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# LEHRHAUS

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## ROSH HA-SHANA READER

"ANI L'DODI V'DODI LI: I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE."  
LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS FOR THE MONTH OF ELUL IS DEDICATED  
WITH GRATITUDE BY **STEVEN WEINER & LISA WISE**  
ON THE VERY HAPPY OCCASION OF THEIR 30TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY.

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY  
**TOVA AND HOWARD WEISER**  
TO COMMEMORATE THE YAHRZEIT OF TOVA'S FATHER,  
**MOSHE WEISS (MOSHE BEN TZVI V'PESEL), ON THE 5TH OF TISHREI.**

### THE BIRTHPLACE OF INFERTILITY

**Yael Leibowitz** taught Tanakh at the Upper School of Ramaz, and then went on to join the Judaic Studies faculty at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women.

Five days after the birth of her daughter, she hemorrhaged, on the floor of her bedroom. But it was 2011, and she lived in New York, so as she faded in and out of consciousness she was rushed to a local hospital where the emergency room staff wasted no time hooking her up to machines and getting her bleeding under control. So, she lived.

She was terrified as it was happening. Mostly that her newborn would go hungry because she hadn't yet taken a bottle. She insisted, irrationally, that her husband bring the baby with them to the emergency room. In some hazy picture in her dark and wild imagination, she figured that even if she were comatose, they could put the baby to her body to feed.

When she was back home, watching her two older sons sleep, she succumbed to the immensity of what she was feeling, and she cried thinking about what could have been. But more than anything, she cried for all the women throughout time and throughout the world, whose stories didn't end like hers. She cried for her matriarch Rachel, and she cried for the woman in a remote village somewhere, who lived too far from a hospital, so five days after the birth of her daughter, bled out on the floor of her hut. She cried for that now-hungry baby.

As the tears fell, her mind glided back in time to a brightly lit room, whose soft music and idyllic photos were, for the most part, ineffectual. It was the familiar mix of emotions that transported her; the coalescence of vulnerability and gratitude, and the swelling of her heart for women she had never met.

The infertility clinic, they were told, was one of the best in the country. Plus, there was ample parking, which meant one less factor to consider on those rushed winter mornings when she sped post-ultrasound to work. She remembers that particular morning. She remembers joking around with the lab technician she had become friendly with as she passed by his window, and she remembers feeling pretty sure in those moments, that interacting with kind people was more calming to her than any of the techniques the waiting room pamphlets advised. She pulled the sides of her puffer vest close as she crossed her arms, and she remembers laughing at herself for neurotically trying to find just the right amount of pressure with which to hold the test tube in her hand. Not too tightly in case it's fragile, but not too loosely or it might slip through her fingers. She wondered for a moment if there were a guy somewhere whose job it is to come up with apparatus for medical procedures based solely on their symbolic value. If so, she thought, humoring herself, he nailed it with glass test tubes for aspiring parents.

Her husband had to be overseas for work, so as she offered a fleeting, anxious smile to the couple that chose the chairs next to her, she steeled herself for the loneliness she assumed would surge. But as she looked down at the vial that held within it the potential for human life and saw the writing on the sticker that encircled it, everything stopped. The swirl around her, the ringing phones, the hushed chatter, the magazine pages-- stilled. And she became excruciatingly aware, in that moment, of her uniquely modern ability to exploit medicine's advances. For thousands of years, she knew, women tried desperately to cajole their bodies into obeying them. Fragments of amulets, incantations, and ritual texts unearthed from the ancient world attest that humanity has always tried to control the precarious progression from conception to birth. For thousands of years women ached. They begged their gods, they consulted their necromancers and their witch doctors, and they used every means at their disposal to break through their uterus's refusal to accommodate life. And there she was, she realized, sitting in a waiting room, holding in her hand scientific breakthrough.

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She thought in those moments of the *Apkallu* figures depicted in Mesopotamian mythology, the semi-divine beings that revealed the secrets of cultural and technological progress to mankind. Left to its own devices, the ancients believed, humanity would be devoid of ingenuity. But the ancient texts she favored had a different take. The Book of Genesis told of Yaval who pioneered animal husbandry, Yuval who devised wind instruments, and Tuval-Cain who developed enhanced agricultural tools. Innovators, she thought, because they heeded the injunction, not just to “fill the earth” but to “master it.” Genesis spoke of a God that not only created humans in His image but endowed them with the ability to probe the secrets of His infinitely complex universe. He enjoined humanity, she thought, as she pictured her doctor’s faces, to be, like Him, creative.

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Growing up on the Bible, meant growing up on stories of barren women. They were as familiar to her as the Garden of Eden and Noah’s Ark, despite the unfamiliarity of the world that produced them. Ancient subsistence living measured the worth of an individual, in large part, by the degree to which he or she contributed to the group’s ability to survive. Male valiance in battle and productivity in the fields, corresponded to the female ability to produce future soldiers and laborers. Naturally, the stories of the Bible reflected the realities of its world, gendered roles and all. But what she loved was how, in carving out space for the experiences of the women that lined its pages, the Bible allowed them to transcend their trappings and communicate timeless truths. And she thought about those truths that morning. She thought about Sarah’s laughter at the angel’s pronouncement of her impending pregnancy, and she understood that sometimes, when heartbreak is at stake, faith and skepticism exert equal pull. She thought about the nerve it took Hannah to march up to the male-dominated sanctuary in Shiloh, and how in fulfilling her appeals for a child, God was also confirming Hannah’s conviction that no one is denied the privilege of prayer. She thought about the fact that Ruth chose compassion as the motivating force behind every choice she made, and how when her baby was finally born, she placed him in Naomi’s empty arms knowing that the warmth generated by new life can crack open the most frozen of hearts, and that its light, diffused, is not diminished. She thought of Rachel’s persistence, and of Leah’s ambition, and she wondered how women, raised in a home that taught them to expect nothing, found the inner strength to demand of man and of God. The stories enveloped her.

And she understood that this preoccupation with the fertility of people and the land was not unique to the Bible. The unpredictability of the ancient world, with its high infant and maternal mortality rates, flash floods that could decimate the annual crop, or drought that could desiccate it, meant that people of the Bible’s world lived with an acute cognizance of that razor fine line between fertility and death. But as she processed the multitude of analogous stories, what struck her was the fact that all the women, whose struggles were so evocatively depicted, ultimately bore children. The narratives, misleadingly labeled “barren women of the Bible,” were in fact preludes to extended narratives about the births of individuals that typically went on to become central figures in Israelite history. Forefathers, prophets, warriors. Countless biblical greats shared that common personal history. So even as she connected to the rawness of the stories, and she stroked that rawness, beneath the scaffolded layers of meaning characteristic of the Bible, there had to be something more profound, more encompassing.

All great cultures have their heroes. All great cultures speak of individuals, real or imagined, that embody what the culture stands for. And whether that status is earned or stumbled upon, once it is ratified, a culture sees in its heroes everything it wants to see in its collective self. Heroes, ancestors, forebears, are turned to by the cultures that venerate them, not just for what they accomplished, but for what they represent. They become, over time, microcosms of the macro; paradigmatic in the most literal sense of the word. The Bible, in a way that was exceptional for its time, did not deify its heroes and it did not portray them as beacons of perfection. The heroes of the Bible were relevant specifically because they were human. They were complicated, and they were flawed, and they made mistakes that blemished their legacies. But none of that changed the fact that the stories about Israel’s heroes were preserved and transmitted because, like all heroes, they projected in their lives, and in the choices they made, matters that were at the forefront of Israel’s consciousness.

For the fledgling nation of Israel, the metaphorical significance of a miraculous birth, following a protracted period of barrenness, was profoundly resonant. Israel, like so many of its heroes, emerged onto the world scene in a stunning manner. God had made promises to Abraham, about his descendants emerging from servitude, and returning as a people to their homeland. But after centuries in Egypt, with the shadows of inherited memory fading by the day, those promises, for the few who even recalled them, seemed dubious. The birth of Israel seemed impossible. But just like its heroes, the Nation of Israel was born. And like its heroes, the fact that it emerged in the face of impossible odds points to the very source of its endurance—the fine interplay between divine promises and human initiative. Like their heroes, the people of Israel bore the responsibility connoted in a miraculous birth.

And just like the birth of its heroes, the Birth of Israel was facilitated by irrepressible women.

It didn’t begin with the Ten Plagues. The Birth of Israel began with an inadvertent sisterhood. It began with midwives refusing to allow tyranny to undermine their craft, and choosing to usher in new life, at the risk of their own. It began with a woman who tried desperately to save her child from a cruel dictator’s infanticidal decree, and it began when the daughter of that dictator rejected the hatred she was raised on, and chose to love her enemy’s child. The women of Exodus chose, instinctively, to believe in life. She had always wondered as she read the account of Moses’ mother placing him in a basket on the Nile, how many other mothers had done the same? When Pharaoh’s daughter assumed correctly that her foundling was Hebrew, was that because the riverbank was filled with similar baskets? Similar attempts to delay the inevitable? She wondered. And when Moses’ sister had the gall to approach Pharaoh’s daughter and suggest she fetch a wet nurse from among the Hebrews, how many women, she remembered thinking every time she read that exchange, were left lactating, anguished, with no mouth to feed?

The impossibility of birth was being whispered all around them. They chose not to listen. And because of that, there was life. Waters broke and Israel emerged.

She thought that morning about the women of Exodus. She thought of their tenacity, and their morality, and of their role in one of the grandest metaphors in history. She thought about how the aggregate of all the stories that had escorted her emotionally those last few

months, was ultimately, the story of her people. It was the story of birth and loss, and obstinacy, and faith. It was the story of defying probabilities, of refusing to despair, and of trying to remain decent in a sometimes-indecent world.

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In ancient times, women would pray to Ishtar the goddess of fertility, and to mother goddesses believed to be present at birth. That night, as her tears fell, she offered up prayers to her God. She watched her children sleep, and she traveled back and forth among her memories and her thought processes, and she prayed in thanks, and in hope. Thanks for the abundance she did not take for granted, and hope for those suffering from emptiness, in any form. Thanks to God for inviting humanity to partner with Him in divine ventures and hope for people everywhere waiting on a medical miracle. Thanks that like their heroes, after their miraculous birth, her people went on to stimulate moral consciousness in an ever-changing world, and hope that like their heroes, they would always be inclined to learn from past mistakes. Thanks that the world that she lived in, like the world of the Bible, was still filled with individuals who chose to push the limits of what others believed they were capable, and hope that the good ones never back down.

## HUMAN WORDS: RAV ELHANAN NIR'S "INTENTIONS FOR ROSH HASHANAH"

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### Introduction

Rav Elhanan Nir is a prolific writer and thinker and the author of numerous articles, including two theological works, [a novel](#), and four collections of poetry. He is not a man of clean genre distinctions, however. While his theological works cite poetry and speak evocatively, his poetry is often highly theological, as befitting a poet deeply engaged with his God and his religious tradition. A particularly striking example of the theologically engaged poetry is a series of four poems entitled "Intentions (*Kavvanot*) for Rosh Hashanah" from his second collection, *The Regular Fire*.<sup>1</sup> Below, I offer short analyses of each poem, exploring their various elements as well as the traditional intertextual references Nir has woven into them.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I highlight Nir's use of the genre of *kavvanot* in a contemporary context.

<sup>1</sup> Elhanan Nir, *The Regular Fire: Poems and a Fairy Tale* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2011), 38–41. © All rights reserved by Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House.

My thanks to Prof. Alan Brill, R. Zach Truboff, and R. Ari Ze'ev Schwartz for reading and commenting on an early draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> A fuller analysis would require also exploring Nir's references to modern Hebrew poetry and literature, but such a task escapes both the limits of this essay and, to be quite frank, my interpretive wheelhouse.

Poetry tends to draw on the rich history of the language in which it is written, and Nir's work does not disappoint. Intertexts can be appropriated in any number of ways and to varying degrees, so they represent a particularly challenging realm of interpretation. The perennial hazard of seeing references where none were intended is

Any translation is fraught with difficulties and unavoidable interpretations, but with poetic translation, the problems are even more severe. The process necessarily involves making interpretive determinations across both individual lines and the poem as whole. A word or phrase in the original might be intended to pull the reader in more than one direction, while the translation can only capture certain elements of the whole. Faithfulness to one element of the text might require betraying another. For example, in the poems below, I switched the primary speaking voice from third person ("he") to second person ("you"). This is because when I maintained the third person form, the resulting English poem was entirely too wordy, in a manner unfaithful to the original. The translations found below are thus a bold attempt but cannot truly do justice to the original Hebrew. Similarly, my brief analyses below cannot explore every aspect of the poems. I hope merely to give the reader some broad outlines and trajectories as a way into further exploration. For that reason, it may also be valuable to first read the poems before reading my analysis of them.

### Feeling the Words

<p><b>Introduction to the Intentions</b>          Take hold of the word with both hands          And even if it delays,          Hold it patiently, and say it.          But how will you say it—it is cast into the depths          How will you draw the voice out of it          Shout and be broken by it          As it breaks a person's whole body          While it is held captive in philologists' chains.          Who will fall from the word and be crushed into wretchedness          Who will be struck with a hundred blows and devise all his dreams          From which he flees every day.          And say: what is it to you that you are afire after me          Indeed, <i>ana mi-zar'a de-Yosef ka atina</i>          See then the word full of disease          After legions have struck it and</p>	<p><b>א. הקדמה לכוונות</b>          יאחז המלה בַּשְׁתִּי          יָדָיו          וְגַם אִם תִּתְמַמֶּמָּה          יאחז פָּה בְּמַתִּינוֹת          וַיֹּאמֶר          אֲבַל אֵיךְ יֹאמֶר וְהִיא          זְרוּקָה אֶל תְּהוֹמוֹת          וְאֵיךְ יוֹצִיא מִמֶּנָּה          הַקּוֹל          וַיִּצְעַק וַיִּשְׁבַּר מִמֶּנָּה          שְׁשׁוּבָרֶת כָּל גּוּפוֹ שֶׁל          אָדָם          וְהִיא שְׁבוּיָה בְּאֲזָקֵי          הַמְּסַקְרִים,          וּמִי יִפֹּל מִן הַמְּלָה          וַיִּתְרַסַּק אֶל הַעֲלִיבוֹת          וּמִי יִכֶּה מִנֶּה מַכּוֹת          וַיִּתְחַבֵּל בְּכָל          חֲלוּמוֹתָיו          מֵהֶם יִבְרַח בְּכָל יוֹם.          וַיֹּאמֶר מַה לָּכֶם כִּי          דִלְקַתֶּם אַחֲרַי          הֵן אֲנִי מִזְרְעָא דְיוֹסֵף          קָא אַתִּינָא          וַיִּרְאֶה אִזּוֹ הַמְּלָה          מְלֹאֶת חֲלִי</p>
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also impossible to avoid and demands a constant conservatism. With that caveat, I will point out and interpret several of Nir's references to traditional Jewish texts (with a few more referenced in annotations to the translations).

profaned it It wails internally, struggling to breathe And it has already lost the strength to cry How will you express the word when all its sinews have withered When it is worn weak with all the words of the world And passes before him with all the daughters of <i>maron</i> and how Will you say the word	אַחַר שְׁהִכּוּהָ וְחָלְלוּהָ לְגִיוֹנוֹת וְהִיא מִנְבֵּכַת אֶל תּוֹכָהּ וּבְקָשִׁי רַב נּוֹשְׁמַת וּכְבֵּר אֶפְס כֹּחָהּ מִלְבָּכוֹת וְאֵיךְ יִבְטֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּשִׁקְל מִיִּתְרִיָּהּ יְבִשׁוּ וְהִיא צְרוּדָה חֲלוּשָׁה בְּכָל מְלִי דְעֻלְמָא וְעוֹבְרַת לְפָנָיו עִם כָּל בָּנוֹת מְרוֹן וְאֵיךְ יֵאמַר אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ
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words but to free them from their historical chains.<sup>4</sup> It is, in a sense, a call to poetry.

Nir makes a clear intertextual reference when he suddenly shifts from Hebrew to Aramaic in the middle of a line: “Indeed, *ana mi-zar’a de-Yosef ka atina*.” This phrase references a Talmudic narrative from [Berakhot 20a](#), where it is used to express confidence when stepping into risky territory. The speaker has been asked why he is not worried about “the evil eye,” and he responds that he is descended from the biblical Joseph, whose descendants are said to be “above”—which is to say, safe from—the evil eye. This self-confident posture slides easily into the texture of the first poem, which, as explored above, encourages the reader to pray from a position of power and judgment. The reader can call on God to draw near and take account of them in the second poem, as we shall see, without fear of danger.

#### Day of Judgment, Day of Rest

The second and third poems (“Intentions for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah” and “Intentions for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah”) form the main sections of the “intentions,” giving the reader more specific instructions about what to say and what intentions to have. Though similar in form, the two poems could not be more different in content. The first begins with a dramatic instruction to the reader to “speak in harsh judgment,” while the second begins by flatly reminding the reader to “remember that the pathos is already lost.” From there, the two poems continue to diverge, painting very different pictures of the prayers for each day.

The first poem sets up a framework for the “intentions,” which themselves only appear in the second and third poems. It focuses on the person praying adopting a proper orientation toward the words of the *mahzor*. The reader is instructed to consciously speak the words of the *mahzor*, to wield them intently when entering the fraught world of prayer. The poem highlights the mutualistic relationship between the words and the person who speaks them, but it ultimately places the person praying in a position of control over the words which are “full of disease,” “withered,” and have “already lost the strength to cry out.” The traditional words of prayer have sufficed for Jews for generations. This could be said to give them their power, but from another perspective it might also challenge their relevance. Perhaps the words, like so many of us, are worn out and exhausted. Thus, it is not enough for a person to simply let the words wash over them; they must take charge. However, as much as the words are vulnerable, the person praying must be vulnerable as well. The words of prayer are described as locked in “philologists’ chains.”<sup>3</sup> Strict historicism can often tie words to a specific contextual meaning. The goal is thus for the person praying to approach the *mahzor* anew, prepared not simply to dominate the

<sup>3</sup> “Philologists” renders the various connotations of the Hebrew “הַמְחַקְרִים,” both based on context in the poem and on the presumption that Nir is drawing on Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav’s usage of the term. Cf. Rebbe Nahman, *Likkutei Moharan* I [25:1](#), [55:7](#), [63:1](#) & [7](#), [64:2](#), [176:1](#); II [19:2–3](#), [44:1](#).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nir’s discussion of literality, orality, and historicism in his second theological work, *A Jew in the Night* [Hebrew] (Rishon LeZion: Miskal — Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Hemed Books, 2017), 189–190. His discussion clearly has the Pauline critique of dead letters in mind, a connection more clearly made by Nir’s contemporary Yishai Mevorach in his *The Jew of the Edge: Towards Inextricable Theology* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2018), 83–143. Both Mevorach and Nir were students of Rav Shagar and editors of his writings.

<p><b>II. Intentions for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah</b></p> <p>Speak in harsh judgment Gaze into the mirror and throw yourself on the water Shout with all your strength: Yes, You are the king and You are the Infinite One, blessed Are you Come down to me to here, where I am And answer me. If you feel you aren't being answered Mark yourself before him with a fish, with vegetables, and with pomegranates, Billow the red cloth and wave your whole life before him and say: Yes, I am going to die, And say aloud: Going to die, Why do I need this whole world Why do I need this If you don't come to take account of me To bring me Life</p>	<p><b>ב. כוונות ליום א' דראש השנה</b></p> <p>ידבר בדינא קשיא ויסתכל בראי וישליך עצמו על המים ויצעק בכל פחו הו אתה המלך ואתה האין-סוף ברוך אתה רד אלי לכאן, להיכן שאני נענני. ואם חש שלא נענה, ניסמן עצמו לפניו בדג, בירקות ובפירות, וירקע באדם הסודרים ויניף את כל חייו לפניו ויאמר: הו אני הולך למות, ויאמר בקול: הולך למות, ולמה לי כל העולם הזה ולמה לי זה אם אינך בא לקדוני להביאני חיים</p>
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as a day of judgment, though one that does not quite match the classical depiction of God judging the Jewish people.

While the first poem intertextually referenced protection from danger, the element of danger itself comes through more strongly in one radical intertextual reference in the second poem: “Yes, I am going to die, / And say aloud: Going to die, / Why do I need this whole world / Why do I need this” echoes a quote from [Genesis 25:32](#): “Indeed, I am going to die; why do I need this birthright?”<sup>6</sup> What makes this intertext so radical is that the original speaker of those words was Esav, the traditional enemy of Jacob and his descendants, who was, in context, uttering a dismissive outburst while agreeing to sell his birthright for a quick meal. To the degree that liturgy and poetry—or any language, for that matter—ask the speaker to step outside themselves and take on a new role,<sup>7</sup> Nir is asking his readers to step into the role of Esav. In the same way that Esav was ready to give up on his birthright, Nir’s speaker is willing to give up on the life of this world, asking only that God come and judge them.

Another critical intertextual reference in this poem is the “taking account” mentioned near the end. The Hebrew verb I have rendered as “to take account of me,” “*le-fokdeni*,” may refer to the rabbinic idea that the barren matriarchs and heroines of the Hebrew Bible were “taken account of” by God specifically on Rosh Hashanah, thus enabling them to become pregnant.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly resonant with the theme of the second poem because of the way that one of these women, Hannah, is depicted by the rabbis as having almost forced God to give her a child.<sup>9</sup> This sort of powerful, judgmental prayer is a prayer that leads to new life. As the poem says, the request is that God “come to take account of me / To bring me / Life.” In the poem, the new life registered may be the speaker’s very survival, or it may refer to a general sense of religious and existential meaning; but, given the shift toward maturity and family life we shall in the third poem, it may indeed connote childbearing as well.

The poem for the first day calls for—or even creates—a relationship of mutual judgment between God and the person praying. It opens by telling the person praying to speak with judgment, and it ends with them calling on God “to take account of” them. Perhaps more importantly, this mutual judgment involves a sort of closeness, referenced later in the fourth poem’s “the closeness bewilders.” God is asked twice to draw close to the person praying, first to descend to where they are and then to come to take account of them. God is asked both to recognize them as they are and to grace them with the mixture of judgment and blessing (alluded to in the verb “to take account of”). The mutual relationship leads to what is almost a relationship between equals. While God is referred to both as “King” and “Infinite One,” the person praying is instructed to speak almost authoritatively, calling upon God to act in specific ways and utilizing specific actions (such as the *simanim* customarily eaten at Rosh Hashanah dinner) to ensure a response. This is made most dramatic via the image of the billowing red cloth, likely a reference to a bullfighter’s cape.<sup>5</sup> The bullfighter waves his cape in order to incite the bull to charge toward him; in the poem, the person praying waves their “whole life before [God]” in order to incite God to draw near and bring life. The poem thus sets up the first day of Rosh Hashanah

<sup>6</sup> I have translated the verse myself here in order to demonstrate the degree to which Nir is simply quoting it. The JPS 1985 translation, by contrast, reads: “I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?”

<sup>7</sup> This performative function is even clearer in the original Hebrew, where Nir’s words address the subject of the intentions in the third person (“He should take hold of the word with both hands,” etc.), rather than the second. The reader is thus asked to displace their own subjectivity and step into that of the subject of the intentions. I have sacrificed this effect in my translation by shifting into the second person because I think it better reflects the overall mood of the original, as noted above.

<sup>8</sup> [Rosh ha-Shanah 11a](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Berakhot 31b](#).

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Elli Fischer for his help with this image.



**III. Intentions for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah**

Remember that the pathos is already lost  
 The prophets have run out, and no longer shall  
 A man rise and feel his nation, rather ask for pleasantness  
 And a gentle Sabbath, enveloped and without judgments,  
 And say, Yes, you are close  
 To all the torn and the pierced and the broken  
 For how long, this infinite repetition  
 For how long, these insults and apologies  
 And why shouldn't it make sense to me  
 (And mention your name: Ploni ben Plonit)  
 Then we will come to the room and there will be the song  
 The water will still and we will rest our heads  
 The fire will die down that once threatened us  
 That lifted the blaze and taught our voice the shouts of the forest,  
 But now we are already quiet in the heated home  
 Drinking tea with marjoram  
 Enjoying vessels that grow wide  
 Until empty

ג. כוונות ליום ב' דראש השנה  
 ויזכר שְׁכָבָר אָבֵד  
 הַפְּאִתּוֹס  
 וְתָמוּ הַנְּבִיאִים וְכָבָר לֹא  
 קָם  
 אָדָם וּמְרָגִישׁ עִם, אֶלֶּא  
 יִבְקֹשׁ נְעִימוֹת  
 וְשִׁבְתָּ רַכָּה, עֲטוּפָה  
 וּבְלֵי דִינָיִם,  
 וַיֹּאמֶר הֵן אַתָּה קָרוֹב  
 לְכָל הַנְּקָרָעִים  
 וְהַנְּשָׁבְרִים וְהַנְּשָׁבְרִים  
 עַד מְתֵי לַחֲזוֹר  
 הָאֵינְסוּפֵי הַזֶּה  
 עַד מְתֵי לְכָל הַפְּגִיעוֹת  
 וְהַתְּנַצְלִיּוֹת  
 וְלָמָּה שְׁלֹא תִהְיֶה מוֹכֵן  
 לִי  
 (וַיִּזְכֹּר שְׁמוֹ: פְּלוֹנִי בֶן  
 פְּלוֹנִית),  
 וְנִבּוֹא אֶל הַסֵּדֶר וְיִהְיֶה  
 הַנְּגוֹן  
 וַיַּעֲמְדוּ הַמִּים וַיִּנְנִים  
 הָרֹאשׁ  
 וְתִשְׁקַע הָאֵשׁ, שְׁפַעַם  
 לַחֲכָה בְּנוֹ  
 וְהַנִּיפָה הַבוֹעֵר וְלָמְדָה  
 קוֹלְנוּ לְצַעֲקוֹת הַיַּעַר,  
 אֲבָל עֲכָשׁוּ אֲנַחְנוּ כְּבָר  
 שׁוֹקֵטִים בְּבֵית הַמִּסָּק  
 שׁוֹתִים הַתָּה עִם הַמְּרֹנָה  
 נְהַגִּים מִהַפְּלִים  
 הַמְּרַחֲבִים  
 עַד שְׁנִתְרוֹקֵן

If, on the first day, Nir’s reader is drawn into a dramatic encounter between the person praying and God, the poem for the second day brings the reader into the speaker’s calm, quiet home. Not only is “the pathos” gone, but so are the prophets who speak directly to, and even argue with, God. Instead, the third poem seeks a day of rest, “a gentle Sabbath... without judgments.” A group of people—indicated by the sudden appearance of the first-person plural “we”—seem to be singing Sabbath songs. The fire of judging and being judged by God is replaced by the warmth of the home and a nice cup of herb-infused tea. The demand that God draw near is replaced by the recognition that “yes, You are close.” The person praying has moved from a religiosity that attempts to reach outside of life to a religiosity that resides within life and embraces its almost banal

comforts. Rather than calling it a “day of judgment,” perhaps we might call Nir’s second day of Rosh Hashanah a “day of acceptance.”

This shift is enacted in the third poem's intertextual references. All of two words in the Hebrew, “The fire will die down,” seems to be a reference to [Numbers 11:2](#). The poem’s fire “that once threatened us” is Numbers 11’s “fire of the Lord” that broke out against the people complaining before God. The harsh speech encouraged by the second poem suddenly seems to have been much more dangerous than we might otherwise have thought. However, in the biblical narrative, the prophet—Moses—interceded, and the fire died down. Similarly, the earlier phrase “no longer shall / a man rise” references [Deuteronomy 34:10](#), which declares that no prophet after Moses’s death will ever be as intimately familiar with God. Moses brought the nation through its dramatic youth in the desert, and now it can begin its more settled life in the land. It may not be possible to arrive at the comforts of mature life without first passing through the danger and drama of youthful religious fervor. The prophets may already “have run out,” God may already be “close / To all the torn and the pierced and the broken,” but the bold speech of the second poem helped us to arrive at this point.

The tension between religious and theological drama on the one hand and comfortable, bourgeois life on the other is a key tension unifying Nir’s corpus. It is a constant presence throughout his poems and part of the fundamental plot of his novel,<sup>10</sup> but it is also the driving force behind his first theological work, *Spirituality in Everyday Life*.<sup>11</sup> The two elements are often separated chronologically, with the fire of youth inspiring dramatic, all-consuming religiosity, while age and maturity shift the focus toward family life and all it brings with it. In these poems, a shift of many years is condensed into just two days. Nir’s “Intentions for Rosh Hashanah” series thus guides the reader through a process of maturation, moving from the prophetic to the mundane, from passion to everyday life. Or perhaps the distinction in these poems is not chronological at all; Nir is asking his readers to maintain both of these elements despite the contradiction. Both days of Rosh Hashanah irrupt into our lives each year as we traverse the calendar, unable to leave either one of them behind.

**No Escaping Our Bodies**

<sup>10</sup> Elhanan Nir, *Just the Two of Us* [Hebrew] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> This is laid out most clearly in the introduction. See R. Elhanan Nir, *Spirituality in Everyday Life* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal — Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Hemed Books, 2011), 9–17.

<p><b>IV. To Say After the Intentions</b>          Going to you hesitating          Like after all the speeches          Behold we meet, and the          closeness bewilders          To tell you how the love looks          from here          And how much danger lies in          wait for it          Cutting the air toward it.          How will I know that you can          really hold the pain          That you will know what it is to          worry for the beloved who just          now left home          That even with a wink, you know          the pains of a body          Of the inability to move about in          it securely          Of a man's fear of the future          When he has no blood          To be held in them</p>	<p><b>ד. דיבור שאחר          הכוונות</b>          לְלַכֵּת אֲלֵיךָ בְּהֶסּוּס          כְּמוֹ אַחֲרֵי כָּל          הַדְּבוּרִים          וְהִנֵּה נִפְגָּשִׁים וּמְבוּכֵת          הַקְּרִבָּה          וְלִסְפֹּר לְךָ אֵיךְ          הָאֲהָבָה נִרְאִית מְכַאֵן          וְעַד כַּמָּה הַסְּפָנָה          אוֹרְבֵת לְךָ          הוֹתֵכֵת אֵלַיָּהּ          הָאֵוִירִים.          וְאֵיךְ אֲדַע שְׂבֻאָמֶת          תּוּכַל לְהַחֲזִיק הַצָּעֵר          שְׂתַדַּע אֶת הַדְּאָגָה          לְאִהְיֹבָה שְׂאֵף יִצְאָהּ          מִן הַבֵּית          שְׂאֲפִלוּ בְקִרְיָצָה תַּדַּע          מִצְעָרֵי הַגּוֹרֵף          מִחֶסֶר הַיְלָלֶת לְהִלָּךְ          בּוֹ בְּבִטְחָה          מִפְּסֵד גְּבֹר אֶת הָעֵתִיד          כְּשֵׁאִין לוֹ דָּמִים          לְהֵאָחוּז בָּהֶם</p>
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The fourth and final poem—literally titled “Speech after the Intentions”<sup>12</sup>—essentially challenges the speech constructed in the middle two poems. It denies the possibility that God could understand the person praying—in their very personhood—and it questions the applicability of terms like “love” and “closeness” to the Divine-human relationship. It thus both reiterates the critique of language mentioned above and denies the reader the possibility of resting easy in their relationship with the Divine (which, as we have seen, is the direction indicated by the third poem). The relationship of the person praying—and thus also of the reader—with God remains one of both loving nearness and yearning from a distance, characterized both by bewildering closeness and by seemingly unresolvable alienation.

This critique expressed here also builds off of the demands expressed in the second poem. The person who survives or gives birth is a person with a body, and how could they make these experiences sensible to the transcendent Divine? The speaker buttresses their relationship with God through recourse to the words of the Jewish tradition, but still, “Danger lies in wait for it.” The battered and broken words of the first poem have been put to good use in the interim, but now, as “Intentions” draws to a close, they have perhaps truly run out of strength. We have moved from the exhaustion of the introduction to the bodily life of the poet praying before God. All that is left is to hope that the words are enough.

<sup>12</sup> The title is problematized by the poem’s first lines, “Going to you hesitating / Like after all the speeches” (the Hebrew in both cases is “*dibbur*”).

**“Intentions”**

The poems take as their starting point the genre of *kavvanot ha-tefillah*, guides for proper intention during prayer, most often written from a Kabbalistic perspective. Nir’s “Intentions” series, however, focuses on the human dilemmas of poetry and theology. It speaks to anyone who experiences pain and exhaustion, suffering and indignation, warmth and respite. It explores the meaning of words that have been said by “legions” in an “infinite repetition,” but which have also been critically analyzed and placed “in philologists’ chains.”

Most of all, the poems depict different aspects of the relationships between people, words, and God. People use words, even to the point of breaking them, but they are also broken by them. Words mediate between God and people—the High Holiday prayers are an “infinite repetition” directed to “the Infinite One”—but words also take on a very human life of their own, suffering as we do. The individual speaks to God, calling God to come and “take account of” her, but she also speaks “in harsh judgment” when addressing God. The individual speaks from a place of “strength” and power—“Take hold of the word with both hands... Hold it patiently”—but also from a place of “wretchedness,” speaking as one of “the torn and the pierced and the broken.” The poems end “like after all speeches” in the inability not only of the individual to understand a God who is beyond words but also of the individual to make themselves understood by this God. After all the beautiful, painful words, we are left with open questions: Can the pains and uncertainties of human existence—bodily existence—really be conveyed to a disembodied and omnipotent being? Can words really build a bridge between the human and the Divine?

**Conclusion**

We have thus seen how Rav Elhanan Nir’s “Intentions for Rosh Hashanah” represents a particularly good example of theologically engaged poetry. The format of poetry allows Nir to engage with theology and the Jewish tradition outside the constraints of more rigid genres. Nir is not alone in doing so—new generations of Orthodox Jewish poets have sprung up on both sides of the Atlantic. Nir himself is one of a number of Religious Zionist poets writing for both religious and secular audiences in Israeli society today.<sup>13</sup> In translating and analyzing Nir’s poems, I hope I have helped make the world of Religious Zionist poetry—and its theologically-engaged poetry most specifically—a little more accessible to the English-speaking world.

We are approaching a rather unique Rosh Hashanah, one where many Jews will miss out on their regular High Holiday prayer experience. I can think of no text more appropriate than “Intentions for Rosh Hashanah,” which calls for the individual to consciously take up the traditional liturgy with a radical poetic freedom. Perhaps more importantly, in discussing both the dramatic and the conventional within religious life, it foregrounds human weakness and vulnerability. It is not just the word which can be “full of disease... struggling to breath... already lost the strength to cry.” It is in full awareness of our bodily weakness and vulnerability that Jews will stand before God this year, as individuals and as communities.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this group, see David C. Jacobson, *Beyond Political Messianism: The Poetry of Second-Generation Religious Zionist Settlers* (Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2011). My thanks to R. Zach Truboff for directing me to this text.

## THE INIQUITY OF INEQUITY

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**R**osh Hashanah is a time for reflection, for looking back at the year gone by and ahead to one just beginning. It is also a time to think about life. And there is so much to think about this Rosh Hashanah: lives lost and lives spared, lives taken and lives saved, lives of meaning and lives that matter. Amidst these weighty issues, Rosh Hashanah 5781 also challenges our Jewish community to think deeply, and maybe even differently, about the gift of life and how it is given.

While most Jewish holidays revolve around a significant event in Jewish history, Rosh Hashanah is different. No major event in Jewish history happened on 1 Tishrei. In fact, this holiday is not even celebrated on the first day of the Jewish calendar, (1 Nisan). And the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah speaks far more about “all God’s creations” and “all the earth’s inhabitants” than the Jewish People or the covenant at Sinai. Where most other Jewish holidays speak to us as Jews, Rosh Hashanah addresses us as members of the human race. Rosh Hashanah thus challenges us to reflect on our experiences over the past year through the shared lens of our common humanity.

In reflecting on these shared human experiences of the past year, we recognize our community’s heroic healthcare workers who selflessly put themselves in harm’s way to save human lives throughout the pandemic, and appreciate the similar acts of kindness that were reciprocated by men and women of all races and religions. Thousands of Jews (many from the ultra-Orthodox community) donated antibody-rich plasma to save the lives of fellow human beings who were critically ill with Covid-19 and an overwhelming majority of our communal organizations instinctively stood in solidarity with non-violent protests against racial discrimination. These Jewish communal responses derive from a deeply rooted sense of equity toward our fellow human beings.

Unfortunately, while our Jewish communal conscience is hardwired to embrace the examples above, we enter Rosh Hashanah 5781 burdened by a different iniquity of inequity.

Many of us have loved ones or close friends suffering from organ failure and in desperate need of a life-saving transplant. Based on regional demographics, more than 1,000 members of the NYC-area Jewish community are on the UNOS (United Network for Organ Sharing) ‘waiting list.’ While it is easy to think of those individuals as waiting, hoping, and praying for an ‘organ,’ in truth what they really need is a donor family who, in the midst of its own grief, makes the incredibly kind and generous decision to save lives by donating their loved one’s organs. While families can direct the donation of a loved one’s organ to a relative or friend on the UNOS list, most organ transplants result from a family’s noble decision to save the life of a fellow human being, with the recipient determined by a complex algorithm that is blind to race or religion. In 20+ years as a synagogue rabbi and now as an organ donation professional, I’ve never seen a Jewish family decline a suitable organ that could save their loved one’s life.

But while we are fully prepared to accept an organ that another family has so graciously donated, when members of the Jewish community have the opportunity to ‘pay forward’ that kindness to a fellow human being suffering from organ failure, Jews decline to do

so more than 70% of the time. Many times these demurrals are based on misinformation and flawed halakhic reasoning. Violating the integrity of a dead body (*nivul ha-meit*) is, unquestionably, a serious transgression; but like all negative commandments other than murder, idolatry, and sexual immorality, *nivul ha-meit* is permitted - even required- when a life may be saved as a direct result.<sup>14</sup> In the words of the great *dayyan* of Vilna, R. Avraham Danzig: “Anything may be done to a dead body in order to save another life” (*Hokhmat Adam, Hilkhoh Aveilut*, 158:11). And the baseless notion that burial sans a missing limb or organ precludes participation in *tehiyat ha-meitim* was already debunked by Saadia Gaon, who explains (*Sefer Emunot ve-Dei’ot* 7:1-2) that resurrection - in whatever forms it takes - is a miraculous process of (re-)creation that is completely independent of the deceased’s physical form, which completely decomposes, to say nothing of this myth’s implications for the millions of Jews whose murderers left no body to be buried.

Within the Orthodox community, however, refusal to donate life-saving organs is most often grounded in the halakhic debate surrounding the definition of death. The publication of the Harvard criteria for brain death determination in 1968 essentially divided halakhic authorities into two camps, one recognizing brain death as the ‘irreversible cessation of autonomous respiration’ defined by the Talmud (*Yoma* 85a) and *Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim* 329:4), the other maintaining that death occurs only when cardiac circulation completely ceases. The former camp tends to embrace organ donation as a *mitzvah*, whereas the latter considers the removal of essential organs from a body with a beating heart to be murderous. Declining the opportunity to donate organs is a personal choice that must be respected, especially if the decision is rooted in a principled halakhic position.

But a principled halakhic position must have integrity; it must be an *equitable* one that affirms the value of every human life. Anyone who declines the opportunity to save a life through organ donation - *especially* if he or she considers it to be murderous- should be prepared to decline a donated organ that could save them or their loved one. Likewise, anyone who is prepared to accept the beneficent gift of a donated organ should be prepared to donate organs to save the life of a fellow human being.

Many similar arguments have been advanced to justify the position of ‘receive but not donate.’ These arguments generally maintain that because the doctors have already decided to remove the organ from the donor, the act of murder is not directly linked to the recipient. Once the ‘violation’ has been reduced from murder to merely ‘strengthening the hands of sinners,’ the opportunity to save the life of the recipient by accepting the organ for transplantation takes precedence.

To my mind, these arguments fail on two levels. Firstly, they are based on a mistaken understanding of the organ donation and allocation process. Vital organs are not simply removed from a donor with the recipient yet to be determined. In almost all cases, a very specific recipient is identified based on a multiplicity of ‘matching’ criteria; the organ is then ‘offered’ to the potential recipient. Only once the organ has been accepted by the recipient (and his or her transplant surgeon) does the recovery surgery take place. If no suitable recipient is identified, that organ will not be recovered for transplant. For those that reject brain death, the decision made by

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<sup>14</sup> See *Hullin* 11b, *Noda bi-Yehudah (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) Yoreh Deah* §210, *Resp. Hatam Sofer, Yoreh Deah* 336.



the recipient to accept an organ offer is analogous to the decision made by a donor family to donate: neither is overtly committing an act of murder, but both are 'authorizing' its commission. The consideration of *pikuah nefesh* should either be sufficient to supersede such an act, or not. But maintaining that *pikuah nefesh* is sufficient to permit the authorization of murder to receive an organ but insufficient to donate one smacks of inequity.<sup>15</sup>

Even if one were persuaded by the legal technicalities put forth in support of receiving but not donating, these arguments still fall short of the halakhic system's lofty standards. The Talmud (Yerushalmi *Bava Metzia* 2:5), Rambam (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 5:11 and Laws of Slaves 9:8), Ramban (*Commentary on the Torah*, Lev. 19:2 and Deut. 6:18) and R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (*Commentary on the Torah*, Deut. 6:18) all stress that the law is necessary but not sufficient in shaping proper Jewish conduct. They emphasize that in order to prevent 'Torah-endorsed corruption' (*naval bi-rshut ha-Torah*) and *hillul Hashem*, sometimes acts technically permitted by law must be rejected in order to meet Judaism's overarching ethical standard of "You shall do what is upright and good in the eyes of the Lord" (Deut. 6:18). Even if a technical halakhic argument can be made in support of receiving organs but not donating, such a position epitomizes R. Aharon Lichtenstein's scenario where "the fulfillment of explicit halakhic duty could fall well short of exhausting clearly felt moral responsibility... [and] the full discharge of one's formal duty as defined by *din* often appears palpably insufficient" ([Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?](#)).

The Jewish cultural bias against deceased donation is a strong one and the principled halakhic rejection of brain death even stronger. How, then, do we address the iniquity of inequity and save more lives in 5781?

The first step is for rabbis, *poskim*, and Orthodox community leaders to acknowledge the inequity of receiving without donating, and then reject it as unethical. Then, motivated by the prospect of thousands within the orthodox community who reject brain death dying from organ failure and unable to receive a transplant, American halakhic authorities should follow the lead of their Israeli counterparts. Faced with a public health crisis due to the scarcity of Jewish donors and the unwillingness of the Eurotransplant organ sharing network to continue sending organs to Israel while receiving none in return, a group of prominent Israeli rabbis, *poskim*, and *Rashei Yeshiva*, have taken on the challenge of revisiting the matter of brain death in light of new scientific and medical discoveries, guided by expert physicians. Not surprisingly, because in Israel equity is an inescapable fact and not merely an ethical ideal, far more halakhic authorities in Israel have come to embrace both brain death and organ donation.<sup>16</sup>

Once the topic of brain death has been thoroughly reexamined in light of new scientific realities, *poskim* must rule in accordance with

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the Orthodox community, largely due to the incredible efforts of the Renewal organization, should be recognized for its disproportionately high number of live-donor kidney donations which save hundreds of lives each year. However, application of the equity principle dictates that those willing to donate a kidney to a fellow Jew should only be prepared to accept a kidney from a fellow Jewish live donor, but not a life-saving heart, lung, liver, or pancreas from a deceased donor.

<sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion, see R. M. Halperin, Ed., *Kevi'at Rega ha-Mavet* (Schlesinger Institute, 2006).

their application of the relevant halakhic principles to the realities of modern medicine. Those that come to embrace brain death as halakhically valid should encourage their followers to both donate organs after their death and accept organs for transplant. Those that reject brain death and maintain the standard of circulatory death should forbid post-mortem organ donation; at the same time, they should follow the lead of *poskim* like R. Hershel Schachter<sup>17</sup> and make it clear to their followers that receiving an organ for transplantation is potentially just as problematic. Freed from the inherent inequity of receiving but not donating, both of these positions would be *mekadesh shem shamayim*.

5780 has reminded us that we are an interconnected part of a larger community called humanity. In the words of R. Joseph Soloveitchik, as resonant today as they were in 1964: "we, created in the image of God... are human beings, committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind, [that we are] interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man's rights, in helping the needy..." ([Confrontation](#)). As we reflect this Rosh Hashanah on our shared humanity, let's resolve to atone for our iniquity of inequity, thereby meriting inscription in the Book of Life - some as recipients and others as donors.

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<sup>17</sup> *Be-dinei Meit ve-Gavra Katila* in R. M. Halperin, Ed., *Kevi'at Rega ha-Mavet*, p. 142-143, and live recording at <https://hods.org/halachic-issues/videos/RabbiHershelSchachter/>.

## EREV ROSH HA-SHANA 2019

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When the world ends:  
A face of fear passes  
Like a cloud, draped  
With hints of hope, hiding  
In a sweetened heart.

When the world ends:  
A voice in stillness rises  
In a silent scream  
(as a fish under water)  
To a hidden place.

When the world ends:  
A covered moon;  
A lone will; nothing else--  
Fortunate are those  
Who remember  
Their souls' song.

## RETURN... AGAIN? THEORIES OF TWICE-BAKED TESHUVAH

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E lul and the *Yamim Noraim* are the primary time for increased introspection and for *teshuvah*, repentance from our sins and the concomitant [return to God](#). Central to the process of *teshuvah* is the act of *vidduy*, confessing sins and seeking atonement. It would be surprising, then, to find a traditional Jewish text dissuade a sincere individual from confessing or repenting – presumably you can never go wrong with some extra *vidduy*! Yet there is a perplexing Talmudic passage in which at least one opinion seems to deter undertaking this process.

[Bavli Yoma 86b](#), citing [Tosefta Yoma 4:15](#) and [Yerushalmi Yoma 8:7](#), reads as follows:

תנו רבנן: עבירות שהתודה עליהן יום הכפורים זה - לא יתודה עליהן יום הכפורים אחר, ואם שנה בהן - צריך להתודות יום הכפורים אחר, ואם לא שנה בהן וחזר והתודה עליהן - עליו הכתוב אומר ככלב שב על קאו כסיל שונה באולתו. רבי אליעזר בן יעקב אומר: כל שכן שהוא משובח, שנאמר כי פשעי אני אדע וחטאתי נגדי תמיד. אלא מה אני מקיים ככלב שב על קאו וגו' - כדבר הונא, דאמר רב הונא: כיון שעבר אדם עבירה ושנה בה - הותרה לו. - הותרה לו סלקא דעתך? אלא אימא: נעשית לו כהיתר.

The Sages taught: With regard to transgressions that one confessed on this Yom Kippur, he should not confess them on another Yom Kippur. But if he repeated those same transgressions during the year, he must confess them again on another Yom Kippur. And if he did not repeat them but did confess them again, about him the verse states: “As a dog that returns to its vomit, so is a fool who repeats his folly” (Proverbs 26:11). Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov says: [If one confesses in subsequent years,] all the more so is he praiseworthy, as it is stated: “For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me” (Psalms 51:5). But how do I establish the meaning of the verse: “Like a dog that returns to its vomit?” It may be established in accordance with the opinion of Rav Huna, as Rav Huna said: When a person commits a transgression and repeats it, it is permitted to him. [The Gemara is surprised at this:] Can it enter your mind that it is permitted to him because he has sinned twice? Rather, say it becomes to him as if it were permitted.

There is a dispute as to whether sins atoned for a previous year should or should not be confessed and atoned for once again. The opinion of the *tanna kamma*, the presumed normative opinion, is that one should not confess again for the same sin, while Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov argues that one should.

The issue does not clearly resolve itself if we consider the commentaries and codes. Both the [Rif](#) and [Rosh](#) codify both opinions,

not offering a clear normative position. Rambam ([Teshuvah 2:8](#)) asserts that one should repeat repentance on these sins; [Tur Orah Hayyim 607](#) quotes the Ri"tz Giat that one should not, but himself is disposed to returning to those sins when confessing. There are also some compromise positions: Meiri 86b says that one should not repent, but it is not so bad (*ein kepeida be-kakh*) if one does, and [Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 607:4](#) rules that one *may* (*yakhol*) return to those sins when repenting. It thus emerges there is no clear consensus, although the evidence does tip in the direction of at least allowing for the return to these sins.

Now that we have established that the reticence to repent a second time on prior sins has at least some standing in the authoritative halakic literature, it is worth considering why this might be. What would be a reason to stay away from repenting once again for previously repented sins?

One answer could be that such a process would be redundant. If one has already done proper *teshuvah*, and also undergone the cathartic expiatory process of a previous Yom Kippur (see [Yoma 85b](#)), the sin has been fully atoned for, and there is simply no need to go back and atone once again. There are two drawbacks or limitations with this approach: First, such a strong response by the Talmud – decrying this act “as a dog who returns to its vomit” – would seem to be unwarranted. Second, not all sins can simply be atoned for with a *teshuvah*-and-Yom-Kippur cycle. An extra confession would not be redundant for those sins which still remain after Yom Kippur, yet the *tanna kamma* would still forbid it. The *Minhat Hinnukh* ([Mitzvah 364](#)) offers a nod in this direction – he tentatively suggests that the whole debate here is only for those sins that are too severe to have been previously forgiven; for those sins that were resolved at an earlier point, there is no dispute at all – both sides agree that the confession would not be necessary. One might offer a modified version of this point as the source of debate between the *tanna kamma* and Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov. Maybe they are precisely disputing whether these severe cases are to be seen as completely atoned previously, in which case there is no reason to go back (the *tanna kamma*'s position), or whether at some level, the atonement is incomplete or at least can be enhanced (Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov).

Alternatively, we might assert that all agree that the sin under discussion has previously been atoned for, but the question is whether, despite that fact, there is still reason for atonement. Is repentance in such a case praiseworthy or condemnable? Rabbenu Yonah, in his magisterial [Sha'arei Teshuvah 4:21](#), offers two explanations for why repenting for an already atoned-for sin should be condemned, building on the version of this Talmudic passage appearing at *Midrash Tehillim* ([Shokher Tov 32:2](#)). He first suggests that one who feels a need to continually return to prior transgressions for which they previously repented demonstrates a lack of belief in the power of repentance. Rav Yitzhak Hutner (*Pahad Yitzhak, Sha'ar Yerah ha-Etanim*, 17:5) offers a slight variation of this teaching – even if this person does not reject the concept of repentance as a whole, he seems uncertain of his own prior repentance on this matter. Following the metaphor, he has failed to successfully “vomit out” the poisonous sin he had previously experienced; returning to it again, even with a repentant attitude, indicates insufficient prior transformation. Rabbenu Yonah's other reason pertains more to the issue of having the appropriate focus. He argues that one who dwells on last year's sins, now resolved, rather than on the more pressing, untouched sins of this year, irresponsibly ignores the more urgent work immediately in front of him. In both approaches, the repentance itself is not problematic as much as a

broader attitude that it reveals, whether distrust in repentance or unwillingness to face pressing challenges.

If returning to previously repented sins runs the risk of redundancy or inappropriate focus, what are the positive ramifications of returning to these actions? Aside from the basic point that more repentance can only help, two more developed perspectives have been offered by two great thinkers of the twentieth century, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler and the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

R. Dessler, in his *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (*helek 4*, p. 86), notes that just because one has repented for a previous sin, they have not necessarily removed their susceptibility to that sin entirely. The fact that one previously failed in connection with that sin means that it will be easier to sin the next time around, a theme emphasized at the end of the Talmudic passage cited above. (One might additionally suggest that previous sins reveal not just one's established patterns but also one's natural proclivities, which have not necessarily changed despite the prior atonement.) In order to remove all remaining traces of sin and undue behavioral patterns, it is necessary to revisit the sin and repent again, not to earn atonement (already achieved) but to continue improving one's disposition.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, has a different suggestion as to why one might need to repent for these sins despite having previously accomplished atonement, which he explains in his *Likkutei Sihot* (vol. 29, pp. 208-09). First, he argues that Yom Kippur demands repentance from each person apart from the usual obligation to repent in resolving an outstanding sin. The repentance on Yom Kippur takes on a communal rather than individual nature, and applies to all prior sins, regardless of whether they were previously atoned. He then adds to this framework a theory of distinct levels of repentance, based on the *Tanya*: the previous repentance may suffice to yield atonement, but only relative to the spiritual level the person was inhabiting at that point; however, if one later attains greater spiritual heights, the need for repentance increases as well. (This is similar to the idea of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav that *teshuvah* requires another *teshuvah*, relative to one's newfound spiritual state; see also the [discussion](#) of this phenomenon by Rav Shagar.) In this context, the impetus to repeat repentance is a function not just of one's generally more elevated spiritual state, but particularly of the temporal context of Yom Kippur. This is why the Talmud speaks of “this year” and “next year,” referring to *teshuvah* season, rather than simply referencing previously atoned sins. The spiritual level one reaches on Yom Kippur fosters the potential to undertake higher-order repentance on prior sins.

In addition to these various insightful views into the phenomenology of repeated repentance, I wonder if it is possible to draw in another perspective from the psychology of religion more generally. Herant Katchadourian, in his [Guilt: The Bite of Conscience](#), notes that different religious traditions have distinct views on the value of guilt in one's religious life. In his admittedly overly broad typology, cultures and religions of “the West” dwell on guilt, while Eastern religion and culture often deny having any experience of guilt at all, and certainly deny it any religious value. One might reconstruct a debate between these reified systems of thought as to whether one should employ guilt that “enhances empathy towards others... restraining people from engaging in risky, illegal, and immoral behavior” (p. 135), or whether it is better to “recognize some version of feelings of regret and remorse, but... not dwell on them, [simply] dealing with their consequences” (p. 237). The two sides of the debate on whether to dwell on past sins once they have already been

atoned for apparently fall out along similar lines. Is the benefit of the constant awareness of one's past foibles – “and my sin is before me always” (Psalms 51:5) – determinative? Or does that sense of guilt actually drag down the repentant individual, forcing them to dwell on their sin, to stew in their own vomit, as it were? Does this guilt prevent religious growth more than it fosters it? It could be that these various perspectives are bringing different aspects of this psycho-religious question to the fore.

As we find ourselves situated within the focal season of repentance and atonement, it is essential that we find the proper path forward, balancing between these competing values. May we all succeed in avoiding the pitfalls of twice-baked *teshuvah* while growing from situating our prior sins ever before us.

*I would like to thank Rabbi Shalom Carmy and Rabbi Elinatan Kupferberg for their input to earlier drafts of this article.*

## WRITTEN AND SEALED (AND STAMPED) IN THE BOOK OF LIFE: WHY WE SHOULD SEND PHYSICAL CARDS THIS ROSH HASHANAH

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Perhaps one of the most stereotypically Jewish things about this holiday period is that we cannot even agree on the proper way to greet each other on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Poskim* and halakhic codes from the Magen Avraham to the [Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh](#) weigh in on the specifics, including the proper way and time to extend greetings.<sup>18</sup> The oral greetings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are elaborate and varied, leading many *mahzorim* to include instructional guides explaining the grammatical changes based on the gender and size of the group addressed. The traditional *Ashkenazi* greeting for an individual man is *le-Shanah Tovah Tikateiv ve-Teihateim* - “May your name be written and sealed for a good year.” The phrase goes back to the idea, originating in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b), that only the truly righteous are written immediately in the book of life; thus we pray that our friends and neighbors be seen by God as *tzaddikim*. As the *Koren Sacks Rosh Hashanah Mahzor* commentary (written by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks) explains, “[A]s we judge others, so are we judged.” If we pray for others to be seen as righteous, then maybe we too can be seen in the eyes of God (and others, and perhaps even ourselves), as deserving of a sweet new year.<sup>19</sup>

Greeting another person on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is powerful not just because it is a greeting, but because it functions also as a short prayer for another that can reverberate back to the self. Indeed, verbal greetings have always had special significance in Judaism. Biblical characters greet each other with kisses and words of peace, and rabbis in the Talmud discuss the best local customs for greetings among friends.<sup>20</sup> Most powerfully, Judaism utilizes rules against greeting to separate normal and happy times from those of tragedy; we do not say hello to one another on Tishah Be-Av and one does not greet the mourner upon entering a *Shiva* house. That moment of greeting, of saying hello, *shalom*, is all important, distinguishing between joyful and tragic times and between old friends and strangers.

The significance given to personal greetings speaks to the relational emphasis within modern Jewish philosophy pioneered by thinkers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. This thread in modern Jewish ethics focuses on the significance of the relationship of an individual to an other, of an [I to a Thou](#), and how these relationships link back to the divine. For Levinas in particular, the moment of encountering the face of the other, and the moment of greeting, is an opening to all of ethics. In [Ethics and Infinity](#), Levinas explains (in his typically cryptic style) that when encountering the face of another person, in the moment of greeting, “it is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to

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<sup>18</sup> For more see Macy Nulman, “[The Greetings of the Jewish People](#),” *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 21 (1998-1999): 6-19.

<sup>19</sup> The [Koren Sacks Rosh Hashanah Mahzor](#), Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2<sup>nd</sup> North American Hebrew/English Edition (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2014), 100-101.

<sup>20</sup> See the stories of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 43:27) and David and Nabal (1 Samuel 20:41). For Talmudic discussions see *Sukkah* 53a and *Berakhot* 8b.

speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.”<sup>21</sup> For Levinas, this moment of encounter and answering the face of the other, of words of welcome and apparent small talk, is really anything but small talk. Rather, “the epiphany of the face is ethical,” and in that encounter we are bound by the command not to murder our fellow.<sup>22</sup>

But this year, how many “others” will we be able to greet? Many of us will be davening alone or with just our families. Some of us may attend small outdoor or socially distanced *minyanim* where no *kiddush* is served and no schmoozing occurs. Greetings will be yelled through masks from eight feet away. And this is how it should be, this year.

So this *Yamim Noraim* we need a new way to greet each other, one that will still be as powerful as our oral greeting tradition but safer than speaking to each other in person. And here is where I want to propose a revival of the Jewish New Year’s greeting card tradition. Now sending physical Rosh Hashanah cards has never totally disappeared – I have a vague memory of learning to fold origami shofars to glue onto cards as a young child at Jewish day school. But particularly among younger engaged Jews, the physical card has been replaced by the Facebook message, the email, and the status update for those who need to send Rosh Hashanah greetings to loved ones far away. And with good reason: communicating over the internet is fast, cheap, and reliable. We usually get our fill of verbal greetings among our friends and family who we celebrate the holidays with.

Yet this year, I argue, sending handwritten cards to loved ones—both those physically near but still impossible to see, and those far away who we cannot travel to visit—will provide a way to wish that all those whom we care about be seen as the *tzaddikim* they are to us. Looking back at the history of these greeting cards provides some insight into how this tradition might help fill voids we are experiencing in our High Holiday celebrations this year.

Postcards as we know them were invented in 1869 in Austria and spread rapidly from there. These cards quickly became a popular way for Jews to send New Year’s wishes to loved ones, and various printing houses began to specialize in cards with Jewish content. As Jews emigrated en-masse from Europe to America and Palestine, cards became an important way of maintaining contact between the Old and New Worlds. Postcards and letters made material the “traditional oral wishes for God to grant the recipient a good year and continued life,” sentiments that could no longer be expressed in person.<sup>23</sup> They also became an important way for Jews to depict their engagement with contemporary technology and the modern world. Many cards included symbols and images of migration (ships) and communication technology (radios).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1995), 88.

<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 199.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Shandler and Aviva Weintraub, “‘Santa, Shmanta’: Greeting Cards for the December Dilemma,” *Material Religion* 3, no. 3 (November 2007): 387-388.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this fascinating history see: Shalom Sabar, “Postcards and Greeting Cards,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Postcards\\_and\\_Greeting\\_Cards](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Postcards_and_Greeting_Cards) (accessed August 24, 2020); Shalom Sabar. “A Survey of the Literature on Jewish Postcards and New Year Cards,” *Jerusalem*

The distance experienced by the thousands of Jewish immigrants stimulated growth in the Jewish greeting card industry, a phenomenon noted during the heyday of Rosh Hashanah postcards themselves. The *American Hebrew* in 1905 wrote that when most Jews lived in small communities in Europe, “It was then both practical and possible to convey all the personal greetings of the festivals, as well as the social news of the home circle, by word of mouth.”<sup>25</sup> By 1905 this was no longer possible; daughters raised grandchildren thousands of miles away from grandmothers, and nephews worked at jobs unimaginable to uncles back in the *shtetl*. So enters the Rosh Hashanah greeting card. Some cards explicitly dealt with the issue of immigration in their design. For example, a rare postcard from the turn of the century depicts a steamship, moving from right to left, from the Old World to the New. Two eagles, one representing imperial Russia, the other the United States bald eagle, sit on either side: underneath the former is written *mi-hoshekh* (from darkness), and under the bald eagle is written *le-or* (to light). (The image of the greeting card at the top of this article has some similar features.) Ellen Smith, in a chapter devoted to studying these cards as a part of Jewish material religion, points out that women were the ones most responsible for sending and receiving Rosh Hashanah cards, making the study of these objects also a chance to gain insight into the female experience of Judaism, materialism, modernity, and immigration at this time.<sup>26</sup>

A fair amount has been written about the history of these cards, and I recommend looking at some of them online (YIVO has a lovely collection [here](#)). Perhaps some of the best are the obviously repurposed cards that were made for a Christian or secular market and then “transformed” into Jewish New Year’s cards with the addition of some traditional Hebrew greetings and Yiddish verses. Most of the articles written about the past popularity of Rosh Hashanah cards take a historical interest in the tradition, implicitly assuming that since today we do not live in a time of mass Jewish immigration—and we do live in a time of fast-paced communications technology—these cards are a relic of the past or at least serve a different function today. Technically this is still true. But this year we live in a world where our access to verbal face-to-face communication is severely reduced. Going retro and writing cards and letters could perhaps fill this gap, just like Rosh Hashanah cards once crossed the ocean to give loved ones back in Europe the latest news and sincerely wished New Year’s greetings.

For immigrants, writing letters also created a new mode of ethical communication. Unable to fulfill Levinas’ “face-to-face” opening to ethics, nineteenth century immigrants used letters “as a new basis for reconfiguring and sustaining a relationship that has been rendered vulnerable by separation.”<sup>27</sup> But a letter, even to a neighbor, by its “very nature marks a separation and the need to overcome it,” making letters their own kind of communication, and requiring a new kind of contract within the relationship. Pen-pals agree to respond to one another, to take the time to truly communicate despite physical

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*Studies in Jewish Folklore* 27 (2011): 269-290 (Hebrew); and Ellen Smith “Greetings from Faith: Early-Twentieth-Century American Jewish New Year Postcards” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. David Morgan and Sally Prome (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 229-248.

<sup>25</sup> *American Hebrew* quoted in Smith, 232.

<sup>26</sup> See Ellen Smith, 243-247.

<sup>27</sup> David A. Gerber, “Epistolary Ethics: Personal Correspondence and the Culture of Emigration in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, no. 4 (2000): 6.



separation, creating what has been termed a specific “epistolary” or “correspondence” ethics.<sup>28</sup> This Rosh Hashanah, sending a sincere greeting via an old style Rosh Hashanah card, with a thoughtful message and a purposeful design, is one way to overcome the distance created by the pandemic.

Like more than half the world at this point, I celebrated my birthday in the pandemic. Unable to mark the day with friends, I asked the people I know to send me snail mail letters. By a few days after my birthday I had quite a nice pile of letters and cards – and origami cranes, cows, and flowers. One enthusiastic friend sent me five cards; an old friend from summer camp painted me a picture of a parrot with the accompanying text “happy birthday.” (For context, until recently I was the proud owner of a very silly “Shabbat Shalom” greeting parrot.) I received sincere letters from new friends and reconnected with old friends who enjoy stationary and a chance to put pen to paper. It was one of the best sets of birthday presents I could have asked for.



The author's birthday cards

Writing out letters by hand (or, for those with challenging handwriting, even typing them) is a way to communicate that is sincere and thoughtful, a step beyond email greetings or Facebook messages with GIFS of shofars. There is something about the act of writing a physical letter, of taking the time to think of a message specific to the recipient, that lends itself to sincere and heartfelt sentiments. Many people think as they write, coming to new ideas, conclusions, and messages as they go. Even the act of choosing a design, writing out an address, or finding a stamp shows a level of love, care, and attention that an email can never quite equal. Further, cards have traditionally allowed Jews to share good wishes and good news over long distances, to overcome separations from loved ones. Letters were a way to truly greet and wish people well when wishing “*le-Shanah Tovah Tikateiv ve-Teihateim*” face-to-face was impossible. This year, saying this greeting in person will be challenging for many of us. So why not send a greeting card instead? (And also [help out](#) the US Postal Service with increased business.) Cards, with their inherent sincerity, allow us to hope that our most distant friends (and thus ourselves) will be judged as immediately righteous. So, my wish to all is for a sweet *and healthy* new year, to be inscribed in the book of life, and to have a full mailbox, stuffed with good wishes from all those you love, no matter the distance.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## HOLISTIC REPENTANCE: LIFE AS A STORY

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How great is repentance?! God created repentance prior to creating the world (see [Midrash Tehillim 90](#)). It hastens the redemption, brings healing to the world, and lengthens one's days (see [Yoma 86a-b](#)). Even immediately preceding one's death, one may repent and acquire the world to come.<sup>29</sup> These descriptions provide a romantic aura to repentance along with the possibility to achieve great feats. Yet one cannot read these statements without thinking them to be hyperbole, exaggerations meant to highlight the importance of repentance. Has anyone ever repented and brought healing to the world? Surely not. However, at least two of *Hazal's* statements regarding repentance may be understood literally, providing greater power to repentance and humanity. First, Rabbi Avahu proclaims, “In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand” ([Berakhot 34b](#)). R. Avahu implies that not only do past transgressions not inhibit the penitent's standing, but repentance raises the penitent to heights beyond the completely righteous. Second, according to Reish Lakish ([Yoma 86b](#)), repentance alters the past. Repentance motivated by fear transforms intentional sins into unintentional transgressions, and repentance performed out of love transforms intentional sins into merits. While Reish Lakish and Rabbi Avahu grant repentance incredible power, they fail to explain how repentance achieves these results.

The trouble with understanding these statements stems from a larger problem concerning repentance. *Hazal* were privy to this problem and expressed it eloquently in [Yerushalmi Makkot](#) (2:6):

It was inquired of Wisdom, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" Wisdom said "Evil pursues the wicked." It was asked of Prophecy, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" Prophecy said to them, "The sinful soul shall perish." It was asked of the Holy One, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" and He said "Let him repent and he will be forgiven."<sup>30</sup>

Repentance makes no logical sense. The institution of Wisdom, and even the divinely inspired Prophecy, cannot comprehend repentance. Just as the physicist claims that “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction,” so too, the Jew must proclaim, “God rewards those who obey the commands of the Torah and punishes those who violate its prohibitions” ([Rambam on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1](#)). Only the Holy One—Blessed be He—in His omnipotence may validate repentance.

Human experience further supports these qualms with repentance. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains:

Just as God remembers the beings of ancient times, so does man remember and revisit the past which is preserved in his memory. . . . What will happen when he [the sinner attempting to repent] looks back and recalls all those years of

<sup>29</sup> See the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdiya in [Avodah Zarah 17a](#).

<sup>30</sup> Translation from Pinchas H. Peli, [On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik](#) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 238.

violating the Sabbath, of exploitation and thievery?<sup>31</sup>

A person must face the humbling reality that the rushing current of time flows in only one direction. Any act remains ingrained forever in the past. The soul aches and groans when it casts a backwards glance and beholds the mistakes of the past self. The thin and clear yet impenetrable wall of time separates the soul from its past, quashing any hope for respite.

R. Soloveitchik reconciles these statements about repentance with logic and religious experience. Instead of downplaying the frustration that plagues the soul reflecting on sin, he views it as the key to repentance:

It is the memory of sin that releases that power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before . . . In repentance of love, love rises with the flames of repentance and burns brightly in the flames fanned by sin; the bonds of love pull man up to great and exalted heights.<sup>32</sup>

The penitent may harness the memory of sin to reach greater heights, as sin possesses a power that merit lacks:

Hate is more emotional and more volatile than love. The destructive forces are stronger than the constructive forces. A thoroughly righteous man is not given to feelings of hatred or jealousy; he is distinguished by natural feelings of love and mercy and kindness.<sup>33</sup>

This insight of R. Soloveitchik explains both statements I cited earlier about repentance. According to R. Avahu, the completely righteous person lacks sin and its reservoir of energy, which the penitent—on the other hand—may channel to reach greater heights. For Reish Lakish, properly utilizing sin changes its meaning. Harnessing the sin's energy produces positive effects that outweigh any previous negatives. Therefore, the sin creates a net positive outcome and transforms into a merit.

*Hazal* implicitly express this relationship between sin, repentance, and greatness: “Four people died due to Adam’s sin with the serpent, in the wake of which death was decreed upon all of mankind, although they themselves were free of sin. And they are: Benjamin, son of Jacob; Amram, father of Moses; Yishai, father of David; and Kilab, son of David” (*Shabbat 55b*). The four characters who never sinned—Benjamin, Amram, Yishai, and Kilab—are minor Biblical characters, while their listed relations—Jacob, Moses, and David—are major characters. Despite being sinless, the minor characters never achieved the greatness that their relations achieved. It is noteworthy that David appears as a relation twice. David sinned gravely by committing adultery with Batsheva and effectively murdering her husband Uriah by sending him to the frontlines of the war (*II Samuel 11*).<sup>34</sup> Yet, upon rebuke, David immediately admits to his sins and

repents. In fact, *Hazal* describe David as the paradigmatic penitent, as the man “who raised and lightened the yoke of repentance” (*Avodah Zarah 5a*). A strong correlation exists between sin and greatness. Thus, *Hazal* implicitly affirm R. Soloveitchik’s claim that sin lifts penitents to greater heights than the completely righteous.

Former professional basketball player Antoine Walker exemplifies the phenomenon that failure, loss, or sin often motivate people to create positive change. Throughout his successful career in the National Basketball Association (NBA), Walker made multiple all-star teams, won a championship, and amassed over 108 million dollars in salary. However, Walker went bankrupt less than two years after retirement due to overindulging on luxury goods, providing unaccounted loans to relatives, and bad luck with real estate investments. Walker eventually recovered from his financial woes and decided to harness his experience to create positive change.<sup>35</sup> Walker’s case is not unique. According to *Sports Illustrated*, 60% of NBA athletes go broke within five years of retirement.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, over three quarters of professional football players go broke or are under financial stress within two years of retirement. To fight these trends, Walker created a documentary about his story and works with Morgan Stanley to educate professional athletes about financial literacy. Walker’s story illustrates how past woes motivate people to create positive change.

Yet the idea of harnessing sin’s power does not truly explain Reish Lakish’s statement. While repenting creates a net positive outcome, it does not erase the sin, which continues to exist in the past. While the meaning of the past changes, its essence remains unaffected. Truly understanding Reish Lakish’s statement requires an understanding of the self and identity, which appears in the research of Israeli psychologist and Noble Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman asserts that the self comprises two modes: experience and memory.<sup>37</sup> Experience refers to the pleasure and pain of each independent moment. It only knows the present moment. Memory, on the other

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admits that he sinned. Furthermore, there are multiple statements of *Hazal* that imply that David did sin. He is called “the man who raised and lightened the yoke of repentance” (*Avodah Zarah 5a*). People can learn from David about how to repent (*Avodah Zarah 4b*). It seems like the plain understanding of the text and the opinion of most commentators is that David sinned. One explanation of the *gemara* in *Shabbat 56a* is offered by R. Yaakov Meidan. R. Meidan notes that the rationale used to acquit David is technical and halakhic. Technically, Batsheva was single because all soldiers who went to war during the Davidic dynasty gave their wives divorce bills. Also, technically, Uriah fell under the category of rebelling against the king because his language implied that he was loyal to Yoav, David’s commander. R. Meidan suggests that the point of these legalistic acrobatics is to show the danger of being overly focused on Halakhah. Despite being technically allowed under Halakhah, David’s actions were morally corrupt. See Yaakov Meidan, *David vi-Batsheva: ha-Het, ha-Onesh, vi-Hatikun*, (Herzog Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> See Matt Egan, “Ex-NBA Star Went from \$108 Million to Bankruptcy,” *CNNMoney*, July 24, 2015, <https://money.cnn.com/2015/07/24/investing/antoine-walker-nba-bankruptcy/>.

<sup>36</sup> See Pablo S Torres, “How (and Why) Athletes Go Broke—Sports Illustrated Vault,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 23, 2009, <https://vault.si.com/vault/2009/03/23/how-and-why-athletes-go-broke>.

<sup>37</sup> See Daniel Kahneman, “Two Selves,” in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

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<sup>31</sup> Peli, 249.

<sup>32</sup> Peli, 249.

<sup>33</sup> Peli, 262.

<sup>34</sup> The *gemara* (*Shabbat 56a*) suggests that David did not sin. This opinion is hard to understand at face value. The prophet Natan comes and rebukes David for his actions, to which David himself

hand, assesses the past, downplaying the duration of experiences while overrating important moments and endings. For example, the self experiences a long distance run mainly as painful moments interspersed with short moments of elation and a feeling of accomplishment upon finishing. However, the self remembers the run by overlooking the quantity of painful moments, instead focusing on the important moments of elation and how it ended with a feeling of accomplishment. In other words, the memory of the run is more positive than the experience of the run.

Kahneman observes that remembering parallels storytelling. Like memories, stories derive meaning from key moments and endings. To his surprise, Kahneman discovered that the self prioritizes memory over experience when making decisions. Kahneman bemoans this finding, noting that memories skew objective experience. People will choose suboptimal experiences if they create optimal memories. The dominance of memory reveals a deep insight into the human psyche: humans make decisions to create the best life story. People view their life as a coherent story rather than a collection of disjoint experiences.

R. Soloveitchik also discusses the relationship between experience, memory, and the self:

The problem of repentance is intertwined with an apprehension of the concept of time and how it relates to the human experience. Rabbi Jedaiah Ha-Pnini was the one who coined the phrase: "the past is nothing, the future is not yet, and the present [passes] like the blink of an eye." According to this conception, man's life is meaningless; he has no hold in time whatsoever. But the truth is that man does exist within two distinct dimensions of time: (1) in memory, and (2) in expectation for the future. . . . Memory replies to the question: "Who am I?" I am he who remembers these feelings and those experiences, these moments of happiness and those moments of sorrow.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to Kahneman, who explains the drawbacks of the memory, R. Soloveitchik details the downside of possessing experience without memory. Without memories and expectations, a person loses their sense of self. Identity comes from memories and the narrative that ties them together. Psychiatrist Oliver Sacks provides real life examples of this phenomenon when discussing two patients who possess Korsakoff's Syndrome, a long-lasting amnesic syndrome.<sup>39</sup> Every few moments, Jimmie's memory would reset to his experiences until 1945. This peculiar condition led Sacks to remark—in the same vein as R. Soloveitchik—that: "He is man without a past (or future), stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment."<sup>40</sup> Eventually, Sacks discovered that Jimmie occasionally achieved meaning through religious worship. Yet his lack of memory severely diminished his ability to form identity and meaning. Similarly, Mr. Thompson also experienced Koraskoff's Syndrome. However, unlike Jimmie, Mr. Thompson had recently developed the syndrome upon meeting Sacks. Sacks quickly noticed that Mr. Thompson obsessively created stories, continuously reinventing himself and the world around him. Sacks attributed this tendency to Mr. Thompson's lack of memory and thus lack of

<sup>38</sup> Peli, 249.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Sacks, 29.

identity. Without memories to create a narrative, Mr. Thompson resorted to storytelling.

Communities and nations also rely on memory to form identity. Yosef Yerushalmi notes that, for most of exile, Jews relied mainly on the Bible to interpret events instead of producing new historiography.<sup>41</sup> The *Akeidah*, for example, served as the framework to interpret and understand The Crusades. Jews viewed Christianity as the modern-day Esau and Islam as the modern-day Ishmael. The Bible sufficed to form the robust, complete identity of the Jewish people. Thus, Yerushalmi notes that non-Biblical Jewish historiography mainly began in the early 19th century concurrent with the rise of new movements such as Zionism and the Enlightenment. These novel movements and ideologies turned to the past to acquire a sense of identity and legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, Kahneman identifies memories and self-narratives as a distortion of reality. By creating memories, the self imposes meaning on the past. Nevertheless, the self only ever experiences independent moments, and so objectively the past is a chronological chain of these moments. However, Dr. Samuel Lebens offers an alternative theory, suggesting that reality is God's story.<sup>42</sup> This "storied reality" exists in a two-tiered system alongside objective reality.<sup>43</sup> This two tiered system allows for a duality of truths. For example, in the storied reality, humans possess significance and free will while lacking these attributes in objective reality. Lebens argues that this duality does not detract from human purpose or freedom. The lack of human purpose and freedom in objective reality is only relevant in a technical metaphysical sense. Pragmatically, however, humans only care about truth in their reality—a storied reality—and the practically relevant truth of a storied reality is that humans possess significance and free will. Furthermore, a storied reality possesses additional practical implications for human identity and meaning. Unlike Kahneman's empirical reality, a storied reality behaves according to the characteristics of literature and stories. First, in stories, the value of an action partially depends upon its role in the entire story. In other words, actions possess "relational value." Second, stories require conflict and resolution. Third, stories increase the importance of their characters' actions. Fourth, stories immortalize their characters. Relational value is the key to understanding Reish Lakish's statement about repentance.

In a story, individual actions cannot be evaluated independently in a vacuum, but rather by their role in the story. Rabbi Abraham Kook describes this phenomenon by comparing reality to painting.<sup>44</sup> A painting comprises many paint brush strokes. However, during the painting process, one disparate stroke may seem meaningless or confusing. Only the completion of the painting bestows context and meaning to each stroke. Similarly, individual actions or events may produce fear or confusion. However, as life progresses and the person's "painting" edges closer to completion, the purpose of each event becomes clear. The true meaning of a moment can only be

<sup>41</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Lebens bases his interpretation of reality on the commentary of Rabbi Mordechai Leiner of Izbica, the *Ishbitzer*, who asserts that the world is God's lucid dream. See *Mei HaShiloah on Parshat Miketz s.v. tishma halom li-pator oto*.

<sup>43</sup> See Samuel Lebens, "God and His Imaginary Friends: A Hassidic Metaphysics," *Religious Studies* 51, no. 2 (2015): 183-204.

<sup>44</sup> *Middot Ha-Ra'ayah: Pahdanut*.

comprehended—with the complete context of an entire life—by how it relates to other moments.

The concept of relational value also appears in modern psychological research. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert coined the term “psychological immune system” to describe the process by which people adapt and achieve happiness regardless of external circumstances.<sup>45</sup> Gilbert describes relational value as the driving force behind the psychological immune system. Events, objects, or situations possess objective value. For example, apples possess an objective chemical makeup and ratio of nutrients. However, buying a specific apple activates the psychological immune system, which searches for subjective reasons to prefer that specific apple. Thus, the apple’s value partially derives from being bought and owned, from its relationship with the buyer.

The concept of relational value explains Reish Lakish’s statement about repentance. During a person’s life, God (as it were) labels actions with a pencil, as the meaning of an action may change. Its value partially depends on a future yet to occur. If a person repents and harnesses the energy of a “sin” to produce greater good, then God relabels that “sin” as a “merit.” In an empirical reality, the past motivates the penitent to create a greater future good. However, in a storied reality, the penitent’s future actions rewrite the meaning of the past. This creates a symbiotic relationship where the past motivates a greater future good, which in turn rewrites the past. The past never holds sway over the living. The gates of repentance offer the eternal possibility to rescue and redeem the past.

Stories revolve around the struggle that besets and plagues their characters. In fact, characters often represent the struggles they endure. As writer Milan Kundera remarks about his character Tereza: “Tereza was therefore born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience” and later about literary characters in general: “As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility . . .”<sup>46</sup> Completely sinless and harmonious characters ruin the very point of literature. Aiming to avoid sin misconstrues the goal. As *Hazal* implicitly suggest, the greatest Biblical characters sinned and lived tumultuous lives. Literary critics evaluate characters by their ability to handle and overcome failure and conflict. Thus, characters cannot be evaluated during the story, but only after their journey and struggle ends. In a storied reality as well, God judges humans not by their ability to avoid conflict or sin, but by their ability to handle and overcome their struggles.

The following midrash implies another implication of a storied reality:

When one performs a mitzvah he should perform it with joy. For had Reuven known that the Torah would record that he tried to save Yosef from the brothers, he would have put him on his shoulders and run home to his father. And if Aharon had

known that the Torah would record that when he saw Moshe Rabeinu the first time and he heard that he was chosen to be the Redeemer of Israel (and not Aharon) . . . Had Aharon known, he would have come (to him) with drums and cymbals. And had Boaz known that the Megillah would record his giving Ruth some parched wheat to eat, he would have offered her a huge banquet like those of King Shlomo ([Vayikrah Rabbah 34:8](#)).

Stories often transcend people and time, surviving through either oral or written transmission. If the characters of the Bible understood the eternity of their actions, they would have approached life with urgency and vigor. Even though the character may perish, their actions remain forever. Their reputation and legacy stand for the remainder of history. In a storied reality, where God remembers every action, each choice becomes infinitely more important and meaningful.

Stories immortalize their characters, keeping them alive beyond their years. Author Tim O’Brien beautifully captures this idea by discussing his childhood crush Linda.<sup>47</sup> When Linda passes away from a brain tumor, young O’Brien continues to visit her in his dreams. Dream Linda insists that she is not dead, or at least, that her death does not matter. Eventually, with persistence, he convinces Linda to describe death:

I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading . . . An old one. It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading. (O'Brien, 232)

Linda captures the essence of O’Brien’s message. Like shelved books, the dead idly sit by, waiting to be noticed. By telling stories, O’Brien “picks” them up off the shelf and brings them to life. Stories carry on the lives of the dead. In a storied reality, God—the ultimate Author—grants immortality to God’s characters: “I will give them, in My house and within My walls, a monument and a name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish” ([Isaiah 56:5](#)).

Two anxieties plague the human psyche: abandonment and meaning. Man fears that he may be irredeemable, that he will reach a point of no return, that he will commit a sin so grave that no one or nothing can redeem him. He fears he will be like the wayward and rebellious son whose gluttonous actions verify his future: to commit crimes liable for the death penalty. To prevent this ending, the community puts him to death ([Rashi on Deuteronomy 21:18](#)). Apparently, the wayward and rebellious son is beyond repair. His future is predictable with complete certainty. But what about free will? What about repentance? Rabbi Shimon refuses to accept such a possibility, claiming that the wayward and rebellious son never happened and never will. Rather, the wayward and rebellious son is a theoretical scenario created for studying and subsequent merit ([Sanhedrin 71a](#)). Rabbi Shimon implicitly affirms an important position: no person is beyond repair. The literal reading of Reish Lakish’s statement substantiates this position. People can always redeem their past and

<sup>45</sup> Daniel T. Gilbert and Jane E. J. Ebert, “[Decisions and Revisions: The Affective Forecasting of Changeable Outcomes](#),” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82, no. 4 (2002): 503.

<sup>46</sup> Milan Kundera and Richmond Hoxie, [The Unbearable Lightness of Being](#) (London: Faber & Faber, 1984). I want to thank Sam Lebens for bringing these quotes to my attention in a lecture he gave at Yeshivat Orayta.

<sup>47</sup> Tim O’Brien, [The Things They Carried](#) (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).



themselves. In fact, through repentance, they can harness their sins to reach greater heights.

Additionally, man fears that his life is meaningless, that his existence is a string of independent, fleeting hedonistic experiences. From this fear arises the tendency of storytelling, of creating a narrative that ties together experiences under a meaningful goal. Thus emerges the importance of a storied reality. God, the ultimate Author, authenticates this human tendency, moving it from a naive human construct to an act of *imitatio dei*: “just as God tells stories, so, too should you tell stories.”<sup>48</sup> The stories that humanity coauthors with God give meaning to struggle, eternal importance to actions, life to the dead, and—most importantly—validity to a repentance that rewrites the past and saves humanity.

## TWO PARADIGMS OF TESHUVAH

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**T**he Talmud records two remarkable anecdotes concerning *baalei teshuva*. Diametrically opposed to one another, the tales appear to present conflicting paradigms of repentance. One anecdote appears in *Avodah Zarah* 17a:

It was said of R. Elazar b. Durdaya that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, upon hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of *denarii* for her hire, he took a purse of *denarii* and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Elazar b. Durdaya never be received in repentance.

Upon hearing this, he went and sat between two hills and mountains, and exclaimed: Hills and mountains, plead mercy for me! They replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it is said: For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed! (Is. 54:10). So he exclaimed: Heaven and earth, plead mercy for me! They, too, replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it is said: For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment. (Is. 51:6). He then exclaimed: Sun and moon, plead mercy for me! But they also replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it is said: Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed. (Is. 24:23). He exclaimed: Stars and constellations, plead mercy for me! Said they: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it is said: And all the hosts of heaven shall perish. (Is. 34:4).

He said: The matter then depends upon me alone! He placed his head between his knees, and wept aloud until his

soul departed. Then a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming: Rabbi Elazar b. Durdaya is destined for the life of the world to come!

This story offers a case of the *baal teshuvah* for whom the only course of repentance is demise and death. So deeply has sin tainted this individual’s life that it cannot be extricated without the inevitable consequence of death.

The Christian model of repentance—a repentance for the Original Sin that burdens all of humanity—follows similar lines. Even while living an earthly existence, the duties of repentance involve detachment and abstention from all that is life. The convent, detached from all things worldly, is the ultimate ideal.

## II

The second anecdote, recorded in *Menachot* 44a, presents a different vision of repentance:

Once there was a man who was very careful about the commandment of *tzitzit*. He heard about a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who charged a fee of four hundred gold coins for her hire. He sent her four hundred gold coins and scheduled a time. When his time arrived he came and sat at her door step. The harlot’s maid told her: The man who sent you four hundred gold coins is here and is waiting at the door; to which the harlot replied: Let him come in. He came in.

The harlot prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and sat upon it naked. He too went up and sat naked next to her, when the four fringes of his garment struck him across the face; he slipped off the bed and fell upon the ground. She also [let herself fall] and sat upon the ground.

She said to him: By the Roman Capitol, I will not leave until you tell me what blemish you saw in me. He replied: By the Temple, never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one commandment which God has commanded us, that is called *tzitzit*, and with regard to it the expression “I am the Lord your God” is written twice, signifying, I am He who will exact punishment in the future and I am He who will give reward in the future. The *tzitzit* appeared to me as four witnesses.

She said: I will not let you go until you tell me your name, the name of your town, the name of your teacher, and the name of your school in which you study the Torah. He wrote all this down and handed it to her. Thereupon she arose and divided her estate into three parts; one third for the kingdom, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand; the bed linen she kept.

She came to the house of study of Rabbi Chiyya, and said to him: Master, give instructions that they may make me a convert. He replied: My daughter, perhaps you have set your eyes on one of my students? She thereupon took out the paper and handed it to him. He said: Go, and enjoy your acquisition. Those very bed-linen which she had spread for

<sup>48</sup> See [Sotah 14a](#).



the student for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully.

This multi-layered story has much to teach us, but the final sentence is most instructive. Instead of the inescapable death that Elazar b. Durdaya's repentance necessitated—the unnamed disciple and his future wife exercised a type of repentance that encouraged pure life. The very bed-linen used in sin was converted, together with the harlot herself, to holiness.

For them, penitence meant a rechanneling of living impulses and energies so that they are in tune with a higher moral and religious calling. Perhaps more precisely than redirection or rechanneling, the inner motion of this type of repentance is rediscovery.

### III

Very different stories, indeed. A third source, however, might bring these two narratives closer together. The *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* records an episode in which Rabbi Eliezer's disciples posed a question to their teacher: "How can we repent, yet live?" The question's emphasis is not repentance, but rather life: How is it possible to repent, to leave a life of sin and iniquity, and yet to live? Is this indeed possible—or does repentance compel a total withdrawal from life, in the manner of the convent and the monastery?

To this, Rabbi Eliezer replied with two verses. "Hashem will answer you on the day of strife." (Ps. 20:2). And yet it is stated: "My beloved put his hand by the hole of the door; and my heart was moved for him." (Song of Songs 5:4). On the one hand, Rabbi Eliezer confirmed his disciples' intuition: the day of repentance is a day of strife—a day that requires painful detachment from former practices. This is the repentance of Rabbi Elazar b. Durdaya. Yet, it is at once a day of moving elevation, a day in which our very same life, with its very same practices, is elevated in closeness to God.

Both paradigms are true, each applying to different elements of our lives. There are some elements in the life of a *baal teshuvah* from which he must detach himself, elements that are incompatible with a life attached to the Godly. By necessity, these need to be cut off, as the decree of death that is passed on the Goat of Azazel. Other elements, however, are elevated by the process of repentance, as the twin goat that survives, later to be brought as an offering to God. Rather than being cut off, they are brought into the realm of holiness and purity, raised to a mitzvah level that has legitimate place in a life of religious wholesomeness—a living offering to God.

The task of discerning which elements of our lives fit which paradigm of *teshuvah* is a delicate one. Mistakes, made this way or the other—as we know from our own experience or from that of others—can be costly. But that is the task of repentance.

Yet the default position, wherever it can possibly apply, is made clear by the verse. God declares that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but wishes them "to turn from their wicked ways, and live." (Ez. 18:23). God urges us to choose life—on Yom Kippur perhaps more than on any other day of the year.

## "LIKE A FLEETING DREAM": U-NETANEH TOKEF, DREAMS, AND THE MEANING OF THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

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**U**-*netaneh Tokef* is the centerpiece of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Mussaf* services. It's stirring and emotional ("And let us now relate [the holiness of this day]"). Tradition has it that this prayer was authored by the medieval sage Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. Many *siddurim* and commentaries relate the famous legend of how Rabbi Amnon refused to convert to Christianity. His body was mutilated, and, before he died, Rabbi Amnon recited the *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer. Though scholars doubt the facts of Rabbi Amnon—even his existence—its reception in traditional lore makes its theme worthy of consideration.

*U-netaneh Tokef* touches on three major themes: God judges and determines the fate of mankind on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; man is powerless in the face of God; God endures for all time. After its stirring declarations, the prayer bleeds into the *Kedushah* service.

A certain phrase in the middle of *U-netaneh Tokef* is striking: *ki-halom ya'uf*, as the ArtScroll editors render it, "like a fleeting dream." The phrase appears at the end of a list of analogues to man: man is compared to "a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower," and a few other transitory and dying things. But among all of the comparisons, "a fleeting dream" is the only one that is truly invisible and intangible. Unlike the others, it exists only in the mind. It also closes out the second theme of *U-netaneh Tokef*, leaving a lasting impression on the reader before he transitions to the theme of God's greatness and eternalness.

What is the significance of "a fleeting dream," and what makes it so appropriate for a prayer that ties into Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

It is worth taking a look back at the legend surrounding the first recounting of the *U-netaneh Tokef* tale, leaving the debate surrounding its origins aside. The thirteenth century talmudist, Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe, tells the tale in his Talmudic commentary [Or Zarua](#) (2:276). His retelling concludes with the following:

[R. Amnon] appeared in a night vision to our Rabbi Kalonymos ... and he taught him that very *piyyut*: *U-netaneh tokef kedushat ha-yom*; and he commanded him to distribute it throughout the far reaches of the Exile, that it might be a witness and memorial to him—and the *gaon* [the sage] did so (translation, Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Who by Fire*, 26-28).

According to this, *U-netaneh Tokef* has **endured** as a part of the High Holidays liturgy because of a "fleeting dream." Something so transitory—a dream never lasts long, and is difficult to remember well upon awakening—brought about something that has lasted a millennium.

On the most basic level, the parallel between the story's conclusion and the prayer itself hint at the theme that dreams—as an analogue for man—could be less fleeting than they seem, even if they are infinitely less than eternal. Intangible dreams, paradoxically, can have an impact. The ideas a person gets from a dream could change his life

and the lives of others, like *U-netaneh Tokef's* impact on the Jewish people through its placement in the liturgy because, according to the story, Rabbi Kalonymos heard it in a dream.

This might be meant to hint that, similarly, man's actions—even those that seem fleeting and insignificant—can have an impact, positive or negative. A few words of gossip can ruin someone's reputation; a moment of carelessness in a store could damage hundreds of dollars of goods. A *raison d'être* of the High Holy Days is to examine those actions and repent for those which caused devastating effects.

Dreams also tie into a common Rosh Hashanah practice, albeit in an indirect way. Rabbi Moshe Isserles—the Rema)—on *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim* 584:2, writes: "There are also those who do not sleep during Rosh Hashanah during the day, and this is the correct thing to do." In other words, it isn't right to spend the day in slumber but rather to use it for prayer, learning, and other pursuits—not for sleeping and dreaming. *Mishnah Berurah* (583:9) cites a possible source for this custom, a quote in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* ([the exact location in the Yerushalmi is no longer extant](#)): "One who sleeps on Rosh Hashanah, his *mazal* [luck; fortune] sleeps, [as well]." A person who takes the holy day lightly by using it for some rest is said to be doomed to a sleepy, unlucky year.

But the absence of dreams during the day of Rosh Hashanah might also be relevant.

Perhaps Rosh Hashanah and, by extension, Yom Kippur are not days for dreaming about the future. God Himself is the one who creatively deliberates our fates; as the prayer itself says, "so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the fixed need of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict." The act of dreaming—including when it comes about by sleeping on the day of Rosh Hashanah—is also rather passive. In the midst of slumber, a person doesn't put his dream together through any sort of action. Instead, it just comes.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days for looking inwards, examining past deeds, and connecting with God actively—not through passive means. Dreams can be significant, but at this juncture, they are simply fleeting. Right after "like a fleeting dream," the prayer exclaims what must be done next, something far more tangible and active than a dream: "But repentance, prayer, and charity remove the evil of the decree!"

## "LOOKING FOR A HAVVAYAH" A GENEALOGY OF "EXPERIENCE" ON THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

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**R**osh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are times when many Jews search out religious experiences, whether by attending lengthy services at their local *shul* or by [making pilgrimages to holy sites in Ukraine](#). Perhaps the founding [myth](#) of Yom-Kippur-as-experience is the tale of [Franz Rosenzweig's decision to attend services on the Day of Atonement](#), on the brink of converting to Christianity. As Nahum Glatzer put it succinctly, "The experience of this day was the origin of his radical return to Judaism." While the majority of synagogue goers are not contemplating apostasy, many are hoping for some sort of transformative experience.

Yet for most of Jewish history, these holidays were not primarily seen as opportunities for religious experience. Rather, Jews prayed so as to participate in the yearly coronation of the Creator, and to attain atonement for their sins and blessings for the coming year. The soul-searching process of *teshuvah*, subjective as it may have been, was meant to have objective metaphysical results. However, ask a contemporary Jew what they're looking for in a Yom Kippur service, and you're liable to hear the reply "I'm looking for a *havvayah*" (חוויה), employing the Hebrew term for "experience."

Haym Soloveitchik evokes a related phenomenon in his seminal essay "[Rupture and Reconstruction](#)." Soloveitchik bemoans that, after attending High Holidays services at a *haredi* yeshivah in Bnei Brak in 1959, "I realized that there was introspection, self-ascend, even moments of self-transcendence, but there was no fear in the thronged student body ... The ten-day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are now Holy Days, but they are not *Yamim Noraim*—Days of Awe or, more accurately Days of Dread, as they have been traditionally called." The dread of these days, their cosmic significance, has been replaced by an introspective spirituality, perhaps angsty, but certainly not terrified. Somehow, for many modern Jews, the penitential goals of *Tishrei* seem involve intense experiences, not a fear of the outcome of God's judgment. One way to start untangling this conundrum is to ask how "experience" came to its current prominence in Western religious life.

Criticism of the concept of "[religious experience](#)" is a commonplace of contemporary study of religion. The primacy of "experience," as scholars like [Wayne Proudfoot](#) have argued, is an artifact of nineteenth century Romanticism. German Protestant philosophers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher aimed to discover an essential core of religion that could withstand biblical criticism, scientific empiricism, and unsettling encounters with non-Christian cultures. They settled on subjective experience as such an inviolable core; who could impugn an entirely inner experience?

The paramount example of this type of subjectivism is William James's monumental 1903 psychological study of religion, simply titled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this light, the search for a "religious experience" on the High Holidays could be seen as merely a modern manifestation of subjective religion, one which disregards the metaphysical import of the days in classical Judaism. Yet, unless we are to entirely delegitimize modern iterations of religion, it behooves us to examine "experience" not merely as an apologetic

term, but as an expression of real religious impulses. In our Jewish context, a brief genealogy of the Hebrew word “*havvayah*” is in order, and can flesh out the relationship between experience and the traditional awestruck process of *teshuvah*.

The word *havvayah*, commonly translated as “experience,” was coined in 1910, with the publication of the first part of A.D. Gordon’s socialist Zionist philosophical work *Man and Nature* in the journal of the *Po’el Ha-Tzair* (Young Laborer). Hebrew was not alone in coming late to an independent word for “experience”; in many other non-European languages, such as Japanese, words for experience were wholly absent until the nineteenth century. However, unlike the many modern Hebrew words coined for recent technological inventions, *havvayah* was not intended to fill a practical linguistic need.

Rather, *havvayah* forms a central piece of Gordon’s philosophical project. Gordon grew up in the traditionally observant Jewish world of Eastern Europe, and by all accounts he did not abandon Orthodox praxis until he left Russia in middle age to join the *kibbutz* of Degania. As one of the more important figures of the “Second *Aliyah*,” the wave of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the Land of Israel in the first decades of the twentieth century, Gordon both valorized and participated in the agricultural labor of the socialist Zionist pioneers. His attempt to create a spiritual basis for the *kibbutz* ethos has thus often been referred to as a “[religion of labor](#),” one which drew both on Kabbalah and Hasidism and on Zionist ideology.

In *Man and Nature*, composed on the *kibbutz*, Gordon analyzes the interaction between the human subject and the world of nature. He compares a person in nature to a fish in water; without even being aware of it, the presence of nature around the subject grants her vitality. However, people in the modern world have become like fish out of water; people feel a distance, a “tear” between themselves and nature. The reason for this alienation is their reliance solely on what Gordon terms “consciousness,” meaning self-conscious, analytical discrimination of external objects, to the detriment of “life,” the holistic connection between subject and object:

[A person] comprehends all that they comprehend through the medium of consciousness only by the power of life, and the division of consciousness from life is like removing the soul of consciousness.

That is to say, life—especially in its human form—is ... the foundation for all human comprehension, not just a particular aspect of being, but a particular aspect of comprehension.

“Life” is not just a way of being—as opposed to death, or non-being—but is also an “aspect of comprehension.” That is, there is no such thing as consciousness which is detached from the lived world. The material which consciousness processes and analyzes has to emerge from vitality. The modern predicament is the disjunction between consciousness and life. However, Gordon finds the term “life” insufficient as a description of the ideal state of human being and thinking in the world:

This term [life] doesn’t supply precisely what is necessary: On the one hand, it is usually used to indicate different forms or states of life (social, national life, eternal life, temporal life, physical life, spiritual life, etc.) and it is difficult to constrict it precisely to its cosmic-human indication; on the other hand, it is not a small problem that life [*hayyim*, (חַיִּים)] is in the plural form and that its form resembles the plural adjective. So, with no other option, I will allow myself to innovate a term in the

form *havvayah* (חַוְיָה), on the [grammatical] model of “being” [*havaya*, הוּיָה].

“Life,” with its range of social and conceptual applications, is too broad a term; Gordon is only discussing the word life’s “cosmic-human” indication, that is, the human state of being in the world. Furthermore, for stylistic and grammatical reasons, Gordon feels it necessary to invent a new word. Therefore, Gordon takes the word “being,” *havayah*, as a grammatical example, and combines it with the word “life,” *hayyim*, and to form *havvayah*. In English, I might translate *havvayah* not as experience, but as “living-and-being.” Boaz Huss, in his *The Mystification of the Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism*, claims that “the concept *havvaya* is a translation of the German concept *Erlebnis*, which filled a central role in the concepts of neo-Romanticism in the beginning of the twentieth century.” While there is certainly some overlap between the terms—“*erlebnis*” could be translated hyperliterally as “living-through-ness”—I will attempt show in what follows that Gordon’s term is no mere translation of German neo-Romanticism into Hebrew, but is rather an original concept which draws on kabbalistic sources in a Zionist context.

The remainder of the lengthy chapter in which Gordon coined *havvayah*, entitled “*Havvayah as the Vessel of Comprehension*,” expands expressively on the characteristics and metonyms of *havvayah* and consciousness. Essentially, however, *havvayah* is “the faculty which interfaces between being and consciousness.” The alienation of the modern person, exemplified by the overly intellectual Jew, can be overcome by reengaging with *havvayah*, which for Gordon meant, practically, a life of physical labor. Agricultural labor, the epitome of a creative engagement with nature that does not merely objectify but participates in nature, actualizes *havvayah*. Thus, Gordon’s concept provides the justification for the *kibbutz* ethos. One assumes that the relationship was reciprocal: Gordon’s life on the *kibbutz* deepened his familiarity with physical labor, and led him to conceptualize the relief from alienation it granted him.

Gordon’s concept reflects socialist Zionist rhetoric concerning the creation of a “new Hebrew,” one engaged in productive labor, as opposed to stereotypical Jewish involvement in non-productive, monetary ventures. However, it would be simplistic to reduce *havvayah* to an anti-Diasporic catchphrase; Gordon’s linguistic innovation draws on methods and concepts found in kabbalistic and Hasidic literature. The very portmanteau of *havvayah* plays on kabbalistic traditions of wordplay and the meditative combination of the letters of various divine names (*tsirufim*). Given Gordon’s pantheism, it would be conceivable to construe both “life” and “being” as names of Gordon’s God, which he combines to gain another linguistic hold on divinity. The resemblance of *havvayah*—the letters חַוְיָה—to the Tetragrammaton, Y-H-V-H, further emphasizes Gordon’s kabbalistic method. Furthermore, Gordon uses the terms *tzimtzum* and *hitpashtut*, or contraction and expansion, to describe, respectively, consciousness and *havvaya*.

These terms originate in the Lurianic Kabbalah, in which *Eyn Sof*, the transcendent, infinite Divine, is said to “contract” itself in order to “make room” for creation. A state of full expansion of God’s infinity would leave no room for existence. Therefore, *tzimtzum* of God’s infinite expanse is necessary for creation in all its particularity. Similarly, Gordon remarks that *havvayah* is not independently a basis for acts of will, emotion, or any personal agency, as it is too broad a summation of the mode of being in the world. The function of

discriminating, analytic consciousness is thus to “contract” *havvayah*, and to enable individuality. Consciousness is both necessary and positive, when appropriately balanced with “living-and-being.”

In his work on Gordon’s kabbalistic sources, Avraham Shapira also points out the essential parallel between Gordon’s binary of *havvayah* and consciousness and the paired kabbalistic *sefirot* of *hokhmah* and *binah*. In kabbalistic literature, and particularly in the Hasidic thought of the Maggid of Mezerich, these *sefirot* are conceived of as related forms of intellect. The first of the pair, *hokhmah*, is understood as a singularity, an undifferentiated “point” that contains all information, prior to any division or differentiation. *Binah* is the “circle,” the cognitive faculty that processes, elaborates, and analyzes the “point,” the raw data of *hokhmah*. The ineffable, vital *havvayah* is thus reminiscent of *hokhmah*, in that it contains within it the potentiality of all thought. Discursive consciousness fulfills the discriminating role of *binah*, which the Zohar describes as the origin of all judgements. Just as in the Zohar the *sefirot* of *hokhmah* and *binah* are called *abba* and *imma*, father and mother, the “two companions who do not separate,” for Gordon there is no consciousness without *havvayah*, nor *havvayah* without consciousness.

The kabbalistic correlates of Gordon’s concepts are as important for understanding his thought as are his Western philosophical influences. His kabbalistic sources attenuate what might otherwise be a purely Romantic exaltation of experience, or a crudely Zionist denigration of analytic thought. Rather, *havvayah* complements and enables healthy human consciousness. Gordon’s conception of *havvayah* is not synonymous with “experience” in the modern sense, either as it is employed colloquially by Hebrew speakers or by scholars of religion.

There are two main meanings of the term “experience”: the first is “having experience” and the second is “having an experience.” The former refers to the sum of events lived through, and the wisdom accrued thereby. Religiously, this is the type of “experience” hopefully attained by someone who studies in a *beit midrash* for years, or spends much of their time doing acts of charity or counseling those in pain. The latter is a momentary state of lived reality, of exceptional perception. This is the type of “religious experience” attained by people dancing ecstatically, or who have a sudden epiphany of God while observing the beauty of nature. Gordon’s *havvayah* is neither of these. Rather than being a specific series of events or a singular and fleeting “peak” experience, *havvayah* is the raw substrate of consciousness. It is the simple “living and being” which provides the platform for abstract thought, but which we are all too liable to forget.

What might this all mean for Jews looking for a *havvayah* over the high holy days? Gordon claims that many of us are blind to the basic facts of our existence. This alienation from physicality was already noticeable in the nineteenth century; even more so, *kal va-homer* in the increasingly disembodied digital world. I don’t know whether Gordon would agree with me here, but it seems to me that deeper awareness of our living-and-being in the world goes along with deeper humility about our finite human lives. The process of *teshuvah* would then be an attempt to get back in touch with *havvayah*, with our embeddedness in the world.

In contrast to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, for whom *teshuvah* means a return to our Divine source, Gordonian *teshuvah* means discarding the abstractions which cause us to forget how fragile and human we are. The High Holy Days allow not just for an experience of Divinity,

but for a *havvayah* of humanity. That is why, for Gordon, the paradigm of the return to *havvayah* is re-engagement with physical labor, not psychic reverie. For us, the physicality of fasting might paradoxically fill a parallel role, to the degree that it allows us to inhabit our bodies more sensitively.

God comes into the story when we correlate Gordon’s *havvayah* with the words of the *piyyut*—to pick just one of myriad examples in the liturgy—which declares that we are “like matter in the hands of the Maker.” Awareness of the limits of our physicality is an opening for awareness of God. Finally, looking for a High Holy Days *havvayah* need not be a search for a fleeting experience, even for an experience of embodiment. Gordon did not mean to discard thought in favor of a brute, human *havvayah*, but rather to recalibrate the relationship of our consciousnesses to our lives. The *havvayah* of *Tishrei* provides primal spiritual matter to digest and process throughout the year. Whether crowding together with thousands of Hasidim in Uman, or sitting stiffly on benches of a Young Israel, true *havvayah* can reaffirm our physicality and dependence on God, and lay a foundation for the intellectual and professional labors of the coming year.

## ROSH HASHANAH AND GOD’S BATTLE FOR COMPASSION

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**U**-*netaneh Tokef*, one of the most memorable pieces of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, imagines the central drama of the day as a trial in which humanity is called to account before God, as the angels in the divine retinue declare, this day is “the day of judgment” [*yom ha-din*]. Often when we reflect on the significance of Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment, we consider what it will mean for us to be judged: we engage in protracted self-reflection and a sober consideration of our shameful misdeeds. We try to embody sincere remorse and attempt to turn toward a path of righteousness. Our attention is focused on the tragedy of human sinfulness and the redemptive possibility of repentance [*teshuvah*].

Less often do we consider what it will mean for God to judge us. Yet, thinking through God’s relationship with judgment may fruitfully complicate our picture of Rosh Hashanah as a cosmic trial of humanity. What’s more, attending to God’s part in the drama of judgment may be valuable in achieving a different understanding of the ritual fabric of the day. To engage in this theological work, we will turn to the corpus of rabbinic literature and consider the striking ways in which our sages imagined God’s relationship with judgment.

### God’s Distinctive Strength: The Quality of Compassion

We should begin by noting the following: for the sages, God’s strength, prowess, and power is most on display not in acts of stern judgment but in acts of tender compassion. This idea is explored in a moving *midrash* from the *Sifre* on Numbers. The textual locus for this *midrash* is the verses in Numbers in which Moses is told to gaze out over the land of Israel before meeting his end at its border. Drawing on the parallel account found in the book of Deuteronomy, the sages direct our attention to the impassioned plea for entrance into the land offered by Moses at this juncture:

And I pleaded with YHVH at that time, saying, ‘My Master, YHVH, You Yourself have begun to show Your servant Your



greatness and Your powerful hand, for what god is there in the heavens and on the earth who could do like Your deeds and like Your might? Let me, pray, cross over that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, this goodly high country and the Lebanon. (Deuteronomy 3:24–25)

In the course of his plea, Moses recalls God's great and unparalleled strength, which God has only begun to reveal. A plain-sense reading of these verses would understand the strength in question as something like physical might and dominance – the kind of physical might and dominance that was on display in God's liberation of Israel from Egypt. Indeed, throughout the book of Deuteronomy the "powerful hand" [*yaakha ha-hazakah*] of God is tied to the moment of the exodus and the miraculous, thundering power with which God punished the Egyptians and saved Israel. This point also helps make sense of the connection between Moses's reference to God's strength and his prayer for entrance into the land: He has only just begun to bear witness to God's might and strength through the punishment of Egypt and the conquest of the lands east of the Jordan. Thus, he prays for the allowance to see more of this might and strength as the people enter the land and conquer its inhabitants with the aid of God's strong arm.

Yet for the sages, the strength at stake in this passage is not that of overpowering might but overpowering compassion manifested in forgiveness and generosity. The *midrash* reads as follows:

Another interpretation: *You have begun [hahilota]* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – You have profaned [*hehaltah*] the vow. You wrote in the Torah, *Whoever sacrifices to a god [other than YHVH alone shall be proscribed]* (Exodus 22:19), and your children worshipped foreign worship, and I requested for them compassion and you forgave – You have broken the vow.

*Your greatness* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – this is the quality of your goodness, as it is said, *And now, let the strength of my lord be great* (Numbers 14:17).

*And your hand* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – this is your right hand, which is extended to all those who come through the world, as it is said, *your right hand, YHVH, glorious in strength* (Exodus 15:6), and it says, *but your right hand, your arm, and the glow of your face* (Psalms 44:4), and it says, *By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness [tzedakah], a word that shall not turn back* (Isaiah 45:23).

*The powerful* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – For you subdue [*kovesh*] with compassion your quality of judgment, as it is said, *Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression* (Micah 7:18), and it says, *He will return, he will have compassion on us, he will subdue [yikhbosh] our sins, You will keep faith with Jacob* (Micah 7:19–20).

*For what god is there in the heavens and on the earth* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – For unlike the way of flesh and blood is the way of the Omnipresent. The way of flesh and blood: the one greater than his friend nullifies the decree of his friend, but you – who can withhold you [from doing as you please]? And so it says, *He is one, who can hold him back?* (Job 23:13). R. Yehudah b. Bava says: A parable – to one who has been consigned to the documents of the kingdom. Even were he to give a lot of money, it cannot be

overturned. But you say, "Do *teshuvah*, and I will accept [it/you], as it is said, *I wipe away your sins like a cloud, your transgressions like mist* (Isaiah 44:22).

The text begins with a playful revocalization of Moses's opening words that transforms "You have begun [*hahilota*]" into "You have broken [*hehaltah*] the vow." In so doing, the sages shift our attention from the scene of the exodus suggested by the plain sense of the verses to the scene of the golden calf, in which God broke His vow to punish those who worship other gods. In that moment of Israel's profound failure, God's strength manifested itself not through physical might but through forgiveness and compassion. What's more, in speaking of God breaking the vow, the text implicitly rejects another pervasive conception of divine power and strength – namely, that divine power rests in stern and difficult judgment. It is not uncommon to hear compassion and forgiveness referred to as a kind of feebleness in contrast to the strength at work in administering justice even when it is difficult or tragic. The sages carefully avoid such a perspective and assert that divine strength lies not in holding to a vow even when it is challenging but in breaking a vow for the sake of compassion and forgiveness.

The themes introduced in this first part of the *midrash* are explored as the *midrash* continues. First, God's greatness is translated into God's goodness through the invocation of a verse tied to another scene of divine forgiveness and compassion – namely, the scene in the aftermath of the sin of the spies. Second, the hand of God, rather than extended against the enemies of Israel in a gesture of physical might is extended in a gesture of compassionate generosity. Indeed, verses tying the hand of God to the destruction and conquest of Egypt and other nations are reread in light of this rabbinic commitment to rendering divine strength as compassion. Third, God's power is understood as His compassion overcoming and subduing His quality of judgment. In the final piece of the *midrash*, we are reminded that God, unlike earthly kings, can break vows and overturn decrees in displays of compassionate forgiveness. Furthermore, when God does vow, it is to bind Himself in commitment to the kindness of *tzedakah*, as noted in the verse from Isaiah quoted by the *midrash*: "By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness [*tzedakah*], a word that shall not turn back" (Isaiah 45:23). There is none who can withhold or nullify His decrees of compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and kindness.

### **God, Anger, and Judgment: The Divine Struggle to be Compassionate**

Thus, what constitutes divine strength, what makes God unique and incomparable, is a capacity for compassion. This compassion sits in an uncomfortable tension with the rage that lights God against the enemies of Israel and the stern judgment that calls for unmitigated punishment. Yet it is precisely this tension that marks divine compassion as a strength. For it is only in mightily subduing a predilection for unmitigated judgment that God's compassion emerges victorious. This is the meaning of the striking phrase found in our *midrash*, "For you subdue [*kovesh*] with compassion your quality of judgment." There is struggle and conquest involved in the victory of compassion over divine judgment. The phrase calls to mind a teaching found in *Mishnah Avot* 4:1: "Ben Zoma says... Who is mighty? The one who subdues [*kovesh*] his impulse, as it is said, *one slow to anger is better than a mighty person and one who rules his spirit than the conqueror of a city* (Proverbs 15:16)." Just as human might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of our impulse toward wickedness, divine might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of God's impulse toward judgment and anger.



This notion that God is locked in a fierce struggle with His tendency toward judgment and anger and is striving mightily to act compassionately with His creatures comes to the fore in a beautiful text from *Berakhot* 7a:

R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Yosi: From where [do we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays? As it is said, *I will bring them to the mount of my sacredness, and let them rejoice in the house of my prayer* (Isaiah 56:7) – ‘their prayer’ is not said, rather *my prayer*. From here [we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays. What does he pray? R. Zutra b. Tuviah said that Rav said: May it be my will that my compassion subdue my anger, and my compassion prevail over my [other] qualities, and I will behave with my children with my quality of compassion, and I will enter before them short of the line of the law.

Critically, God’s will for compassion rather than anger or judgment is couched in the language of prayer. To pray for something is in some ways to admit that achieving that something lies beyond the ken of one’s intentional capabilities. There is a measure of hope in prayer that signals a desire that may go unfulfilled. In this case, God’s prayer for compassion signals the degree to which victory against judgment and anger is not a forgone conclusion and the prevailing of compassion is something that will require effort and struggle.

This struggle is powerfully dramatized by the sages in a number of texts that reimagine God’s anger and judgment as independent personified characters. The retributive aspects of God’s nature become angels who can preclude Him from enacting His will and are often at cross-purposes with this compassionate God. Thus, in the case of divine anger we encounter the following passage from *Yerushalmi Ta’anit* 2:1:

R. Levi said: What is the meaning of *erekh ‘apayim*? Distancing anger. [This is compared] to a king who had two tough legions. The king said, “If [the legions] dwell with me in the province, when the citizens of the province anger me, [the legions] will make a stand against [the citizens]. Instead, I will send them off a ways away so that if the citizens of the province anger me, before I have a chance to send after [the legions], the citizens of the province will appease me and I will accept their appeasement.” Similarly, the Holy Blessed One said, “*Af* and *Hemah* are angels of devastation. I will send them a ways away so that if Israel angers me, before I have chance to send for them and bring them, Israel will do *teshuvah* and I will accept their *teshuvah*.” This is that which is written, *They come from a distant land, from the edge of the sky [YHVH and the weapons of his wrath—to ravage all the earth]* (Isaiah 13:5). R. Yitzḥak said: And what’s more, he locked the door on them. This is that which is written, *YHVH has opened his armory and brought out the weapons of his wrath* (Jeremiah 50:25) ...

*Af* and *hemah*, terms often used in the Bible to describe God’s anger, are here transformed into “angels of devastation” that operate almost independently of God. In the *masnal*, they are compared to two military legions who would loose devastation on the citizenry at the slightest sign of the king’s anger. It appears almost as though the king would be unable to hold them back from their rampage once they set forth against the people. This frightening independence is confirmed in the *nimshal*, wherein God sees a need not only to send them far away but also to lock them up. If they are allowed to roam

free, who knows what havoc they might wreak. One senses in this text the precariousness of God’s relationship with anger and wrath. At the same time, the sages make clear the profound efforts God makes to favor compassion and forgiveness.

*Middat hadin*, or “the quality of judgment,” also becomes an autonomous character in the rabbinic imagination. Thus, in *Pesahim* 119a we read:

R. Kahana in the name of R. Yishma’el b. R. Yose said that R. Shim’on b. Lakish in the name of R. Yehudah Nesi’ah said: What is the meaning of that which is written, *and they had the hands of a man under their wings* (Ezekiel 1:8)? ‘His hand’ is written. This is the hand of the Holy Blessed One that is spread under the wings of the *Hayyot* [i.e. angels] in order to accept those who do *teshuvah* from the grips of *middat hadin*.

In this dramatic scene, God spreads His hand beneath the wings of the angels so as to collect up the remorseful and repentant and protect them from falling into the hands of the less than sympathetic *middat hadin*. One is given to imagine that were these people to fall into the grips of *middat hadin*, God would be powerless to retrieve them or at the very least would need to valiantly struggle for their release. In the cosmic drama, *middat hadin* is God’s adversary, attempting to uphold the strict letter of judgment while God vies for the victory of compassion and forgiveness. The sages make this point clear in several texts that situate this struggle at various moments in our mythic-history. Thus, we are told that God constructed a sort of tunnel in the firmament so as to sneak Menasheh – the repentant wicked king of Yehudah – past *middat hadin*, who would surely have prevented his acceptance in heaven (*Sanhedrin* 103a). Similarly, when creating humankind, God disclosed to the ministering angels only that righteous people would emerge from Adam. God chose to conceal the future reality of wicked people, precisely because He was certain that had *middat hadin* known, it would have prevented the creation of humanity (*Bereishit Rabbah* 8:4). *Middat hadin* was also critical in delaying and precluding the exodus from Egypt. Witnessing the utter depravity of captive Israel who had adopted the customs and practices of the Egyptians, *middat hadin* could not allow for their liberation. Only on the strength of God’s prior commitment and oath to redeem Israel was God able to defeat the uncompromising will of *middat hadin* (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:2).

These texts are theologically audacious and undoubtedly jarring to ears accustomed to the staid contours of a Maimonidean God. God is a vulnerable, struggling God, fearful of the most dangerous and powerful members of the divine family – anger and judgment – and intent on defeating them through precautionary measures, wily maneuvers, and whatever resources are available. As we briefly alluded to earlier, this picture departs in certain ways from that painted by *Sifre Bemidbar* and *Berakhot*. In those texts, the struggle for compassion is rendered internal to God’s person. Judgment and anger and compassion compete for attention in the divine psyche and God struggles mightily for the victory of His more compassionate side. Here, by contrast, judgment and anger are reified and externalized as members of the angelic retinue. It is worth pausing to consider how this impacts the drama. In externalizing anger and judgment, God is rendered wholly and incorruptibly compassionate rather than divided against Himself. This constitutes a certain sacrifice in divine psychological complexity. However, this sacrifice allows for richer imaginative possibilities when it comes to considering how God fights against judgment and anger for the victory of compassion – bolting the door against them, concealing

facts from them, tunneling beneath them, etc. I don't wish to advocate for one of these images to the exclusion of the other. Each of these images captures something about the character of God's struggle with judgment and anger, and it will only be through the cumulative effect of seeing this struggle in multiple successive perspectives that we will appreciate its full-bodied richness.

### "The Day of Judgment"? A Reconsideration

With this consideration of God's relationship to judgment in mind, we can now turn to consider the day of Rosh Hashanah and how it fits into this broader narrative. In *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:3, we encounter the following passage:

Yehudah b. Nahmani in the name of R. Shim'on b. Laqish opened: *God ascends amidst acclamation [teru'ah]; YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar* (Psalms 47:6). When the Holy Blessed One ascends to sit on the throne of judgement on Rosh Hashanah, he ascends for judgement. This is that which is written, *God [Elohim] ascends amidst acclamation [teru'ah]*. And once Israel take their *shofarot* and blow them, immediately *YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar*. What does the Holy Blessed One do? He rises from the throne of judgement and sits on the throne of compassion, and is filled with compassion for them and transforms the quality of justice into the quality of compassion for them. When? On Rosh Hashanah, in the seventh month on the first of the month.

In the rabbinic imagination, the names of God are to be associated with distinctive traits (see for example, *Sifre Devarim* 26). Thus, Elohim signifies God's quality of judgment while YHVH signifies God's quality of compassion. Capitalizing on this rabbinic trope, our *midrash* imagines the shift in divine epithets found in the Psalmic verse to signify a shift in God's character on the day of Rosh Hashanah. While God initially ascends the throne of judgment, the blasts of the *shofar* sounded by Israel move God to abandon the seat of judgment for that of compassion. This idea is one worth examining more closely.

First, this text might push us to reconsider the aptness of *yom ha-din* or "the day of judgment" as a name for Rosh Hashanah. If we take this text seriously, the day is less one of judgment and more one of the abandonment of judgment for the sake of compassion. It is part and parcel of the story of God's struggle against the potent force of strict judgment. The day is one on which the singular strength of God is on display, as God succeeds in conquering and subduing God's quality of judgment with compassion. In a certain sense, we might even take the commandment issued by God for Israel to sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah as a prophylactic measure against *middat hadin*. God knows that the sound of the *shofar's* blast will move Him to remember His deepest commitments, His truest self, and His love and compassion for Israel. For this reason, God assigns this tasks to Israel on the day He has set aside for judgment.

If we wish to deepen our appreciation of *Vayikra Rabbah's* claim, we might turn to Maimonides' articulation of the purpose of the *shofar*. In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4, Maimonides writes as follows:

Even though the sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a decree of the text, there is a hint for it. That is to say, "Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep and comatose from your comas, and return in *teshuvah* and remember your creator. Those who forget the truth through time's hollow things and wile away all their years with hollowness and emptiness that won't be of use and won't save, look to your

souls and improve your ways and your deeds. And each one of you, abandon his wicked way and his thoughts, which are not good."

For Maimonides, the *shofar* is a piercing cry that wakes us from our slumbering attitude. In a world where we find ourselves forgetful of what is important, the sound of the *shofar* shocks us back into an awareness of our deepest commitments and moves us to abandon the hollow and useless things in life in favor of righteousness. In R. Yitzhak Hutner's rendering of this idea, "the *shofar* can bring to life the traces and transform something's trace or impression into its embodied fullness" (*Paḥad Yitzhak, Rosh Hashanah* 20). For both Maimonides and R. Hutner, hearing the *shofar* is an activity designed for the benefit of human beings. However for *Vayikra Rabbah*, it would seem that hearing the *shofar* is something that also benefits God. If the *shofar* has the capacity to wake us from our slumber and restore vitality to our sedimented commitments, perhaps it has the same capacity to do so for God. Parallel to Maimonides' "Wake up, sleepers" might be the Psalmist's cry: "Rise, why do you sleep, lord?" (Psalms 44:24). God calls on us to sound the *shofar* to wake Him from His slumber and transform the trace of reserve compassion into its embodied fullness.

### The Sound of the Shofar and the Tragic Costs of Judgment

But what is it about the sound of the *shofar* that so moves God to abandon judgment and return to His deep and fundamental commitment to compassion and forgiveness? We might find the beginnings of an answer through reflecting on the story of the binding of Isaac and its aftermath, a story we in fact read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In considering what motivated God to test Abraham with the sacrifice of his child, the late midrashic collection, *Yalkut Shim'oni*, imagines the following:

Another interpretation: [This is compared] to a king who had a beloved [friend] who was poor. The king said to him, "It is on me to make you wealthy," and he gave him money with which to do business. After a time, he [i.e. the poor friend] entered the palace. They said, "For what reason is this one entering?" The king said to them, "Because he is my faithful beloved [friend]." They said to him, "If so, tell him to return your money." Immediately, the king said to him, "Return to me that which I gave you." He did not withhold, and the members of the palace were embarrassed, and the king swore to grant him more wealth. The Holy Blessed One said to the ministering angels, "Had I listened to you when you said, *what is a human being, that you are mindful of him* (Psalms 8:5), could there have been Abraham, who glorifies me in my world?!" *Middat ha-din* said before the Holy Blessed One, "all of the trials with which you tested him involved his money and property. Try him through his body." He said to him, "He should sacrifice his son before you." Immediately, "He [i.e. God] said to him [i.e. Abraham], *take your son* (Genesis 22:2). (*Yalkut Shim'oni, Vayera*)

In the eyes of this *midrash*, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was issued at the prodding of *middat ha-din*. Skeptical of the fortitude and authenticity of Abraham's commitment to God, *middat ha-din* asks God to *truly* test Abraham through his flesh and blood rather than through his material possessions by asking him to sacrifice his son. The story of the binding of Isaac is thus cast as a concession of God to the skepticism of *middat ha-din*, the quality of judgment. Unobscured by the love God feels toward Abraham,

*middat ha-din* coldly assesses the situation and desires a strict test of Abraham's righteousness.

This *midrash* is particularly striking as it evokes and plays with another narrative found in the Biblical canon – namely, the story of God's test of Job (Job 1–2). In the beginning of the book of Job, God boasts of Job's righteousness, prompting the Adversary or '*ha-satan*' to question the authenticity of Job's commitment. Like the attendants to the king in the *mashal* of our passage, the Adversary suggests that robbing Job of the material wealth God has showered upon him will test the strength of Job's piety. When this fails, the Adversary responds by discounting the previous test as insufficient. A true test of Job's piety will come when his body and flesh are inflicted rather than merely his wealth. This again is echoed in the comments of *middat ha-din*, who insists God try Abraham "through his body" [*be-gufo*]. The implication of this parallel is hard to ignore. By drawing on the narrative framework of the book of Job, the *midrash* in *Yalkut Shim'oni* casts *middat ha-din* in the role of satanic adversary to God. This text would then continue the trend we have seen of depicting *middat ha-din* in a tense and difficult struggle with God. Yet remarkably, if *middat ha-din* is the satanic adversary to God, then its suggestion of binding Isaac to the altar would seem to emerge in a strikingly negative light.

What then is the source of this ambivalence about testing Abraham through the sacrifice of his son? And what does all of this have to do with the sound of the *shofar*? One possible answer emerges from a *midrash* that first appears in *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2:

He took Isaac his son and led him up mountains and down hills. He took him up on one of the mountains, built an altar, arranged the wood, prepared the altar pile, and took the knife to slay him. Had [God] not called upon him from the heavens and said, *Do not reach out your hand* (Genesis 22:12), Isaac would have already been slain. Know that this is so, for Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him, "Where have you been, my son?" And he said to her, "My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills." And she said, "Woe for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for an angel from the heavens, you would have already been slain!" He said to her, "Yes." At that moment, she uttered six cries, corresponding to the six blasts of the *shofar*. They said, "she had scarcely finished speaking when she died." This is that which is written, *And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her* (Genesis 23:2). Where did he come from? R. Yehudah b. R. Simon said: He came from Mount Moriah.

For this *midrash*, the binding of Isaac to the altar and his near-sacrifice had tragic consequences in the form of the death of his mother, Sarah. What's more, this *midrash* explicitly ties the pained cries of Sarah to the piercing sound of the *shofar*. If we consider this text together with our passage from *Yalkut Shim'oni*, what emerges is a searing indictment of *middat ha-din*. Strict judgment leaves casualties of pain, tragedy, and death in its wake, and it is for this reason that it should be seen as an unsympathetic, almost satanic adversary to which God sadly succumbed in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. When administering strict judgment, one may become so myopically focused on the subject at hand that the unintended and violent consequences of rendering a certain verdict go unnoticed. *Middat ha-din* fails to note the mothers who suffer pangs of sorrow at the loss of children taken in the name of judgment and justice. Sounding the *shofar* recalls God to the moment of Sarah's tragic death and awakens God to the reality of *middat ha-din*'s

violence and its many casualties. God cannot help but return to Himself, to His deepest commitments, and subdue the impulse toward judgment in the calming waters of compassion and forgiveness.

## LEAVINGS OF SIN: RAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN ON TESHUVAH

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### Introduction

**T**he yeshiva "academic year" begins in Elul, a heady and intense time leading up to the Yamim Noraim that centers around *teshuvah* and self-improvement. The mere memory of that season is liable to invoke feelings of divine longing and spiritual awakening in yeshiva alumni. Despite these stirrings, it can be difficult to embrace the Yamim Noraim spirit for those whose lives are structured not around a yeshiva schedule but around vocational, familial, and other responsibilities. While classically the *shul* rabbi's *shabbos shuvah derashah* was meant to break this monotony and inspire spiritual inspiration, the prevalence of the rabbinic *derashah* nowadays (at least in the US) dulls the intensity of the *derasha* experience. It is perhaps for this reason that the more noteworthy *teshuvah derashot* over the past half-century have been offered not by *shul* rabbis but by *rashei yeshiva*. Most famous among these, at least in the Modern Orthodox world, are the annual *teshuvah derashot* of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, offered from 1964 to 1980, and those of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, offered from 1985 to 2010 at either the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem or a New York synagogue.

While *derashot* are most potent in the moment, with the indelible impression they make upon their listeners, quality lectures of this sort also have the capacity to be of enduring value. To that end, Pinchas Peli collected and published seven *derashot* of Rabbi Soloveitchik in his journal *Panim el Panim* and then in a volume, *Al ha-Teshuvah*, which has since been [translated](#) into English. Most recently, consumers of *teshuvah* literature will be most excited to learn, twelve of Rav Lichtenstein's *teshuvah derashot* have been published, by the Mishnat HaRAL project through Maggid books. *Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*, adapted and edited by Michael Berger and Reuven Ziegler, affords access to Rav Lichtenstein's teachings on *teshuvah* to a general audience. This publication not only allows for the broader public to study and consider Rav Lichtenstein's teachings regarding repentance, but also consolidates his thoughts on *teshuvah* for consideration as part of his broader *hashkafic* and theological writings.

The topics presented in the book have some range, but all are centrally focused on repentance. They include:

- a. considerations of certain halakhic issues regarding *teshuvah* – whether it is an obligation or not, and gradations of sin and repentance;
- b. the timing of *teshuvah* – does it stem from a norm or a time of crisis, and *teshuvah* at different stages in one's life;
- c. the experience of sin and repentance – undoing and rehabilitating a relationship with God, the motivating factor

of *teshuvah*, experiencing *teshuvah* from a place of mediocrity; and  
d. the interaction between *teshuvah* and other themes, such as truth, integrity, humility, and joy in *avodat Hashem*.

The book's writing style follows Rav Lichtenstein's inimitable fashion, with complex sentences (somewhat attenuated, given the transcribed oral presentation format) drawing upon both traditional Jewish sources and the occasional reference to classical Western literature to support its arguments. The study mixes halakhic analysis with spiritual reflection and includes some consideration of communal concerns as well. As one would expect from Rav Lichtenstein, the analysis relies not on pat generalizations and platitudes, but on a deep and broad consideration of each topic, establishing the scope of the topic at hand and staking out particular positions on various issues.

In particular, the style in many of the essays utilizes the "mapping out the topic" approach that would be familiar from Rav Lichtenstein's Talmud lectures. For one representative example, the essay "*La-Kol Zeman: Teshuvah* within Four Time Frames of Our Lives" analyzes the temporal aspect of *teshuvah* in a variety of ways: is *teshuvah* occasional, responding to a particular sin, or annual, to be carried out on a yearly basis independent of sin? Is it meant to be perennial, drawing upon previously resolved sins as part of the *teshuvah* process, or not? And to what extent should *teshuvah* be perpetual, carried out daily, because today might be one's last opportunity?

#### **Comparing *Return and Renewal* and *On Repentance***

As regards content, given the proximity and similarities between Rav Lichtenstein's and Rabbi Soloveitchik's *teshuvah derashot*, a comparison between *Return and Renewal* and *On Repentance* is in order. It is only reasonable to compare the *teshuvah* writings of one great theologian and leader of Modern Orthodoxy with those of his son-in-law and *talmid muvhak*, who occupied a similar position for much of that audience. An analysis will reveal several points of contact, but also several distinctions between the two works.

Many classic Soloveitchikian themes of *teshuvah* are noticeable immediately upon consideration of Rav Lichtenstein's study: the heightened role of confession within repentance; the concept of standing before God; the power of free will; repentance in response to a shock; the concept of breaking the covenant; the exclusivity of *avodat Hashem* as servitude to God; *teshuvah* as elevating sins; the comparison between seeking out sins and seeking out leaven before Pesah; crisis as a *mehayyev* (obligating force) of *teshuvah*; and a future-oriented rather than past-oriented view of spiritual activity. Some of these can be traced further back as classical Maimonidean or Brisker themes, while others are more particularly the Rav's contributions. In any event, Rav Lichtenstein engages his father-in-law's *teshuvah* discourse by drawing upon these themes, at times citing the Rav. In fact, the volume's central distinction between two types of sin, to be analyzed below, is explicitly attributed to the Rav (p. 16):

The Rav z"l used to speak frequently of "sin," meaning specific actions, and "the ways of sin," the whole context of lifestyle and personality out of which sin develops and by which it is sustained.

At the same time, however, Rav Lichtenstein evidences a fairly explicit shift away from certain Soloveitchikian themes. In comparing Rav Lichtenstein's writing on *teshuvah* to the Rav's, the argument from silence is instructive – Rav Lichtenstein leaves out almost

completely any discussion of the Temple service on Yom Kippur, whose repentance-related themes comprise a core part of the Rav's *On Repentance*. Relatedly, Rav Lichtenstein avoids significant treatment of less prosaic topics such as the nature of the atonement afforded by the day of Yom Kippur itself, the metaphysics of sin and its stain, and the role of suffering in expiating sin. While avoiding these more abstruse metaphysical topics, Rav Lichtenstein substitutes for them more experiential perspectives. Rather than emphasizing the metaphysics of sin and its impact on the broader world, he focuses on the phenomenology of sin, how it impacts upon the sinner and his or her relationship with themselves and with God. Rather than discussing the nature of Yom Kippur in the Temple of years past, Rav Lichtenstein turns to contemporary religiosity, considering what sort of introspection might be necessary for various communities. Even among more prosaic areas of Halakha that appear frequently in his volume, Rav Lichtenstein avoids overly involved discussion of the halakhic nuances. While these appear more frequently in *On Repentance*, *Return and Renewal* prefers to mention or gesture at them and then move on to focus on the more practical upshot from these discussions. For example, while the Rav dwells at length on the question of whether *teshuvah* can be commanded (*On Repentance*, pp. 15-18), Rav Lichtenstein notes the question (pp. 64-65) quickly, and then spends much more time contemplating whether *teshuvah*, and divine service more generally, is most spiritually meaningful and effective if commanded or if merely presented as an opportunity (pp. 65-68).

There would appear to be two ways to explain this divergence between the topical preferences of these two *gedolim*: one based on audience and genre, and the other based on discrepancies between the religious worldviews of the Rav and Rav Lichtenstein.

As regards audience and genre, Rabbi Soloveitchik's *derashot* from 1962-1974, on which the book is based, were given in Yiddish to an audience presumed to be able to follow some fairly complex halakhic reasoning and attracted Torah scholars outside of Modern Orthodoxy's immediate orbit. By contrast, Rav Lichtenstein's *derashot* were given from 1985 to 2010 in English either at Kehillath Jeshurun in New York, or at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, aimed at a general rather than a yeshiva audience. The audience's interest would have been best accommodated by minimizing excursions into complex issues of the Temple service of Yom Kippur, and even complex exposition of questions in *lomdus* relating to *teshuvah*. The use of more familiar textual sources would allow for paying attention to other matters close to the hearts and minds of the audience, including communal and humanistic concerns.

At the same time, however, the discrepancy might also be explained by reflecting on the distinct worldviews of the two presenters. For the Rav, for whom "out of the sources of Halakha, a new worldview awaits formulation," (*Halakhic Mind*, p. 102), halakhic argumentation is necessarily the beginning and end of any discussion about *teshuvah*. For Rav Lichtenstein, Halakha is certainly the core and basis of the entire institution of *teshuvah*, but many other sources of insight exist as well. In particular, contributions from humanistic sources, Jewish and otherwise, provide important reflections on how the process and experience of *teshuvah* should be viewed. For example, Socrates' aphorism that "the unexamined life is not worth living" is cited approvingly several times in the volume (pp. 16, 71, 147, and 150). While this approach might not be the focus of a *shiur* in Gemara and *lomdus*, for a more general reflection on *teshuvah*, this broader palette of prooftexts is appropriate for Rav Lichtenstein. In a sense, then, the works on *teshuvah* by these two colossi reflect their approach in their disquisitions on Jewish thought more

generally; whereas the Rav was more likely to go into extended and often abstruse halakhic discussion than was Rav Lichtenstein, the latter was more likely to take a broader perspective on the topic at hand and to cite humanist thinkers as sources of authority. Parenthetically, one might compare this distinction regarding these two thinkers' use of non-Jewish sources to their particular approaches to ethics outside of halakha, in "[Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha](#)" and [Halakhic Morality](#), as I may do on another occasion.

### **The Volume's Key Question: Moral Repentance or Religious Repentance?**

As noted above, there is really one primary *hakirah*, a particular question, that runs through the various essays in this volume – the distinction between *teshuvah* as fixing one's sins and *teshuvah* as returning to a better relationship with God. In fact, the theme appears so many times that it approaches the point of redundancy. One wonders whether an alternative organizational structure of the volume might have succeeded in integrating this theme, such that it appeared as a single, lengthy essay rather than being presented again and again (albeit from different perspectives) throughout the volume.

Many questions throughout the volume tie into this core question of moral repentance (fixing one's behavior) versus religious repentance (fixing one's relationship with God). Two sources on repentance in the Torah (Numbers 5 and Deuteronomy 30) and two versions of contemporary confession (*aval anahnu hatanu* versus the *al het* listing) each distinguish between a sin-oriented and relationship-oriented *teshuvah*. There are at least five aspects to sin, as is laid out several times in this volume (pp. 44-45, 62-3, 90, 122-3), which map onto the two categories. The impetus for *teshuvah*, whether it is based on a particular sin or on one's situation (whether individual or communal, whether a state of mediocrity or a crisis), also splits among these two questions. Whether combating sin should ideally be a struggle or not, the nature of communal repentance, and even the distinct emphases between Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, tie in to this fundamental question pervading the entire volume. As was so often the case for Rav Lichtenstein's *hakirot*, the reader is asked to [embrace both sides](#) of the *hakirah*, and to strive for *teshuvah* to both repair the sin and the human-divine relationship.

### **Themes Relating to Rav Lichtenstein's Broader Oeuvre**

While this central question dominates many of the essays from their various perspectives, additional perspectives and issues are taken up throughout the volume as well. Many of these integrate well with themes key to Rav Lichtenstein's worldview more generally, as one might have expected. Possibly most prominent among these themes is the close relationship between *teshuvah* and *avodat Hashem*, divine service in general. If *teshuvah* is meant to repair one's religious ways, an understanding of *teshuvah* must confront the nature of religiosity overall. Thus, the halakhic Jew's dual focus on the detailed regimen of *mitzvot* and the sweeping relationship with God (p. 39-40, and addressed at length in Rav Lichtenstein's Orthodox Forum article on "[Law and Spirituality](#)") correlates well with both the topic of *avodat Hashem* and with the primary question of this volume. The theme of commandedness, and the related expectation of a strong work ethic, which is so core to Rav Lichtenstein's conception of religiosity (for both Jews and non-Jews), and discussed (among other places) in "[To Cultivate and to Guard](#)" ([By His Light](#), ch. 1), appears several times as well (pp. 8-9, 24, 66-67, 89-90, 114, 134-35).

A good example of Rav Lichtenstein's characteristic nuance appears in the chapter on "Mediocre *Teshuvah* and the *Teshuvah* of the Mediocre" (pp. 97-120). While noting, on the one hand, that the

Torah is less opposed to mediocrity than are certain 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, and that there is still value to *teshuvah* of this nature, Rav Lichtenstein also argues that such *teshuvah* is "grievously inadequate" (p. 110) and that it is the role of the one doing *teshuvah* to do everything they can to escape the limitations of mediocrity. Still, if someone does the best he or she can, and yet falls short of a full and perfect *teshuvah*, God accepts the *teshuvah*, weighing the effort more heavily than the results, and yielding a process attainable by non-elites.

### ***Teshuvah* and Religious Humanism**

Certain cases in the volume would appear to reflect Rav Lichtenstein's broader [orientation as a religious humanist](#), as well. One example of this is his nuanced position (noted above) opposing elitism that excludes most religious practitioners, while at the same time having high expectations for the average person in his stirring push against mediocrity. This religious humanist framework allows each individual to pursue religious excellence on their own level.

Additionally, the question as to whether one should have a certain happiness as they go through the process of *teshuvah* is resolved with a "personal, intuitive answer" of "an emphatic yes" (p. 217) and only afterwards proven from sources. This position derives primarily not from a halakhic or *hashkafic* source, but from Rav Lichtenstein's developed religious humanist reflex that spiritual activities, even when difficult, must be attended by joy. A flourishing religious individual, fulfilling his or her telos of serving God, must be happy, even while fulfilling the difficult task of *teshuvah*.

Rav Lichtenstein's strong and consistent advocacy of guilt as a healthy religious reaction to sin throughout the volume (see pp. 62-64, 79-81, 89, 93, 110, 131, 208, 215) reflects his religious humanist worldview where what is demanded of a person is more than conforming certain actions and beliefs, but living a life "as ever in my great Taskmaster's eye," where failure of necessity entails a deep-seated guilt.

Related to this is the view that "*teshuvah*... is itself a crisis" (p. 130), as the religious individual's personality and life is torn apart as they attempt to reform themselves to properly stand before God again. The humanism inherent in the focus on the experience of the person in their religious experience facilitates the development of these novel formulations.

While being understanding of human weakness and not artificially assuming everyone is an elite scholar, and taking the human experience seriously throughout, this volume still strikes a fairly demanding pose (as one might hope for a *sefer* on *teshuvah*): it urges people not to accept the mediocre excuses of the *beinoni* (p. 105) and strongly rejects an attitude of fatalism in light of free will (e.g., pp. 1-4). The appropriate modulation of expectations for the religious practitioner is yet another expression of Rav Lichtenstein's religious humanism.

### **Commentary on the Modern Orthodox Community**

In addition to the development of *teshuvah* themes of general interest, one feature of the volume is the explicit reflection on the Modern Orthodox community, and, at times, its contrast to more Haredi communities. Acolytes of Rav Lichtenstein will be familiar with some of these reflections from his articles "The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy" in [Leaves of Faith vol. 2](#) and "[Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting](#)" ([By His Light](#), ch. 12), but the added valence of *teshuvah* provides for new perspectives and makes these comments pack an additional punch.



As in those volumes, a critical angle is often taken towards Modern Orthodox apathy. For example, the community is accused of lacking the proper passion in prayer (p. 31):

For the Modern Orthodox Jew and his community in particular, the inclination and the capacity to pray properly and with passion, with a plaintive *cri de coeur* issuing *mi-ma'amakim*, from the depths, is often sadly deficient.

In his discussion of *timhon levav*, or the role of wondering, Rav Lichtenstein critiques both the Haredi and the Modern Orthodox worlds for failing to find the proper balance between introspection and self-certainty (pp. 155-56):

[For the *Charedi* world] there is no *tim'hon levav* at all – just passionate certitude, never to walk against your best light, yet never examining what is the nature of that light.... In the Centrist world, by contrast, there is a surfeit of *tim'hon levav*... While the *Charedi* world is so certain that it, and it alone, has absolute, comprehensive, detailed truth, the individual in the Religious-Zionist world often doubts its ideals and its ideology, its goals and its methods. Riven by conflicting loyalties, driven by a quest for integration, he finds himself in a state of tension. He likes to see that tension as creative – it has an appealing ring – but on the other hand, he's not quite certain.

Certitude can't come at the expense of introspection, nor can an abundance of wondering at the propriety of one's religious community and its goals come at the expense of passion in living that life. This honest reflection on the limitations of both communities in this connection, is developed at length in the essay "Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting."

The comfortable state of Modern Orthodoxy is representative of the modern era and its relative stability (certainly as compared to the poverty and high mortality rates of years past), which can lead to a sort of calmness and even lack of focus. To that end, Rav Lichtenstein notes the risk of being lulled into a sense of security (pp. 73-74):

I need to focus upon the besetting sin, the inherent danger, of the Modern Orthodox community, the danger against which we need to be on our perpetual guard. That danger is, quite clearly, *heise'ach ha-da'at*, spiritual and religious inattentiveness.

One notes a similarity in themes to his previous essays, "*Bittachon*: Trust in God," in [By His Light](#) and "My Soul was Faith," in [Seeking His Presence](#), as the community is charged to be attentive, to both investigate spiritual deficiencies and do what they can to fix them.

#### Conclusion

The essays collected in this volume aim primarily not at a *lomdish* analysis of *teshuvah* but at the phenomenological perspective of a religious humanist. Traditional Jewish sources, studied by references to the Western canon, form the backdrop against which success or failure to live up to one's personal or communal religious obligations must measure up. This volume develops the concept that sin creates a rupture, both on a local level and as it reflects on the relationship

between the *oved Hashem* and his God, each of which must be repaired by the penitent. The many insights into repentance included in the volume are deeply nuanced, and are of a piece with Rav Lichtenstein's writings more broadly.

The subtitle of this study by Rav Lichtenstein is "Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth." That description is certainly accurate, but what the volume offers goes beyond that. Each essay contains within it a charge – some more explicit than others, often directed at the individual, at times directed at the community – pushing for growth in *avodat Hashem*. For a religious community that has produced few *musar* books, this volume's subtle yet powerful religious thrust is significant. Even where the text does not explicitly call upon the individual in the second person, the tone and humanity of its pieces, the piercing ability to reach people on their own level, forces the reader to confront his or her own situation as they read this text.

The presumed readership of this volume is American and English-reading Orthodoxy writ large. To a large extent, this community might be described, with a critical eye, as composed of two groups: those who see Judaism as a mere adornment, embraced primarily to enhance quality of life, on the one hand, and those fully focused on studying Torah (and facilitating such study), to the absolute exclusion of any other endeavor. This volume, framed by the context of *teshuvah*, offers a third way: a Judaism that is based on the divine command and the imperative of *avodat Hashem* – divine service and maybe even servitude – but also offers a broad, textured approach to the world, one that values literature and the humanities, eschews religious extremism, and accepts the world's complexity. Of course, this worldview can be gleaned from Rav Lichtenstein's other writings as well, but it is in some ways more powerful to see such an integrative religious worldview come to life in a series of *derashot* on *teshuvah*.

Although Rav Lichtenstein has left this world, his enduring legacy – as regards *teshuvah* but also about *avodat Hashem* in general – lives on, as this volume furthers the return and renewal of his teachings.

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