



Haazinu

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The Silence That Makes Us Responsible
An Essay in Ethical-Liturgical Hermeneutics

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Yom Kippur does not commemorate the giving of the Torah. What it asks is that we come back to Torah from a different place: Yom Kippur is the day we ask ourselves, and are asked, what we have done with that revealed word since the moment God spoke. It is, before anything else, a day of fasting and self-examination, of confession and prayer, of judgment and *teshuvah*, the famous

"return."

At Mount Sinai, the Torah tells us, there was lightning and thunder, and the blast of a shofar, while God proclaimed His commandments to a People of Yisrael terrified out of their minds ([Ex 20:15-16](#)). But that noise has receded over time. So much so that today it is perceived as silence. For a long time now, it seems that God has gone quiet.¹ So what do we do with that silence? Because if God is silent, revelation does not resolve the moral problem for us. Worse still, the name of God can be invoked for justice and for barbarism by those

¹ Our sages addressed a related principle when they faced the "Oven of Akhnai" issue ([Bava Metzia 59b](#)). There it is written that "Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: It is written: 'It is not in heaven' ([Deut 30:12](#)). The Gemara asks: What is the relevance of the phrase 'It is not in heaven' in this context? Rabbi Yirmeya says: Since the Torah was

already given at Mount Sinai, we do not regard a Divine Voice, as You already wrote at Mount Sinai, in the Torah: 'After a majority to incline' ([Ex 23:2](#))".

who try to recreate that reverential awe through terror.

I want to propose something that is simple to state and hard to hold: faith does not suspend ethics. This holds whether God speaks or is silent. But God's silence adds something else: it creates a void. And every void tends to be filled. Because God is so often silent, what falls on human beings is a greater responsibility. If we, for some reason, fail to fill the void created by God's silence with an ethical theology, that void will be filled by those who use the name of God for evil purposes. Thus, before the apparent divine silence, it is we, human beings, who bear the enormous responsibility of carrying on the spirit of that word so that it is not twisted into something terrorist. I am aware that I am not the only one to state this proposition, i.e., that ethics precedes theology. The last century brought several philosophers and Jewish theologians who arrived at similar propositions using their own systems of thought. Nevertheless, my approach comes from a direct reading of biblical and liturgical texts.

In that sense, my statement that human ethics precedes its religious codification is supported by the Torah's first account of murder ([Gen 4:8](#)). In that verse, Cain slays Abel. In the next verse, Cain, who seems to know that killing his brother was wrong, answers a simple, "Where is your brother?" with an evasive question that suggests he knows he is accountable for what he has done. There was no need for an explicit commandment or law to say so. He showed a capacity to recognize the harm he had caused and the responsibility for

his own acts before murder had been explicitly prohibited by divine command. Perhaps we humans acquired that notion as we were created in God's "image" and "likeness" ([Gen 1:26](#)).

The argument goes further than religious codification. Across societies shaped by radically different theological traditions, human beings have developed prohibitions against murder and theft, along with rules limiting violence. Similar moral judgments are also made by people who hold no theological commitments at all. This suggests that ethical judgment does not need to wait for theology: human beings can recognize harm, assign responsibility, and formulate norms before settling what, if anything, they believe about God.

For the purposes of this argument, the central question here isn't really whether God exists. You may believe in God every day; you may feel His presence every single day of the year. Nothing I am about to say depends on your beliefs. The stronger our faith in God, the more pressing this message becomes. For the great danger that stalks every religious belief is precisely when conviction replaces doubt, and the convinced come to see themselves as the owners of certainty. At that point, faith ceases to be a private matter and becomes a historical one.

As a clear and recent example, absolute certainty is what can produce the jubilant cries of *Allahu Akbar* ("God is great") on October 7th. One of the details, and I stress the word "details," that struck me most from footage of that day, and that still

sickens me, was hearing those jubilant cries, hundreds or thousands of times, while the most atrocious crimes were being committed. Did those acts make God great? Does terror make God great?

In any case, those cries are a painful reminder of how far we human beings can go when we are certain we are the custodians of truth. None of us is immune to that. Not me, not you. None of us. For sacred texts contain verses that glorify and promote violence and verses that condemn it and extol peace and mercy. Through a partial reading, anyone can justify anything.

As a moral imperative, of course, we are obligated to defend ourselves against those murderers blinded by their apparent certainty. This is a visceral, human response, but one that must resist the temptation of being cloaked in an order from the explicit will of God. Because no such order ever existed. Beyond the eternal Jewish mandate to preserve life, there was no explicit order from God to do or not do anything. God kept silent that day. As He did the day before and the day after. As much as it hurts to say it, silence prevails.

That silence is so conspicuous that it confronts me, and I, grounded in my beliefs and in the midst of that silence, build from this starting point: life, in itself, does not come with an obvious meaning, a meaning given in advance. We are born, we die, and in between, things happen to us. If we think about it, nothing seems to follow any preordained plan or order. And yet, we human beings refuse to accept the evidence and have the impulse to

search for meaning so as not to accept that everything is chance, contingency, and absurdity. Religion is one of the oldest and most profound ways of responding to that absurdity, and it gives us tools to grant life a purpose. That is a huge contribution.

Judaism, in its religious form, responds to this predicament in a very particular way: not only by speaking of God, but by sanctifying the chain of transmission. *MiDor leDor*. From generation to generation. The promise to Abraham does not end with Abraham. The people themselves are called *Bnei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel. The tribes are the descendants of Jacob. David was the great-grandson of Ruth. The Messiah, in turn, is “the son of David.” Again and again, the biblical text turns the continuity between generations into a carrier of promise, identity, and future. It is no accident that the Passover Haggadah is written in the present tense. “*Ure’e Banim Levanecha Shalom al Yisrael.*” Children, the bond between generations, and peace constitute the blessing.

We, the Jewish nation, accept the inheritance of memory, belonging, and promise. But this inheritance is not free. It comes with an inherent responsibility over the use of those words. *MiDor leDor* also means deciding what we do, in our generation, with a word that no longer descends accompanied by thunder and shofar, and it means how we pass it on.

So, faced with a life that guarantees no meaning, Judaism sanctifies the bond between one generation and the next, and gives life meaning by

committing us to the word when divine silence leaves a void. Because, faced with this void, we human beings fill it with interpretation.

If there is interpretation, the first question that arises is this: what kind of God do we want to exist? Because every person, deep down, ends up wanting some particular conception of God to be true: a God of justice, or of comfort; a God who guarantees meaning, who accompanies us; a God who punishes, a God of vengeance, a God who absolves. Even our desire for God to exist is already shaped by a human image of God!

Some interpretations of the Divine draw on peace and solidarity, demand justice and seek mercy. But others do the opposite: they turn God into the perfect alibi for crime. We have seen it too many times. Those cries of "God is great" remind us of it.

I do not know about you, but when that phrase comes back to me, the images of atrocity return with it, automatically. There we cross from the abstract to the concrete. In that crossing, theology is no longer an intellectual luxury and is forced into being a moral necessity. Because if God is silent, someone is going to speak in His name. And not only those who cry "God is great". Some of our own dare to invoke God in a similar way when attacking their neighbors in Judea and Samaria.

Silence creates an empty space. And every empty space tends to be filled. If there is no ethical theology, the void will be occupied, far too often, by those who bless atrocity. That is the price we

pay for not making ourselves heard.

Seen this way, Yom Kippur does not only focus on the individual process of introspection; it expands it into the concept of "return." Yom Kippur demands that we involve ourselves in the problem of how God's name is used, and that we be part of the solution to that problem.

On Yom Kippur, we stand before God, or before the idea of God, to examine ourselves, ask forgiveness, confess, fast, and return. The point is not only whether we observed the ritual, which is the easy part. The point is what we do with the word we received, with the Torah, in the face of God's subsequent silence. Ultimately, the point of Yom Kippur is what we do with the responsibility that remains in our hands.

The *Haftarah* assigned for *Shacharit* on Yom Kippur, from the book of Isaiah, speaks to this. The prophet upholds fasting and prayer. What he points out is that they do not replace justice. He has nothing against ritual, but he makes clear that a ritual indifferent to the suffering of others is not the will of God. Isaiah returns us to the moral demand of revelation, of the Torah. In his version, moral demand does not replace or nullify ritual. It stands above it.

Thus, the prophet is not secularizing Judaism or pushing God out of the picture. Quite the opposite. He seeks to ensure that God's name is not used to, for example, absolve atrocity. Because if we read the Torah honestly — not with terror, with honesty — the text does not allow us to hide

behind mute obedience.

Without going any further, the biblical text itself contains iconic scenes of protest: Abraham argues with God over Sodom in the name of justice. He does not question God's existence. He questions God's decisions. Moses, after the golden calf, stands against the possible annihilation of the people. In both cases, the anger is God's; in both cases, it is the human being who seeks to contain it. In both cases, the conception of justice is inherent to the human being. The result of those interventions is a God who acts with more justice than He was about to exercise. In both cases, when humanity confronts God, it makes Him better. That is not heresy. It is in the text.

The greatness of God does not cancel debate. In fact, it makes debate more important. I would say it is foundational: protest is not something imported from outside the text; it sits inside it. These cases show that moral resistance born of doubt can be a stronger form of faithfulness than unreflective submission.

I can say this about doubt because it is the place I inhabit. There are days when I feel the divine presence and days when I do not. Belief, even when it appears, is not certainty. Some days I want Him to be there; a good number of days I do not even think about the question. That not-knowing does not, I think, make me a "bad Jew." In fact, it strikes me as more honest than any certainty. That doubt keeps me inside the tradition without lying to it and without lying to myself. In any case, my argument does not rest on these beliefs nor

weaken without them, but, having come this far, it would not be honest to omit them.

This doubt founds my position on the *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac. When it is read solely as a test of faith, I find it insufficient. If a test of faith requires suspending moral judgment when a third party is harmed, the price is too high. Passing that test would come at an intolerable cost. A test that a human being can only pass by harming another is, to that extent, a test under suspicion.

The narrator of Genesis knows this, because he shows us Abraham's heart everywhere else: When Sarah demands that Ishmael be cast out, the text is explicit: "the matter was very grievous in Abraham's eyes, on account of his son" ([Gen 21:11](#)). The narrator is showing us Abraham's feelings. When God resolves to destroy Sodom, this same Abraham argues and pleads for the lives of strangers he has never met ([Gen 18:23–33](#)). This same man walks to Moriah with the son he loves and says nothing, shows nothing, asks nothing.

That is the discontinuity. The Bible shows Abraham's feelings on every side of his story and withholds them here. In this chapter ([Gen 22](#)) the register goes flat. We are not told how Abraham receives the command. We are not told how Isaac receives the news. Abraham comes down the mountain and the text does not return Isaac to him. Sarah, decisive until now, is simply absent from the scene. Her next recorded act is to die.

The greatness of Abraham, if there is greatness

here, is that something in him refused. I call its return, and I call it the angel. In any case, the text's refusal to grant him a single visible tremor until that moment is exactly what I find insufficient. So I try to convince myself that doubt does rise in him, however, only after the binding, with the knife already lifted. Doubt comes too late to spare Isaac the binding. It comes in time only to stop the blade.

For all of this, Abraham is granted a blessing the tradition treats as the cornerstone of the covenant: his descendants as numerous as the stars and the sand, a blessing to all the nations of the earth ([Gen 22:17–18](#)). We are taught to read this as the founding moment of the People of Yisrael.

Nevertheless, it had all been promised before. God had told Abraham that he would father a nation on numerous occasions and long before Moriah: when he first left Haran ([Gen 12:2](#)), and again at the parting from Lot ([Gen 13:15–16](#)), and in the covenant between the pieces ([Gen 15:13](#)), and in the covenant of circumcision ([Gen 17:4–8](#)), and once more in the assurance that Isaac, not Ishmael, would carry the line ([Gen 21:12](#)). Five times, by my count, the promise of a dynasty had already been freely given, attached to no condition and earned by no act.

However, to call the *Akedat Yitzhak* our founding is to lay the cornerstone of the covenant on attempted filicide. Obedience does not always ennoble, and not every act of submission is a virtue.

My overall point becomes even clearer when we internalize that every human word about God is mediated by human language. We have no direct access to God as God is in Himself. We have texts, traditions, representations, metaphors, anthropomorphisms, human names with which we try to reach what exceeds us. Not because there is nothing beyond our words, but because, if there is, our tools are not enough to apprehend it. We never speak of God as He is in Himself, but only of God as a human mind can think and say Him. Even now, saying this, I keep resorting to words like "He," "His," and "Himself", words soaked in human meaning. Replace the masculine with the feminine in everything I have just said and a different God appears... or Goddess. Because what God truly is lies beyond our cognitive reach.

So, if every formulation about God passes through human mediation, it can also be examined — and it must be! It is the only way to prevent faith from becoming moral idolatry, or from being hijacked by certainty.

Our Yom Kippur liturgy is not foreign to this tension. In *Avinu Malkeinu* we ask for compassion, forgiveness, life, sustenance. But there are also harsher requests, born of pain, of fear, and of our history as a people: requests for judgment, for the defeat of enemies, even for retribution for the spilled blood of the faithful.

This shouldn't scandalize us in any easy, surface way. It should make us think. The liturgy does not speak from outside the wound; it speaks from within the wound: from persecution, from the

memory of blood spilled. So where do we stand? What do we do with those words? How do we read them? How do we prevent a legitimate pain from hardening until it becomes a theology of vengeance? It is not the same to say out loud that the crimes of our enemies should not go unpunished as it is to make them pay for those crimes in the name of God.

Something similar happens with *Unetaneh Tokef*. It is, in my view, one of the most moving and powerful texts in all of the liturgy. It names the extreme fragility of human existence and puts it in religious language. And the same question returns: what do we do with that language? Do we read it as the literal account of a God who hands out tragedies one by one? Or as the extreme form through which the tradition tries to put into words our radical vulnerability?

On this matter I do hold a conviction: neither *Avinu Malkeinu* nor *Unetaneh Tokef* should be read in a way that ends with religion absolving bloodshed or romanticizing destruction, which is what the legend of the origin of *Unetaneh Tokef* ends up doing when it is taught as if it were a historical account. Precisely, this is what one of the most important Hasidic movements today proposes in its official web site in Spanish, under the title "The History of the Unetaneh Tokef Prayer."^{2,3} I will simply summarize it.

²https://web.archive.org/web/20130907074427/https://es.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1973088/jewish/La-historia-de-la-plegaria-Unetan-Tokef.htm

Eight hundred years ago, in the city of Mainz, there lived Rabbi Amnon, a great and pious sage, beloved and respected by Jews and non-Jews alike. For this reason, the local duke sought his counsel. This aroused the envy of the duke's other advisors to the point that the duke's secretary convinced him to demand that the rabbi convert to Christianity. The duke put it to Amnon plainly: convert, or face the consequences.

Rabbi Amnon asked for three days to think it over. But the moment he stepped out of the palace, he understood the terrible sin he had committed: "Did I ask for three days because I lack faith and courage? My beloved God, '*du lieber Gott*,' forgive me." And he spent the next three days praying and pleading, begging God to forgive him.

On the third day, when Amnon failed to appear, the duke had him brought by force. There, Rabbi Amnon refused to convert. The duke condemned him in this way: "For having sinned against your God," the duke said, "let Him avenge Himself. I will punish you for having disobeyed my orders. Your legs sinned against me, for they refused to come here; therefore, your legs shall be amputated." And so it was done.

It was the eve of Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Amnon asked to be carried to the synagogue and placed before the *Aron HaKodesh*. A note from me:

³ The cited article is published in Spanish, where the word 'historia' means both 'history' and 'story.' In this context, the usage is unambiguous: the article presents the account as historical fact, not as legend or devotional tale. See <https://dle.rae.es/historia>

picture the scene — a mutilated body, blood on the stumps, a face pale from blood loss, sitting small before the *Aron HaKodesh*. I continue with the story: When the cantor began the *Musaf* prayer, Amnon interrupted him and recited *Unetaneh Tokef*. Then all recited *Kedushah*, and then *Aleinu HaGadol*. When he reached the words "He is our God, and there is no other," Rabbi Amnon cried them out with his last remaining strength, and died.

Well, it seems God did not forgive him.

The account, as told by this movement, ends with an editorial comment: "Thus, the unbreakable courage of Rabbi Amnon, author of this prayer, serves as an inspiration to us all."

I think it is necessary to dismantle this myth.

First, the Hasidic version already calls it "the history of *Unetaneh Tokef*." Not a legend. Not a devotional tale. It has made the leap from myth to history, from legend to fact, even though researchers have established that the *piyyut* is considerably older and its real origin is still unknown (fragments tied to the Yannai tradition place it centuries earlier).

Second, in the legend Amnon never doubts his faith, his God, or his Judaism. His only doubt is whether to submit to punishment or save himself by being forced, publicly and under coercion, to convert.

Third, that doubt lasts barely a few minutes.

Fourth, God punishes the doubt without mercy. He lets Amnon die in a horrible and painful way. Note that the text uses a very harsh word: "avenge."

Fifth, when the version closes with "the unbreakable courage of Rabbi Amnon, (...) serves as an inspiration to us all," what it is actually saying is: do not even think about doubting, because God will punish you.

What pains me most about this myth is that, even now, it is still taught as a true story. If the liturgy says something true, it cannot do so at the cost of making us less thoughtful and less sensitive. If the fear of divine judgment leaves us morally blind, then we have misread even our own prayers. For terror and reverential awe are not the same thing.

It is worth recalling here something well known from the rabbinic tradition, something that makes the spiritual pedagogy of that legend even poorer.

Hillel — not just anyone, Hillel — summarized the Torah this way: do not do unto your neighbor what you would not want done to you. Rabbi Akiva, the Rabbi Akiva, named *ve'ahavta lere'akha kamokha*, "love your neighbor as yourself," as one of the great principles of the Torah.⁴

Neither Hillel nor Akiva were secularizing the Torah. Quite the opposite. They believed in God to

⁴ The citation of R. Akiva on [Leviticus 19:18](#) is stated in [Sifra, Kedoshim 4:12](#)

the marrow; they lived and breathed Torah. But even so, when they had to reduce its livable core to a single phrase, they framed it in terms of how a person stands before their neighbor. Intense Jewish religiosity, with God and Torah obviously at its center, places ethics between one person and another in a central place.

So, what do we do on Yom Kippur?

This is my answer: we return to the Torah as a weight of responsibility, never as a shield against doubt. Because faith does not suspend ethics. The ethical obligation does not depend on God. Hillel and Akiva did not need to mention God to formulate the core of the Torah, because the ethical demand precedes the theological question. Let me be clear: it does not replace it. It precedes it.

Fasting does not replace our moral discernment, and the liturgy obliges us to raise our voice when the name of God is placed at the service of evil. We are obligated to fill the void with an ethical theology and to understand that doubt is not a failure of faith. On the contrary, it is part of faith. Sometimes it is the only honest way to remain within a tradition without lying about it.

For that reason, on Yom Kippur, I would not put the whole weight on whether God judges us. I would also remember that God spoke, that afterward He so often fell silent, and that the silence left us with the task of responding: responding to how we treat the other, to what we do with the text, to

which image of God we let occupy the void, and, in the end, to whether religion will be a force of responsibility or an alibi for violence.

The View from the Cleft of the Rock: The Mystery of Forgiveness

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The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy stand at the center of our language of forgiveness. They form the heart of Selichot, return again and again throughout Yom Kippur, and have become the words we instinctively reach for when we ask God to meet us with compassion.

But when these words first appear in the Torah, they are not introduced as a formula. They emerge from a mysterious and highly visual encounter between God and Moses. Before the attributes are proclaimed, the Torah lingers over the strange circumstances in which they are revealed, drawing our attention not only to what Moses heard, but to what he experienced.

That alone should make us wonder: Why was the revelation of mercy conveyed through an encounter rather than through words alone? What did God need Moses to see? The Torah seems to suggest that Moses needed more than information. He needed to undergo something.

To understand what God was teaching Moses

about mercy, we need to begin not only with the words God says, but with the scene that surrounds them. The setting itself may be the key to interpreting what the Thirteen Attributes were meant to reveal.

Moses's Request

Let us set the scene: The Israelites, convinced that Moses would never return from Sinai, fashioned a golden calf to serve as their god. Angered, God threatened to destroy them and begin anew with Moses, but after Moses rose to their defense, God relented and forgave them. This led Moses to make a bold request:

God said to Moses, 'Also this thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in My eyes and I have known you by name.' **He said, 'Show me, please, Your glory.'** ([Exodus 33:17–18](#))

What was it, exactly, that Moses was seeking? He had fought hard to defend the people. It was quite an uphill battle given how badly they had erred. So when it actually worked, when God actually forgave them, Moses must have been somewhat taken aback. Moses marveled at God's mercy and wondered how God had such capacity to forgive.

As much as forgiveness was Moses's desired result, it also proved that God does not operate the world through a strict system of justice, raising a deep mystery about the nature of God's

governance. The Talmud explains Moses as asking, "Why are there righteous who suffer and wicked who prosper?" ([Berachot 7a](#)). If God does not exclusively reward the righteous and punish the wicked, adds the Midrash, "by what principle *does* God run the world?" ([Tanchuma Va'etchanan 3](#))

God's initial response may at first seem somewhat dismissive:

He said, 'I will pass all My goodness before you, and I will proclaim by name, 'God' before you, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy.'
(Exodus 33:19)

Instead of revealing any principle governing His mercy, God seems to retreat into an assertion of absolute sovereignty: He will bestow grace and mercy wherever He chooses, on whomever He chooses, for reasons He does not disclose.

Berachot 7a expands upon this: "'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,' even though he is not worthy. 'I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy,' even though he is not worthy." God's mercy, on this reading, does not merely operate independently of justice; it subverts it, extending grace precisely where it has not been earned. The Midrash sharpens this further by saying that even when God does good for the righteous, He is doing it as a *favor*, not as a reward for their virtue ([Tanchuma Va'etchanan 3](#)). Essentially, after

Moses asks for the principle by which God's mercy can be understood, God responds by rejecting the premise that mercy follows any fixed moral calculus at all, or that there is any logic by which Moses might predict its workings.

But then God continues talking. In fact, the Torah introduces this with a second *va-yomer* — “and He said...” a formulation that, according to the Sages, “always requires interpretation.”¹ Commentators interpret a second *va-yomer* as introducing a separate speech, often assuming that the speaker is changing their approach, when they realize what they originally said did not land with their audience. Occasionally they even suggest that the successive speeches conceal an implied reply in between, as if we are only being presented with one side of the conversation.² We can imagine what Moses might have said or thought, after God brushed off his first request to understand Him: *God, You have tasked me with leading this people, You have to give me some sense of how You run the world, of the rules of the game that I am playing. Surely, there is at least something You can tell me about the way You run the world!*

What's important is not Moses's exact words, but

that God felt the need to explain Himself further:

He said, ‘You won't be able to see
My face, because man cannot see
Me and live.’ (Exodus 33:20)

Perhaps God means to explain to Moses that it is not just that His mercy defies logic. God's essence, “His face,” is fundamentally beyond human understanding. It is incompatible with our earthly existence.

This, too, must not have satisfied Moses, because God continues with yet a third *va-yomer*, a third speech. Apparently there is still something God can say, or perhaps show, about his mercy:

God said, ‘Behold, there is room by
Me; you shall station yourself on
the rock, and when My glory
passes, I will place you in the
crevice of the rock, and I will screen
you with My palm until I pass.
When I remove My palm, you shall
see my back; but My face shall not
be seen.’ (Exodus 33:21–23)

¹ [Megillah 16a](#), [Eichah Rabbah 1](#), [Vayikra Rabbah 26](#), [Tanchuma Emor 3](#)

² See [Berachot 9b](#), [Rashi on Shemot 16:8](#), [Abarbanel on Bereishit 15:3](#); [37:12](#), [Shemot 32:7–9](#), [Bamidbar 32:1](#), Ha'amek Davar on Bereishit [37:21–22](#)

This moment will ultimately be Moses's greatest personal revelation, but for some reason God can't just come out and tell Moses what he needs to hear. Instead, it will require a mysterious dance, mostly revolving around a rock. If we actually stop to think about what God said, it raises a number of questions. Let's break down His instructions one step at a time:

"There is space here with Me," says God. This is an odd thing for God to say. For one thing, God isn't usually thought of as having a physical place. God is everywhere. Moreover, what does it mean for Moses to join God in this "place?"

Question One: What is this place with God?

"And you should stand yourself on the rock." *The* rock? Which rock? Are we supposed to know which rock God is talking about? Is Moses supposed to know?

Question Two: What rock?

And why is Moses supposed to stand on this rock? Is the standing important? What if he wants to sit on it? Can he stand next to it? Why do we need this rock anyway?

Question Three: Why stand on the rock?

None of this is relevant for very long, however, because God will then move him *inside* the rock:

"I shall put you in the cleft of the rock." What is with this whole dance and what does any of it have to do with what God needs to tell Moses? While some commentators suggest God positioned Moses into a corner in order to shield his eyes, that would have been redundant as the next thing God says is: "I shall screen you with my palm."

Question Four: Why the cleft?

God's mysterious response to Moses is, in fact, the culmination of a story that is chapters in the making, and one whose echoes resonate through the final words of the Torah. Ultimately, this story is central to our understanding of God and the role He plays in our world.

The Real Tzur

The clue to the hidden story lies in the fact that God doesn't just talk about any rock. He talks about *the* rock, "*ha-tzur*." Are we supposed to know which rock God is referring to? There are dozens of rocks throughout the Torah, far too many to choose from. However, almost all of those rocks have one thing in common: they are referred to with the word "*even*." No fewer than 88 times does the word *even* appear in the *Chumash* alone. The word *tzur*, by contrast, which the Torah uses here, is extremely rare. So rare, in fact, that there are only *two* rocks called a *tzur* in the entire Torah. (In *Ha'azinu* it is used as a nickname for God, but

we will return to that.) The first, and only other, *tzur* is the rock that provided water to the Israelites throughout their time in the wilderness.³

Could these two rocks be connected? The story in Parashat Beshalah may provide an answer.

The entire congregation of the Children of Israel traveled from the Wilderness of Sin, on their journeys at the directive of God, and they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water that we may drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test God?' The people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why have you brought us up from Egypt to kill me and my children and my livestock with thirst?' Moses cried out to God, saying, 'What shall I do for this people? A little longer and they will stone me!' God said to Moses, 'Pass before the people, and take with you from the elders of Israel; and the staff with which you struck

the river, take in your hand and go.

Behold, I am standing before you there, by the rock (*ha-tzur*) at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and waters will go forth from it, and the nation will drink.' And Moses did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel. He named the place Massah and Merivah, because of the quarrel of the Children of Israel and because of their testing of God, saying, 'Is God among us or not?' ([Exodus 17:1-7](#))

It is easy to overlook the fact that Moses did not hit this rock in front of the people. He and the elders traveled a great distance from Rephidim to Horeb where the rock was waiting for him. Horeb is the name of the place where Mount Sinai stood and is often used as a descriptor for the mountain.⁴ Once again we see someone standing on a *tzur*, only this time instead of Moses it is God, Himself.

It is also easy to overlook the fact that the rock was at Mount Sinai, probably because this detail seems so unnecessary. Why does Moses have to travel all the way to Sinai just to find a magical rock? Were there no rocks in Rephidim that Moses could have hit? There is also something else

³ While this is often referred to as the "Well of Miriam," the well is only a midrashic concept and [Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2](#) explains that this "well" was a proverbial description of the rock itself ("Of what was the well constituted? It was a

boulder."). See also [Tanchuma, Bamidbar 2:1](#).

⁴ See [Shabbat 89b](#); see also Ramban, Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel on Exodus [17:6](#).

strange: Here, too, God refers to “*the rock*” as if everyone is supposed to know which rock he is referring to.

The evidence so far can be summarized as follows:

1. Moses goes all the way to Mount Sinai to find “the” *tzur* that, apparently, everyone is supposed to know about.
2. Later, we find God referencing “the” *tzur* at Mount Sinai that, again, everyone seems to know about.

Now for the final piece of evidence:

3. *Tzur* does not simply mean a rock.

As noted above, the Torah already has a go-to word for rock: *even*. What does *tzur* mean? Across Tanakh, it generally refers to a mountain face or a cliff. Not surprisingly, this is exactly how the BDB dictionary defines it:

Tzur: 1. a. rocky wall, cliff. (F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs Dictionary, s.v. “*tzur*”)

Was there one massive mountain face in Horeb

that everybody knew about? The answer, of course, is Mount Sinai.

To spell it out, the *tzur* was not a small boulder but Mount Sinai itself. Moses did not make water squirt out of a rock like a magic water fountain. He struck the side of the mountain, where a waterfall gushed forth. It’s an entirely natural scene that most hikers have seen at some point: water flowing through the rocky mountainside. The miracle may have been a lot more about *when* God provided the Israelites with water than *how*.⁵

How Did the Water Get to Them?

The implications for the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy will become clear shortly, but first one challenge remains. If the *tzur* was not a mobile boulder—if they couldn’t throw it on the back of a wagon while they traveled—then how did they continue to drink from it throughout their journey of forty years? Naturally, the water must have flowed from Mount Sinai down to the people via a river.

But surely such a river flowing from Sinai would have been mentioned. Is there any evidence to support such a claim? Well, right after sin of the Golden Calf, look what we read:

⁵ We are not the first to suggest that the two *tzurs* are one in the same and, in fact, refer to the mountain itself. Ibn Ezra comments: “‘In the cleft of the rock’ — a place hollowed out in the rock, and this is Mount Sinai. And likewise it is written:

‘Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock at Horeb’” ([Ibn Ezra \[katzar\] on Exodus 33:22](#)).

He took the calf that they made and burned it in fire, and he ground it until it was fine. **He scattered it on the surface of the water and gave to the Children of Israel to drink.** ([Exodus 32:20](#))

The water? Which water? They were in the middle of the wilderness. It is not like there were random bodies of water everywhere.

The retelling of this story in Deuteronomy explains:

I took your sin, the calf which you had made, and burnt it with fire, and crushed it, grinding it very small, until it was as fine as dust: and I cast its dust into **the river that descended out of the mountain.** ([Deuteronomy 9:21](#))

There it is, clear as day: a river descended from Mount Sinai. This was their water source for forty years. It must have followed the Israelites (or perhaps vice versa) wherever they traveled. Every time they went to get a drink, their eyes must have traced the river back all the way to the distant mountain on the horizon. The Israelites always knew exactly where their water was coming from. It was exactly the same place they received the

Torah. As Abarbanel puts it:

The Lord came from Sinai to give the Torah to Israel, and from Sinai He came to give them water. The Torah came forth from ‘the Rock, perfect is His work (God)’, blessed be He — and the water likewise came forth from the rock that was at Sinai. ([Abarbanel on Exodus 17:1](#))

Water and Torah, both flowing from the same mountain, one nourishing them physically, the other spiritually. Throughout rabbinic literature, water becomes a central metaphor for Torah: it quenches thirst ([Taanit 7a](#)), serves as a vehicle for kindness ([Bava Kamma 17a](#); [Avodah Zarah 5b](#)), wears away even what is hard ([Sukkah 52b](#)), sustains life ([Kiddushin 40b](#)), and flows naturally to the lowest places ([Taanit 7a](#)). Strikingly, the Talmud derives this metaphor from the very water Israel thirsted for in the wilderness:

It is taught in a baraita: and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water (Exodus 15:22). Those who interpret verses said that **water is referring to nothing other than Torah**, as it is stated, ‘Ho, everyone who thirsts,

come for water' (Isaiah 55:1). ([Bava Kamma 82a](#))

Poisoned Water

What exactly did Moses do when he threw the ashes of the Golden Calf into the water, and how did he force the Israelites to drink it? Moses did not go around and, one by one, hold people's mouths open and pour water down their throats. That would have been far too difficult. Instead, he simply went to their water source and contaminated it. They had no choice but to consume the dust of the Golden Calf.

The significance of Moses's action becomes clearer from how Moses himself described this water in Parshat Ha'azinu:

He found him in a desert land, in the waste howling wilderness. He surrounded him. **He cared for him. He kept him as the pupil of his eye. As a griffon vulture that stirs up her nest, that flutters over her young,** He spread abroad his wings, He took them, **He bore them on his feathers.** God alone led him. There was no foreign god with him. He made him ride on the high places

of the earth. He ate the produce of the field. He caused him to suckle honey out of the cliff, oil out of the flinty *tzur*...

You are unmindful of the *Tzur* who fathered you and have forgotten God who gave you birth. (Deuteronomy 32:10–13, 18)

God is described here as a mother bird caring for her helpless young, like a mother nursing her baby from the *tzur*. There is no greater picture of love than of a mother breastfeeding her baby. This water⁶ was the symbol of God's love for the Israelites.

It is shocking, then, that Moses would go ahead and poison that very water, the metaphorical mother's milk, with the ashes of the Golden Calf. Even God, who considered wiping out the nation, wouldn't have hurt them through His beloved water. We even have a rule about doing things like this. It's called not cooking a kid in its mother's milk. A mother's milk is a symbol of love, it is there to nourish the baby. Slaughter whatever animal you want to slaughter, but don't boil it in its own mother's milk. Don't use this object of supreme love against it.⁷

This is the backdrop against which the scene of the

⁶ The water in this metaphor is replaced by oil and honey to demonstrate how precious it is.

⁷ See [Ramban on Deuteronomy 14:21](#)

Thirteen Attributes can now be reconsidered.

Moses's Personal Revelation

When Moses first asked to understand why God forgave the Israelites, God was initially dismissive: "I will be merciful to whomever I am merciful to." Then he doubles down: "It is impossible to see my face." His essence is beyond understanding.

But then God continues. Moses may never be able to *understand* God's mercy, but maybe, through a hands-on experience, he can learn to *intuit* it. God does this by giving Moses a chance to view the Israelites through God's own eyes. Here is what God does:

"There is space here with Me." In other words, *there is space here on My throne. I will scoot over to share the seat so you can see what it is like to be Me.*

"And you should stand yourself on the *tzur*." God invites Moses to stand in the exact same place as He did when He responded to the Israelites' cry for water.

"I shall put you in the cleft of the *tzur*." Why was there a cleft in this *tzur*? Because not long ago, Moses stood on this same mountain and struck this same *tzur*. This must have been the very hole out of which the water flowed. Imagine what it would have been like, for Moses, for God to place him *inside* that crack. You turn to look out at the view from the mountain. Water rushes by you as you gaze down through the mist at the people you

have shepherded out of Egypt. It must have felt as if the water was flowing from Moses himself, as if *he* was the one breastfeeding the Israelites. God allowed Moses to view the world from the shoes of a heavenly nursing mother. This was Moses's personal revelation.

God had first tried to explain to Moses that His love for Israel is irrational, that there is no logical principle that could fully account for it, and that to explain it would be impossible. But when that left Moses unsatisfied, God provided him with a metaphor—the closest human analogue: the love of a parent. A parent does not love a child because the child has earned that love, nor does that love disappear when the child has done something terribly wrong. It simply persists. Parental love exerts a claim more powerful than logic. It is not something that can be justified or reduced to reasons, but something any parent knows from experience. It may be impossible to explain, but it is remarkably simple to experience. And so, rather than rationalize or justify His love to Moses, God allowed Moses to experience it from His own point of view.

God does not exactly call Himself a parent. Whatever Moses experienced in that quiet moment on top of Mount Sinai was something beyond words, something that God could only explain through experience. But at the end of Moses's life, as he is delivering his parting words to the Israelites, trying to impress upon them the years of wisdom he has accumulated, he lands upon this formulation. What he saw—or maybe even felt—when he stood in God's shoes could

only be described as parental love, and this is the metaphor Moses returns to over and over again throughout Deuteronomy.⁸ To understand God, or at least to intuit Him, requires thinking of God as a loving parent.

Finally, in Moses's final message in Ha'azinu, he employs a new nickname for God, never before seen throughout the Torah. Moses calls God *The Tzur*. Throughout everything God taught Moses, that *tzur* left the most lasting impression. Moses saw past all the scariness at Mount Sinai, and understood that nothing describes God better than this.

Odysseus vs. Avraham: What An Essay Written In Exile Teaches About Teshuva

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It's 1944 and Erich Auerbach, a German Jewish refugee in Istanbul, sits down to write what will become one of the most influential works of 20th century literary criticism.

His goal is nothing less than to chart the history of how western literature has described reality over the previous 3,000 years.

So where to start? With a comparison and contrast of what he considered to be the two great original stories of the West - the Homeric tales of the Iliad and the Odyssey, and the Hebrew Bible.

Thus was born 'Odysseus' Scar' - the first chapter of Auerbach's great work *Mimesis*.¹ It takes the form of a side-by-side consideration of the story in the Odyssey of how the young Odysseus received his scar with the *Akeida* - God's command of Avraham to offer up his son Yitzchak on Mount Moriah. In Auerbach's reading, not only do Homer and the Bible have fundamentally different approaches to describing reality, but the literary difference is reflective of a deeper opposition about the nature of a meaningful human life.

Over the last few years, I have come to believe that, whether or not Auerbach realized it, he was giving a profound description of the concept of teshuva and of the Torah's understanding of what it means to be human - understandings whose fundamental novelty is sharpened by comparison to the works of Homer.

Given that the Odyssey is enjoying a renaissance in popularity due to Christopher Nolan's blockbuster and that the *Yamim Nora'im* are upon us with their themes of teshuva and human existence - it seems to be a particularly

⁸ Deuteronomy [1:31](#); [14:1](#); [8:5](#); [32:5](#), 6, 11, 13, 18, 19

¹ [*Mimesis: The Representation Of Reality In Western Literature*](#), by Erich Auerbach. Written in Istanbul

between 1942 and 1945, published in 1946. Translated from the German by Willard R. Trask and first published in English by Princeton University Press in 1953. Citations are from the 1991 edition.

appropriate time to revisit Auerbach's insights.

Two Stories & Two Ways Of Encountering Reality

Following the Trojan War, Odysseus eventually returns home to Ithaca after numerous adventures. His wife Penelope, whom he had left twenty years earlier when he set out on his journey, is surrounded by suitors - each trying to convince her that her husband is dead and that she should marry them. Rather than announce his return, Odysseus disguises himself as an old beggar so that he can observe whether or not his wife will remain faithful. His old housekeeper Euryclea, who has known him since he was a child, bathes the weary stranger's legs. She does not recognize him at first but upon touching the scar on his leg gasps and lets go of his foot which falls into the bowl causing the water to spill over- only one man has such a scar and this must be her master! Before she can cry out in joy, Odysseus grabs her tightly and warns her not to reveal his identity to Penelope and the others.

But how did Odysseus get this scar? The story breaks off for an extremely lengthy filling-in of the backstory. On a hunting trip as a boy while visiting his grandfather, the young Odysseus runs ahead of the older men pursuing the boar. The two face off against each other. The boar lunges at Odysseus and gores his leg but the lad gets his spear in and kills the beast. The older men arrive and discover the wounded boy and the dead animal and carry Odysseus back in triumph. The scene is narrated at such great length that only after 77 (!) verses do

we return to the action many years later as the old housemaid discovers this scar and what it must mean.

Such a lengthy tangent to explain a detail is nothing remarkable in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Auerbach stresses that the Homeric epics skip nothing. Every detail is accounted for and explained. Characters speak at great length to one another, even in the midst of battle, to share their emotions and opinions. If there is no one to speak to they share their innermost feelings with the reader. If a god arrives, we are told where he or she has been previously. In the story of how Odysseus received his scar, we are told how the light played between the trees, how the boar looked and sounded. No background is left unexplained and every tangent merits a thick description.

What a difference with the world of the Tanakh! In the story of the *Akeida*, Auerbach stresses how many crucial details are withheld from the reader. We are not told why God tests Avraham. We are not told how Avraham feels about it or whether he informs Sarah about it. We are certainly not told what the characters look like, where they are, or even told how old Yitzchak is. To ponder for a moment that last question of Yitzchak's age - undoubtedly the challenges that the story raises vary dramatically depending on whether Yitzchak is a small child or a grown adult, and yet the Torah's text leaves us in the dark.

This phenomenon of what Meir Sternberg will

later call the Tanakh's 'gapped text'² is recognizable to any traditional Jewish reader of the Torah. In fact, it is exactly the gaps that create the opening for midrash to insert itself - answering the questions that the verses leave open, imagining for instance that it is Sarah's horrified response to the *Akeida* that causes her death, which is related in the very next chapter (Tanchuma and others).

Homer's text is rich and full. Splendid speeches and rich backstories accompany the action. By contrast, the Tanakh's extreme economy withholds almost every non-essential detail. Does this mean that the Torah's stories are the poorer for it, that what its stories lack in word count they also lack in depth? If anything, Auerbach's argument leads us to the opposite conclusion. Precisely because the Torah's text does not tell us whether Yitzchak is 3 or if he is 37, both options are possibilities. By withholding crucial details, the reader is forced to insert themselves into the text and consider the different possibilities, giving life to both options.

Auerbach, an assimilated Jew, wrote *Odysseus' Scar* as a piece of literary criticism, not as a religious or Torah text. And yet his argument can be of immense value to traditional readers of Torah.

"One is the word of God, yet two things I have heard," says David HaMelech in [Tehillim 62:12](#), and continues, 'this is the greatness of God.'³ Hazal saw this verse as capturing the experience of reading Torah. Expanding upon it, they said "a single verse is given several explanations.... The House of Rabbi Yishmael taught: 'As the hammer splits the rock' ([Yirmiyahu 23:29](#)), just as the

hammer smashes the rock into several shards – so too a single verse is explained in several ways." ([Sanhedrin 34a](#))

Auerbach's piece can be considered to be a meditation on this verse from psalms and its Talmudic commentary: that a single text is heard in multiple ways, and that this is the greatness of God. It would not be possible to write a work of midrash on the *Odyssey*. The questions have already been answered in the text. Yet the Torah's text forces the reader to probe the ambiguities and gaps and come up with their own answers.

In the 12th century, the great Biblical commentator Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) famously wrote that his grandfather Rashi had admitted to him that, if he lived another lifetime, he would need to write new commentaries on the Torah *lefi ha-peshatot ha-mithadshim be-khol yom* "according to the interpretations which are

² Meir Sternberg, [The Poetics Of Biblical Narrative](#), Indiana University Press, 1985, chs.6-8. See also Robert Alter, [The Art Of Biblical Narrative](#), New York: Basic Books, 1981, ch.1.

³ Translations, unless noted, are my own.

renewed each day.” ([Rashbam to Bereishit 37:2](#)).

That each day and year has its own unique Torah commentaries to be produced is a cornerstone of Jewish faith - “there is no beit midrash without hiddush” ([Hagiga 3a](#)). Auerbach’s essay allows us to understand that there need be nothing mystical about this claim. Although he may not have been familiar with Abaye and Rashbam, his sense of the Torah text as gapped, as holding back critical information that the reader must themselves answer, is what gives the Torah’s stories the

psychological depth that the Odyssey lacks and allows for the possibility of endless chiddush, of *davar acher*. Another possibility always exists.

Teshuva As The Pendulum Swing Of A Human Life

These gaps and ambiguities that are built into the Torah’s texts - the questions that we are left wondering about - lay the groundwork for what will be Auerbach’s deeper claim: that the great characters of the Tanakh are fundamentally different in kind from the Homeric heroes. This claim will be the one that I believe gets at the heart of teshuva.

The characters of the Odyssey and the Iliad arrive on the scene fully formed. They are warriors and leaders and poets and lovers - they give long speeches, declaring their innermost thoughts,

they live lives of adventure and danger and heroism - but, Auerbach argues, they undergo no personal development.⁴ In fact, they frequently appear to be of an age fixed from the very start.

The contrast, Auerbach stresses, to the Biblical heroes is profound:

‘Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier. But what a road, what a fate, lie between the Jacob who cheated his father out of his blessing and the old man whose favorite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast!—between David the harp player, persecuted by his lord’s jealousy, and the old king, surrounded by violent intrigues, whom Abishag the Shunnamite warmed in his bed, and he knew her not! The old man, of whom we know how he has become what he is is more of an individual than the young man; for it is only during the course of an eventful life that men are differentiated into full individuality; and it is this history of a personality which the Hebrew Bible presents to us as the formation undergone by those whom God has chosen to be examples’ (17)

The idea of formation, of development over time, is key here. That it is only over the course of a rich and varied life with its challenges and triumphs that that a character is fully developed and revealed. The journey is key. Not for nothing does Avraham - the paradigmatic ba’al teshuva of

⁴ One could, of course, disagree with this assertion and claim that Odysseus and the other Homeric heroes do indeed undergo development. Nevertheless, for our purposes, we are interested in how Auerbach’s understanding of the

Odyssey sharpened his insights into the nature of Tanakh. These insights stand independently of whether or not he was correct in his analysis of the Odyssey.

Jewish tradition - live his life between the two commands of *lech lecha*. His life and growth is bookended with the journeys that God instructs him to undertake - first the journey to Canaan ([Bereishit 12](#)) and finally the journey to Har Ha-Moriah ([Bereishit 22](#)). Moreover, Hazal saw a great multitude of tests as resting at the heart of Avraham's story. The tests along the journey bring out the character that we will eventually know as

Avraham Avinu. If he had been fully formed from the start there would be little value in telling the story and less still to learn from it.

If Auerbach's claim about Odysseus' lack of development is true - that he is identical upon his return to who he was when he set out twenty years earlier - then perhaps it is Avraham's journey that should more correctly be described as an odyssey, for it contains not only an external wandering but also an inner movement and journey that is lacking in the Greek legend.

What can be said about the nature of the journeys of Biblical characters? What features do they have in common? Auerbach writes:

There is hardly one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation—and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God's personal intervention and personal inspiration. Humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher than in Homer, and they belong basically together. The poor beggar Odysseus is only masquerading, but Adam is really cast down,

Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. But their greatness, rising out of humiliation, is almost superhuman and an image of God's greatness. (18)

Humiliation and elevation. The journeys that great characters of the Tanakh undertake are not simply ones of outward adventure, but ones of emotional and psychological extremes. The shame of loneliness, failure and embarrassment, the sense of being cast out, on the one hand. The sense of return, restoration, rebuilding, of being supported by God and people, on the other.

Towards the end of the essay, Auerbach strikes a tone that is less "detached literary critic" and more "teacher profoundly moved by the religious meaning of the text for his audience":

The reader clearly feels how the extent of the pendulum's swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history—precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair, or immeasurably joyous and exalted, give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich development. (ibid.)

Speaking in the first person plural - 'we,' all readers of Tanakh, see ourselves in the pendulum swing between humiliation and elevation that Adam, Avraham and all the others undergo - a pendulum swing which Auerbach claims 'is so much wider

than that of the Homeric heroes.'

'Each one of us is banished from Gan Eden, and each one of us experiences the flood,' sings Hanan Ben Ari. We dream like Yosef and like him we are thrown into the pit. The circle turns. And like David we turn it into a song of praise.

The Jewish sense of being and becoming - of what we can make of ourselves over the course of a lifetime, not despite the setbacks but because of them, is intimately tied to our people's original stories. We, too, inhabit the pendulum swing, and we strive to make meaning out of the intensity of our experiences.

—

I have long felt that the many attempts to define or even translate the concept of teshuva end up limiting and diminishing the power and depth of the idea.

Perhaps we should think of teshuva as the story of our lives. Lives lived with an awareness and scrutiny of our own development, on the journey to and from God, to and from ourselves, on the pendulum swing from elevation to humiliation and back again. We must not be the same people at the end of the journey as we were at the start - we must not experience the Odyssey of our own lives as Odysseus experienced his - returning to

our own Ithaca the same as we were when we left. The Torah demands more of us.

It is for this reason I would like to suggest that the tefillot and Torah readings of the Yamim Nora'im are filled not with formulas and definitions but with stories. We read of the expulsion of Yishmael and the binding of Yitzchak on Rosh Hashanah and of Yonah on Yom Kippur. We inhabit the pain of childlessness felt by Sarah and Hannah and the fragility of Noah and his family surrounded by hostile waters.

These days of awe are designed for us to situate our own stories within the frameworks and themes of the great heroes of the Tanakh who undertook their own journeys, as unsure of the destination as we are of our own - but who turned to God with pleas for clarity and illumination about where they were on the maps of their own lives.

Auerbach was an assimilated German Jew, and according to a number of sources ambivalent about his own Jewish identity. He was a literary scholar and not a rabbi.

But as the flames of World War II and the Shoah engulfed the Europe that he had fled, perhaps his choice to place the story of the *Akeidah* - the classic motif of Jewish martyrdom - at the heart of

his great work was not a coincidence, but rather his own subtle way of situating his own story within that of his people's history.

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