forward. And this year, there's no better place to look for error than the house where you've spent the past six months living through this new normal.

Mishnah Berurah ([603:2](#)), citing R. Yonatan Eybeschutz, teaches that on each of the seven intermediate days of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* (excluding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), one should reflect upon and repent for the sins committed on that day of the week. This makes sense, because who I am on a lazy Sunday differs from the me of a hectic Monday, a stressful Wednesday, or a dragged out Shabbat afternoon, and each calls for its own introspection. Maybe this year, having spent so much time within the same four walls, the same can be done with each room within our homes. Is the couch the place where I doomscroll through nonsense on my phone, or is it where I spend quality time with the people I live with? Does my kitchen reflect my values, my appetite, my budget, or some healthy combination? Is my bedroom a space to re-energize for a new day or where I arrive too late into the night (and from which I depart too late in the morning)? Have I given my roommates enough personal space, or too much? This penitential season, appoint yourself as the judge of the hyper-local court of your home, and stand as the first defendant. Take a good look at your home and ask whether the life that happens within it is the one you want to live this coming year, or whether it's time to chart the course of a better one.

Even Home Isn't Home

Regarding the verse “the boy is gone; where shall I go?”—it is stated [in the Midrash] that Reuven was [thereby] the first to repent. For this is the ultimate repentance, in discovering that, due to sin, one has no place or existence in the world. ([Sefat Emet, Vayeshev, 5664](#))

Breaking ranks with his brothers, Reuven attempts to save his brother Joseph, but for one reason or another he arrives at the scene too late. The [Midrash](#), through a wordplay on the word *vayashav*, claims that Reuven did not merely return to the scene; in doing so, he had actually performed *teshuvah*, though what exactly he did to repent is

unstated in the biblical text. Sefat Emet, however, finds Reuven's penitence in his peculiar response to discovering his younger brother's absence: “The boy is gone; where shall I go?” ([Genesis 37:30](#)). The text leaves no indication of why he was left confused regarding his next destination. But Sefat Emet sees in the power of these words a deep act of *teshuvah* in the wake of Joseph's disappearance. The foundation of *teshuvah*, he claims, is the honest declaration that you have nowhere to go. It's the realization that the places we call home and the people we call friends and the way of life we call familiar are all fragile, transient, temporary. In the midst of strife and chaos, we reach out for a foothold or stepping stone, but there is none. Life—mine and yours and everyone's and everything in it—no matter how stable it may seem, is always up in the air.

When the pandemic broke out, so many people made their way home, seeking out places of refuge and security to wait out the storm. Cabin sickness notwithstanding, nothing beats the reassuring sense of coming home, feeling the stark contrast between the threatening outside and a welcoming within. But as those who have experienced eviction, homelessness, and house fires all know in their respective ways, even home can let us down. The same goes for those who thought over these months that home would be a place of security, only to find physical and emotional impediments to safety and wellbeing there too. And even for those still enjoying this six-month staycation, the existential meaning of vulnerability, of the real possibility that our homes and lives are here today and gone tomorrow, awaits internalization. Vulnerability inspires us to keep both the gifts and misfortunes of our lives in perspective and also to keep the lives of others—whose differences from our own lives are so drastically outweighed by their similarities in plight and fate—closer to our hearts.

That is *teshuvah*: not just technical fixes to local problems but a rude awakening to the world as it really is—a humbling before the God whose awesome glory fills the world in which we hardly deserve a place at all. If we can embrace that our lives are indeed ‘[like a puff of dust and a fleeting dream](#),’ if we can ask God—not R. Nachman's iconic ‘[where are You](#)’ but Sefat Emet's ‘where shall I go’—then God will be the one to create a special ‘place’ just for us, the itinerant penitents, beyond the world we know. Sefat Emet notes that it is not by chance that the tribe of Reuven was [the first to house an ir miklat](#), a city of refuge for wrongdoers, in its territory. The *ir miklat* embodies Reuven's understanding of *teshuvah*—the realization, in the wake of sin, that we have lost our place in the world. And only once we accept how transient our life on earth really is, how no place can ever really be home, then God reassures us: ‘And I shall make for you a place for you to flee there’ ([Exodus 21:13](#)).

Coming Home

The essence of repentance does not [address] any individual sin; rather, one must return to, and reconnect with, one's [spiritual] root. ([Sefat Emet, Nitzavim, 5650](#))

Returning home, or even just spending a lot more time there, has offered an opportunity to reconnect with family, with ourselves, and with the four walls within which the basic elements of our lives take place. Covid has brought a return to thoughtful cooking and collective eating, a reevaluation of whether we really need the clutter hiding in our closets, and a wardrobe makeover from what we think others expect us to wear to what feels right today. Not everyone has found this extended at-home sleepover comfortable or even manageable, and for others it has produced lethargy, take-out orders, and binge TV-watching. But I think many of us have discovered within it a return

to square one, a chance to feel out what it's like to live by ourselves and as ourselves.

If we listen closely, at the core of this experience of returning home is the challenging yet enriching question: Who am I really? What kind of person am I, especially when there's no one watching, save for, perhaps, the people I'm closest to? The personality you wear in the comfort of your home, and the gap between it and the one you let others see—that's what needs a check-in and tuning at this time of year. Ask yourself: When cutting costs during the pandemic, did the budget cuts come out of what makes you comfortable, or from what you spend on supporting others in need? Who are the people who have made an effort to keep in touch with or support you, and how have you reciprocated? Without community life keeping you going, have your prayers, Torah study, and Shabbat observance dwindled to the bare minimum or taken on new layers of personal flavor? How have you filled the long pockets of quiet time that the lack of commuting and 'kiddushing' has opened up in your schedule?

Sefat Emet teaches that this return to our home, to our roots and our rootedness, is the very essence of *teshuvah*: to strip ourselves of the layers and facades we wear in the world, to once again meet our best and truest selves and figure out how to let that person shine through year round. This is the *teshuvah* of authenticity, the *teshuvah* of journeying—not from home, but back home—a trek whose destination is clear yet whose starting point and direction await determination. Standing in stark opposition to penitential escapism, Sefat Emet teaches that home is what *teshuvah* is all about. Were Sefat Emet to join you in quarantine this Yom Kippur, perhaps he would ask: Do you feel at home with your family, your life, yourself, your God? And do you think God feels at home with you?

Conclusion: Finding Your Way Home

Three pathways of repentance: examine your home, accept the transience of home, or trace your steps back home to your truest self. Three modalities of penitence that share at their core a home-focused approach to *teshuvah*, allowing us to turn our shared Covid predicament into a spiritual opportunity. Whichever path you take, may the journey homeward strengthen and empower you for the days and months ahead. Let the time you spend at home—this week, over Yom Kippur, and over the long road ahead toward the end of Covid—be an opportunity for reflection, growth, and change. And may it be said of the home where you're reading these words, as Sefat Emet would repeatedly remind his students, that 'in the place where true penitents reside, even the most righteous of people have no right to stand' ([Berakhot 34b](#)).

WHY WASN'T JONAH PUNISHED? READING JONAH DURING COVID

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Yom Kippur will be different this year. How could it not be? The stark differences may help us withhold judgment even in a time of judgment, while affirming the way ancient texts wrap themselves in today's challenges and offer us new conceptual frameworks.

To this end, there is something about the distress, the isolation, the narrow world we've occupied for these many months that may make us more sympathetic this year to Jonah's desire to run away from the life he knew. Rather than judge him for his foolish escapade and the supposition he could run away from his Maker, a part of us may think, "Hey, Jonah, is there any more room on that boat for me?"

Among those who justify Jonah's flight, the French medieval commentator, Rabbi David Kimche (1160-1235), best sums up the traditional posture. Jonah was concerned not "about the honor of the father but the honor of the children." He challenged God in order to preserve his people, a tactic taken straight from the playbook of Abraham and Moses. If Jonah's pleas were successful in his mission to Nineveh, its spiritual successes would be leveraged for the punishment of Israel. All of this would be traced back to Jonah, who would be regarded for posterity as a traitor. This mental model of betrayal and total accountability would lead anyone to run away from the task at hand. Add to that the view from II Kings 14 that Jonah was afraid to be labeled a false prophet, and we can understand Jonah's legitimate concerns.

Yet while this reasoning makes sense, it does not unlock the full picture. Neither Abraham nor Moses ran away. They confronted God and used words as a ladder to negotiate a more humane outcome. Jonah said nothing. The text tells us that he was not merely running away from something; he was running *toward something else*: "Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the Lord" (1:3).

We are told three times that Jonah had a specific destination in mind: Tarshish. Unlike the immoral, warring power that was Nineveh, Tarshish was associated with travel¹ and expensive goods,² high seas, and extravagance, as recorded in I Kings: "All King Solomon's drinking cups were of gold, and all the utensils of the Lebanon Forest House were of pure gold: silver did not count for anything in Solomon's days. For the king had a Tarshish fleet on the sea, along with Hiram's fleet. Once every three years, the Tarshish fleet came in, bearing gold and silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks" (I Kings 10:21-22). Disappearing far away and into the lap of luxury must have been quite the enticement for a prophet running away from the burden of his heavy mission. Many interpreters, like Radak cited above, tackle the obvious question of what Jonah was afraid of, but few try to

¹ Other verses that discuss the rich merchant fleets of Tarshish include Isaiah 23:1, 6,10, 14, Ezekiel 27:25 and 38:13, Psalms 48:7.

² See, for example, I Kings 10:21-22, Psalms 72:10, Isaiah 60:9, Jeremiah 10:19, Ezekiel 27:12.

understand or honor his desire to break free, to go to a place far from the ordinary to experience another world that is represented by Tarshish.

People who overturn their lives are often looking for something they cannot find where they are. Harry Houdini, perhaps the most famous escape artist who ever lived, is quoted as having said, "The greatest escape I ever made was when I left Appleton, Wisconsin."³ One of his biographers claims, however, that Houdini's greatest escape "wasn't from handcuffs or straitjackets or Appleton. It was from the shackles of reality."⁴

The world of literature abounds in freedom journeys, whether it's Melville's sailing exploits or Kerouac's open road. They allow us to experience larger vistas than the ones we have; we are invited to enter the mindset of someone who volitionally lets go of society's constraints and expectations.

One of the most popular recent documentations of this desire to run is presented in Jon Krakauer's book, *Into the Wild*, about Christopher Johnson McCandless, who graduated Emory, donated his life savings to Oxfam, and began a journey to the wilds of Alaska in 1992, woefully underprepared. He kept a journal and wrote postcards that helped Krakauer understand the narrative arc of McCandless's journey and his motivation for going. Although McCandless enjoyed meeting people on his trek across the country, his retreat from people explains part of his enigmatic run: "We like companionship, see, but we can't stand to be around people for very long. So we go get ourselves lost, come back for a while, then get the hell out again."⁵

In the long run, it was not an unhealthy introversion that drove McCandless farther and farther from the margins of safety but a profound desire to rid himself of the life he knew in search of endless possibilities:

So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more dangerous to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun.⁶

We could chalk up his adventure to a naïve, almost adolescent need to overturn a sad life on the edge and a background of family secrets and possible parental abuse,⁷ but there is something compelling

³ Although this quote is commonly associated with Houdini, Tom Boldt, who runs the Boldt Company in Appleton, claims Houdini would never have said it because of his fond associations with the city and its people, as discussed in Joe Posnanski's *The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini* (Simon and Schuster, 2019), 19.

⁴ Posnanski, 20.

⁵ Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor, 1997), 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁷ This background was supplied by McCandless's sister Carine in her memoir *The Wild Truth* (HarperCollins, 2014) and contested by her parents, as cited in Johnny Dodd, "Chris McCandless' Sister Pens New

about McCandless's desire to remove the shackles of convention that made Krakauer's book into another bestseller and then a popular movie. We are drawn to the words McCandless uses as he begins his trek: "I now walk into the wild."⁸

McCandless met an electrician on his way to Anchorage and hitched a ride with him. The electrician noted the lightness of his pack and voiced concern about this ambitious, ill-informed young man's plan. "Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing."⁹ Human desire is often no match for nature.

Jonah, too, learned this the hard way. He never spoke his desire; he just proceeded with a determined gait and a pounding silence. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.' Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service..." Jonah's obstreperous about-face – he was told to rise and go, which he did, just in a different direction - leads the reader to conclude that a substantial punishment awaited this fugitive.

But it never came. God never punished Jonah. Instead, like a loving parent of a lost child, God used the forces of nature to stop Jonah's flight and allow him to analyze of his own accord his desire to run. As Jonah lands on the sea's breakers, we think of Odysseus and his grasp for life: "He lunged for a reef, seized it with both hands and clung for dear life, groaning until the giant wave surged past and so he escaped its force, but the breaker's backwash charged into him full fury and hurled him out to sea."¹⁰ Jonah's prayer in chapter two reflected his downward spiritual descent. Finally, at the very bottom of the sea, the words tumbled out.¹¹

Jonah longed for the Temple. He longed to see God again. He pledged fealty to the mission. If Jonah thought his life was overly constrained by duty and obligation before, he ended up in the greater constraint of an oversized fish that ironically forced the long-awaited confrontation. The fish then spat him out on dry land. Maybe the book could have ended here. Personal salvation helped Jonah overcome the desire to run and replaced it with a newly energized will to serve God as commanded. The Yom Kippur message ties Jonah's mortality to his mission and helps us understand that running away serves no positive end.

But the book does not end here. Jonah continues to Nineveh. Only one day into Jonah's new commitment, the prophet fled again. He left Nineveh for the small comforts of his booth despite his obvious success in transforming an entire city. No storm, no fish, no hot sun or burning wind, no gourd or small worm ultimately worked. It is then that God used a series of three direct questions in a chapter of only eleven verses. To the first question, "Are you that deeply grieved?"

Book Detailing Parents' Violence and Abuse," *People* (November 12, 2014).

⁸ From his postcard of April 27th, 1992.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics), 165.

¹¹ See the similarities of Jonah's prayer to Psalm 139.

(4:4),¹² Jonah offered no answer. To the second question, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” Jonah replied: “Yes, so deeply that I want to die” (4:9). Jonah could not even see the sham that was his answer, that he could cling so tightly to something in which he made no long-term investment. The book’s concluding question lingers.

Then the Lord said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (4:10-11)

This is not really a question about Jonah but a statement about God. It seems God had, for the moment, bypassed Jonah. God’s loving efforts to use the range of nature to help Jonah see himself only resulted in Jonah’s shameful answer about the gourd. In the absence of punishment, all God had left, so to speak, in the arsenal of persuasion was to be the Divine Model to create and sustain a world where everyone matters. It’s as if God said to Jonah, “I cannot help you understand who you are if you keep running. Perhaps if you refuse to see yourself, you can understand, however, who I am. I am not the God whom you describe as having every quality Moses attributed to me in Exodus 32 but *emet* (truth). Instead, I am a God for whom truth and mercy are intertwined so as to be inseparable. For you, these are binary qualities. For me, they are one. Jonah, were that not the case, you would not be alive today. You ran away to expand your world, but, in *truth*, it has never been more narrow.”

Maybe God never punished Jonah because it is no sin to leave the confines of one’s life to pursue one’s truth. But maybe God thought that when Jonah left Jaffa to expand his world, he really would. Instead, Jonah built a man-size booth that made his world even smaller. Jonah, who in II Kings enlarged the Land of Israel’s borders, never really adjusted his worldview despite his travel experiences. After all, if you can go to Tarshish, you should be able to go to Nineveh.

Like Jonah in his fish or his booth, this Yom Kippur we are masked, restricted, and constrained, tossed on some difficult seas and distant from the spiritual anchors of our lives. Our world is so much smaller that we too long to run and get happily lost somewhere far away. And maybe we read this book on Yom Kippur to reject that urge and make peace with the lives we have. But maybe we read Jonah on Yom Kippur for the exact opposite reason: to enter that small enviable moment of wanderlust and ask ourselves, when we are finally let out of this crucible of introspection, where we have spent so much time only with ourselves, who will we become when the world opens up again? God never punished Jonah for running. He only questioned him for traveling the world without seeing anything new and never really changing.

¹² Note the similarities to another penitential text, Genesis 4:6, where God tries to induce Cain into understanding his primal, violent emotions and thereby curbing them. Neither Jonah nor Cain respond.

THIS IS NOT A POEM

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Editor’s Note: These are excerpted from R. Poupko’s soon-to-be-published work of poems, What Is Lost.

This is not a poem*

this is not a poem
nor a parable
it is a vision
from a sin master
to read
the list and liturgy
for we have sinned
is to report
and record
and then to add
and to reckon
and to balance
the accounts
and close the book
and cast to
the cleansing river waters
but if the reading
flows to chant
and chant to singing
and singing to swaying
then guilt and pain
seek their same
in the embrace
of sin
she said
reclining on one arm
for life
is a breath
and sin
its net
as the holy
gives way
to the good

*See *Avodah Zarah* 17a.

Starlings and pigeons

the other
day
between
shofar blast
and yom kippur fast
I saw
the starlings
and pigeons
against
the autumn
heavens
god grey
and fateful
flying
racing
southward
to warm

skies
blue
and godless
o that
i had wings

Kol Nidrei – All my vows

i am lost
a wandering jew
in Yom Kippur
land of violated promises
failed oaths
unkept vows
alien to me
as Canaan
to Abraham
sin's topography
sculpts all form
of landscape

and who shall
scout the land
for dangerous
outcropping
of rock and craggy sin
soul faults
quaking with offense

wadis rushing
with sin
flooded Noah's Ark
shattered on
secret perfidies
sins and lives drowning

the angel recorder
of sins
faithful custodian
of bones crushed
in falling words
echoing through desert
and canyon
none shall escape
the day of the lord

Roster

as i
read
read and recite
recite and chant
chant and read
the list
and litany
roster
and all
of my
sins
and a few
not yet
thought

and formed
in fantasy
and deed
i wonder
did you
really
make me
make
and create
create and
form
form and knead
knead and breathe
life and
image
as i
read
and recite

When the goat escaped

when the goat
escaped Temple's altar
climbing desert hills
searching the barren
for green and grass
unwittingly bearing
Israel's sins
red ribboned
by a deftly priest
climbing the precipice
the earth yawns
surprises the grass
munching goat
and a sin or two
bounces down
the hill
as goat's brains spill
on rock and crag
all is forgiven

GET RID OF THE MANELS – AND THE PANELS TOO

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Many years ago, I got into a debate with a male scholar, well-known on the Jewish circuit, about why there were not more women faculty members on the roster of a particular institution. Without blinking an eyelash, he said, matter-of-factly, "There aren't enough qualified women." Wrong answer. I asked him for his criteria, went home, and typed up a list of 60 women with the required credentials and emailed it to him. I never heard back.

This story, to me, illustrates the issue that undergirds the discussion of manels: the generalized belief that there are not enough competent women to occupy the seats. The question of manels [discussed here at Lehrhaus](#), I believe, contributes to a necessary and under-addressed issue while also potentially sidestepping two fundamental assumptions: the persistent, erroneous belief that there

are not enough women to fill these roles and a broader misconception that panels, in general, are sound educational structures for the delivery of content and opinions. Before asking if more women should be on panels – the answer is an obvious yes – are panels, in and of themselves, valuable educational formats in which genuine learning takes place?

I'd like to tackle this second issue first. On the face of it, panels seem to be an excellent way to engage a variety of opinions and personalities around a topic of interest. Ideally, a panel brings together those with different experiences and expertise for the back-and-forth, the *shakla ve-tarya*, of debate. When an issue is contested and controversial, sparks fly, and the audience becomes increasingly engaged. Every time we see a panel advertised, we are hopeful.

Yet, anyone who has ever heard a panel - which is nearly everyone - knows that this reality is a rarity at meetings and conferences. More often than not, no matter the hot topic or the big name presenters, a panel is an hour of disappointment, unless, of course, it's two hours. Close your eyes and you're there. Four or five people with microphones sit behind a table with navy fabric bunting paying little attention to a lackluster moderator until it is their turn. This inattention diminishes the chances of any thrilling sparring. There is an underlying fear of offense so that the discussion is usually highly curated and manicured. There are often too many people to be thanked or be cautious about; consequently, niceties eclipse content. If there are too many panelists, no one really has a chance to educate. When the panels involve rabbis, particularly those of recognized stature and authority, the other panelists self-edit and self-censor so as to make the very idea of debate a non-starter.

In the unfortunately named article "[How to Kick Butt on a Panel](#)," marketing specialist and author Guy Kawasaki advises panelists to make sure they really know their subject and control their own introductions by telling the audience what they'd like them to know. He advises panelists to speak up and speak out without waiting to be called; entertain rather than only inform; tell the truth; answer the question that's posed but not feel limited to that question; and be plain, simple, and short. Panelists are not to look bored or look at the moderator, and they should never say they agree with another panelist, because it's a waste of time. In other words, all of the advice Kawasaki gives points to the fact that panels are mediocre and unengaging media to communicate ideas. And if, in the unusual instance, sparks do fly, the format of a panel rarely offers time for any controversy to be properly addressed or processed.

From a pedagogic standpoint, a panel feels two-dimensional, maybe even one-dimensional. The audience has little role until the Q & A, when the questions often are not questions but declarations. The panelists themselves never have enough time to formulate a thought fully or properly develop an idea in the five allotted minutes. If you allot ten, it's not much more time to teach anything, but too much time on any one panelist. The audience gets restless. If the panelists get too deep in the weeds of their expertise, the audience gets lost. If they don't get in the weeds enough, they hover in a generalized space that fails to enrich. There is also a detectable tension, even a touch of envy, among panelists as to who is smarter, wittier, most lucid or more informed. Often the person who can tell a good joke is better received than the panelist who is most knowledgeable. As audience members, we often have the distinct feeling that the panelists didn't prepare at all because, after all, it was only a panel.

Should more women appear on such panels? No. Fewer men should appear on them. In fact, if I never heard another panel discussion for the rest of my life, my world would lack nothing.

As an educator, not only do I avoid them, but when asked, I advise organizations to find another format that is less transactional. They are not always grateful for this unsolicited advice, but I, for one, have *rachmunes* on the audience and believe that to bring gifted people together and not allow them to do what they really know how to do is a shame and a waste.

What's the alternative? A conversation. The very word changes the visual, dynamic, and expectation of engagement. It changes the way people are seated and reduces the stress to be the smartest or the wittiest. The point is not for one person to best another but for the conversation itself to be rich and meaningful because humble people are interested in what other people have to say and let them say it. In a conversation, there are no timed slots. You take the time you need, conscious of creating a respectful space for others, and ask your fellow conversationalists to explain more if you do not understand.

And here's where the female factor comes in. Conversations are best when they both reflect the community in the audience and inspire them. Communities are not made up of all males, but if you looked at most panels in the Orthodox community, you might think so. And when it's only males speaking, the other half of the audience may not see themselves fully in those on the stage, or worse, may not believe that their experiences are worthy of someone else's attention.

Why is it that when someone asks me to speak because they "need" a woman (for the optics, of course), they cannot detect the insult? Don't invite women to speak so you can have the "female" perspective – whatever that is – on your panel, but because you benefit from the perspective of another human being. Conversations, to be multi-valenced and interesting, require that we stop talking to ourselves. We have mirrors for that. Can a panel ever really produce an I-Thou moment? Not really. But when a conversation is good, it produces lots of them. The "Thou" cannot be only male or mostly male if a conversation is an authentic reflection of our community. It's time to say *kaddish* for panels or manels, or whatever you want to call them, in favor of exchanges that are more humanizing – which means that all humans – "male and female He created them" - share in the conversation.

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