

# LEHRHAUS

Over Rosh Ha-Shana

<p>Vol. IV Issue 46</p> <p>29 Elul 5782</p> <p>September 25, 2022</p>	<p>Shanah Tovah from The Lehrhaus team.</p> <p>We wish you and your families a sweet year ahead</p>	<p><b>CONTENTS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ First (Page 1)</li> <li>▪ Holzer (Page 5)</li> <li>▪ Morrow (Page 11)</li> <li>▪ Fried (Page 20)</li> <li>▪ Leibowitz (Page 27)</li> <li>▪ Corvo (Page 31)</li> <li>▪ Hirsch Gelman (Page 34)</li> </ul>
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## HENDIADYS IN THE PRE-SHOFAR ACROSTIC PRAYER: AN INTRODUCTION TO AN OVERLOOKED PRINCIPLE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

**Mitchell First is an attorney and has authored five books, including most recently *Words for the Wise* (2022).**

**B**efore we blow the shofar on Rosh Ha-Shanah, we recite six verses that generate the acrostic *kerá satan* – tear up the [evil decrees of the] Satan. The first verse (with initial letter פ) is Eikhah 3:56: “*Koli shamata, al ta’ilem aznekha le-ravhati le-shav’ati.*”

The first five words are easily translated: “You have heard my voice. Do not hide Your ear.”

The last word, *le-shav’ati*, means “to my cry.”<sup>1</sup> But what about that word *le-ravhati*?

The root of this word is *resh-vav-het*. A little background on this root is necessary.

In Genesis 32:17, we are told that Jacob instructed that a *revah* be placed between each of his flocks. From the context, it is evident that *revah* means “space.”

Another use of this word is found in the book of Esther. There (4:14), Mordekhai tells Esther that if she refuses to help, *revah* and *hatzalah* will arise for the Jews from another place. The word *revah* there is usually translated as “relief.” This expands its original meaning “space”, as confinement

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps *le-shav’ati* is best translated as “cry for relief,” as it may derive from the root *yod-shin-ayin* (help, save, deliver). See E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological*

*Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (1987), 646.

causes distress.<sup>2</sup>

There is also the word *ruah*, which has meanings such as “breath,” “air,” and “wind.” It contains the same consonants as *revah* but is vocalized differently.<sup>3</sup>

Now let us return to our word *le-ravhati*.

The Jewish Publication Society of America 1917 translation of Eikhah translates this as “at my sighing.” Many others take this approach, including the 2000 edition of the Koren Tanakh. This translation bases itself on the “breath” meaning of the word *ruah*. A “sighing” of distress would nicely parallel “my cry.” But *le-ravhati* is vocalized in a manner that indicates that it is from the word *revah*, and not the word *ruah*.<sup>4</sup> In Tanakh, the word *revah* always means either “space” or “relief.”<sup>5</sup> So we must reject the “at my sighing” translation or anything akin to it.<sup>6</sup>

But translating *le-ravhati* as “relief” is also difficult. “Do not hide Your ear to my relief, to my

cry” is a very strange phrase. The word “relief” does not fit well at all. We would expect that God’s ear might hide from a “cry” or “voice,” but not from “relief.” Moreover, “to my relief” is not a good parallel to “to my cry.”

Some propose emending the text and adding an initial yod to *le-shav’ati* so it becomes *li-yeshuati*.<sup>7</sup> *Yeshuah* means “salvation,” and is a better parallel to “relief.” Nevertheless, neither “relief” nor “salvation” fits well following, “Do not hide your ear.”

Another approach is to understand “my relief” as “my prayer for my relief,” which the *ArtScroll Tanach* (1996) proposes.<sup>8</sup> ArtScroll translates *le-shav’ati* (after a comma) as “to my cry.” But still it is difficult to justify adding in “my prayer for,” as it is not really in the text.

An alternative and in my view superior approach is the one adopted by Adele Berlin in her commentary on Lamentations.<sup>9</sup> She suggests that what we have here is an (atypical) hendiadys.

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the comments of S.D. Luzzatto on Exodus 8:11 where the related noun *harvahah* is used.

<sup>3</sup> In words derived from the root *revah*, there is no dot inside the *vav*. In words derived from the root *ruah*, there is a dot. Almost certainly, the “space” meaning of *revah* and these meanings of *ruah* have a related origin, but the exact nature of the relationship is still at issue. One suggestion is that the “space” meaning originally referred to the air between two things. See, e.g., Klein, 610.

<sup>4</sup> Even if the vocalization was *le-ruhati*, I am aware of no other time in Tanakh where *ruah* means “sigh” or something similar. Therefore, such an interpretation would be farfetched. Of course, Tanakh includes expressions such as *marat ruah* (bitterness) and *ruah nishbara* (broken spirit). But in expressions such as these there is another word that clarifies the state of the *ruah*.

<sup>5</sup> The root *revah* occurs in Tanakh in Genesis 32:17, Exodus 8:11, 1 Samuel 16:23, Job 32:20, Jeremiah 22:14, and Esther 4:14.

<sup>6</sup> Another widespread similar translation that suffers from the same issues is: “to my groans.”

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., D. Hillers, *Lamentations* (The Anchor Bible) (1992), 118. Many precede him with this suggestion. The argument has been made that the Septuagint supports this reading.

<sup>8</sup> In 1986, the ArtScroll Rosh Hashanah Machzor translated differently: “my prayer for my relief when I cry out.”

<sup>9</sup> *Lamentations: A Commentary* (2002).

'Hendiadys' is a Latinized form of a Greek phrase that means "one through two," and has been defined as "the expression of one single but complex concept by two separate words. ... The important aspect of hendiadys is that its components are no longer considered separately but as a single unit in combination."<sup>10</sup> An example is *yad va-shem* (Isaiah 56:5). If this is a hendiadys, which is likely, the two words together do not mean a *yad* (monument) and a *shem* (memorial) but a *yad* that will serve as a *shem*. Another example is *ger ve-toshav*. This should be understood as *ger toshav* (a *ger* – a foreigner, who is a *toshav* – a resident).

If our phrase is a hendiadys, then it is to be read as one concept and can mean "my plea for relief." Berlin prefers this translation.<sup>11</sup> Even though there is no *vav* between the two words, making it atypical, Berlin and others are willing to interpret

our phrase as if it were a hendiadys.

Although the typical hendiadys has two nouns with a *vav* between them, it occurs with other forms of words as well.<sup>12</sup>

Hendiadyses are not just found in Hebrew, but in other ancient Semitic languages like Ugaritic and Akkadian. It is also found in Greek, Latin, and English. For example, Macbeth in Shakespeare's famous play says, "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." "Sound and fury" is a hendiadys, offering a more striking image than "furious sound," but meaning the same thing.

When involving two nouns, hendiadys results in extra emphasis, instead of a noun with a modifying adjective. This is one of hendiadys' primary purposes, and what we see in the

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<sup>10</sup> W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (1986, 2d ed.), 324–25.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin, 81 and 83. See also 4 where she writes that she adopts this approach "even though the conjunctive 'and' is lacking and so this may not be a true hendiadys." Berlin was not the first to cite hendiadys as an explanation for our two words, as Watson (p. 328) preceded her. Our phrase is cited as one of the many possible examples of hendiadyses in Tanakh in the dissertation cited below, at 583.

Without using the term hendiadys, Soncino, in its commentary, had offered the translation: "my cry for relief." Daat Mikra also understands the phrase in this manner without mentioning hendiadyses or an equivalent term in Hebrew. R.B. Salters, *A Critical and Exegetical*

*Commentary on Lamentations* (2010), 267–269, points out several others who give such an interpretation without stating explicitly that they view the two words as a hendiadys. (Salters himself disagrees and disputes our present text.)

The interpretation "my cry for relief" is also found in some of our traditional sources. See, e.g., Radak, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

<sup>12</sup> There are other phrases in Tanakh without a *vav* between them that many argue are hendiadyses. For example, *koli tahanunai* (Psalms 116:1). This may mean "my supplicating voice." Salters mentions some Biblical manuscripts which have a *vav* between our two words in Lamentations 3:56, but the *vav* was likely a later addition.

Shakespeare example. But a hendiadys has other functions as well, such as producing assonance or rhyme or preserving rhythm.<sup>13</sup>

Even if those last two words of Eikhah 3:56 are not a hendiadys,<sup>14</sup> it is a style used many times in Tanakh that needs to be better publicized. Some scholars believe that there are only a small number of hendiadyses in Tanakh, but most believe there are many.<sup>15</sup> For example, already in Genesis 1:2 we have *tohu va-vohu*, which many believe to be a hendiadys meaning “formless void.”

When first proposed by Christian Hebraists in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, here are some of the hendiadyses that were suggested:<sup>16</sup>

- Genesis 19:24: *gafrit va-esh*, literally “sulfur and fire.” If a hendiadys, it is one concept that means either “burning sulfur” or “sulfurous fire.”
- Genesis 23:4: *ger ve-toshav*, literally “foreigner and resident.” As noted, this is to be understood as *ger toshav*, i.e., a *ger* who is a *toshav*.<sup>17</sup>

- Jeremiah 22:3: *mishpat u-tzedakah*, literally “judgment and righteousness.” Perhaps it means “righteous judgment.”
- Job 4:16: *demamah ve-kol*, literally “silence and voice.” If a hendiadys, it means “low voice.”<sup>18</sup>

Limiting ourselves to the first half of the book of Genesis, here are some others that have been suggested in recent centuries:

- Genesis 1:14: *le-otot u-le-moadim* - as signs to mark seasons
- Genesis 1:22: *peru u-revu* - be abundantly fruitful
- Genesis 2:15: *le-avdah u-leshamrah* - for the task of tending it
- Genesis 3:16: *itzvoneikh ve-heironeikh* - your pain in childbearing
- Genesis 4:12: *na ve-nad* - restless wanderer
- Genesis 11:4: *ir u-migdal* - towering city
- Genesis 12:1: *mei-artzekha u-mi-moladetekha* - from your native land
- Genesis 13:13: *raim ve-hataim* - wicked sinners

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<sup>13</sup> Watson, 328.

<sup>14</sup> If one rejects the hendiadys approach in Lamentations, one can read the verse as a plea to God not to hide His ear from the pleader’s “relief” and “cry,” and just accept the fact that “ear” does not fit well with “relief.”

<sup>15</sup> Rosmari Lillas, *Hendiadys in the Hebrew Bible* (Univ. of Gothenburg, 2012), is a dissertation available online that discusses hendiadys extensively and itemizes many possible hendiadyses throughout Tanakh.

<sup>16</sup> I am not claiming that Rishonim and early Aharonim did not interpret the individual verses below in a manner that achieves the same result. But I do not think they discussed something like hendiadys as a general principle.

<sup>17</sup> There are a few other verses with *ger ve-toshav*. Interestingly, in Leviticus 25:47, we have *ger ve-toshav* and *ger toshav* in the same verse.

<sup>18</sup> The related *kol demamah* appears in 1 Kings 19:12.

- Genesis 22:2: *et binkha et yihidekha* - your only son

The following occur several times in Tanakh: *hesed ve-emet*, *toshav ve-sakhir*, and *yayin ve-shekhar* (“wine that makes one inebriated”).

*Hesed ve-emet*, appears many times, significantly in Exodus 34:6 in the first of the two verses where the thirteen Divine attributes are specified. The complete phrase here is *ve-rav hesed ve-emet*. Almost all commentators count *hesed* and *emet* as separate attributes. But if *hesed ve-emet* is a hendiadys here, these words amount to only one attribute, and this is one of the ways Daat Mikra understands the phrase.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude, it is ironic that a style often meant for emphasis is little known today, resulting in various biblical passages being misunderstood. This might be what happened to *le-ravhati le-shav’ati*. Thus, it is important to look out for hendiadys when reading Biblical passages.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See similarly Daat Mikra to Genesis 24:27 and the comments in the Conservative movement’s *Etz Hayim* Torah commentary (Exodus 34:6): “The Hebrew words *hesed v’emet* appear frequently together to express a single concept .... When used together, the two words express God’s absolute and eternal dependability in dispensing His benefactions.”

<sup>20</sup> For further reading, see E.Z. Melamed, *Shenayim She-Hem Ehad* (EN ΔΙΑ ΔΥΟΙΝ) *Ba-Mikra*, Tarbitz 16 (1945), 173–189; R. Gordis, *The Word and the Book* (1976), 40–43; W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (1986, second ed.),

## MIND BLOWN: SHOFAR AS DIVINE ENCOUNTER BEYOND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN COMPREHENSION

**Aton Holzer is Director of the Mohs Surgery Clinic in the Department of Dermatology, Tel-Aviv Sourasky Medical Center**

One of the most perplexing practices in the Jewish tradition -- when we give it sufficient thought -- is the sounding of the shofar. Jews come to synagogue, begin prayer, and punctuate the prayer with loud, monotonal trumpet blasts.<sup>1</sup>

What do the blasts mean? The Torah gives no indication. The Talmud (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16a) explores this question haltingly, and becomes a *locus classicus* for the unknowability of the mind of God:

Rabbi Yitzhak said: Why does one sound [*tok’in*] on Rosh Ha-Shanah? Why do we sound? The Merciful One states “Sound [*tik’u*]” (Psalms 81:4). Rather, why does one sound blasts [*teru’a*]? Sound a *teru’a*? The Merciful One states: “a memorial proclaimed with the blast of horns [*teru’a*]” (Leviticus 23:24). Rather, why does one sound blast [*teki’a*] and blasts

324-328. I would like to thank Rabbi Menahem Meier for introducing me to the concept of hendiadys after he read an article I had written about the meaning of the Biblical phrase *yad va-shem* when I was unaware of the concept. I would like to thank my wife Sharon for getting me interested in the root *resh-vav-het*. I would like to thank Sam Borodach and Mike Alweis for their feedback as I was writing this article.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my daughter, Dina for reading an earlier draft of this article.

[*teru'a*] sitting and sound a *tekie* and a *teru'a* while they are standing? In order to confuse [*le'arbev*] the Satan.<sup>2</sup>

The Talmud makes clear that the reason for the commandment of shofar is unknowable. The expansion of the shofar-blasts beyond the Divine prescription, however, is given a rationale: to make the Satan confused (literally, mixed – to render two separate entities indistinguishable). Medieval scholars such as Rosh (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 4:14), Ran (ad loc s.v. *garsinan*), Ra'avayah (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 542) and Tur (*Orah Haim* 581) expand this explanation to a further, later expansion – the shofar blasts sounded (in Ashkenazic communities) throughout the month of Elul.

The various commentators on the Talmud deal with problems posed by this cryptic passage. Two stand out among them.

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<sup>2</sup>Translation from Sefaria ([https://www.sefaria.org.il/Rosh Hashanah.16a.17?lang=en](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Rosh_Hashanah.16a.17?lang=en)) with minor modifications.

<sup>3</sup> The use of *ha-Satan* by the Talmud actually already seems to militate against this idea, as the definite article suggests not a proper name but a descriptor: “the accuser.” The very idea of a distinct angelic figure described as Satan emerges only in some of the very last books of the Bible: Zechariah, Job and I Chronicles, and even there his distinct identity is debatable; there is nothing to suggest that “the adversary” is anything but a loyal member of God’s retinue. In extracanonical Second Temple literature and the Gospels, Satan, *beliya'al*, *mastema*, and ultimately *diablos* emerge as a personified evil agent and God’s adversary, perhaps under the influence of Zoroastrian dualism. But Rabbinic literature shies away from such personalization in the Tannaitic period, and while Samael/Satan as a character emerges in Amoraic literature, he is a minor figure who is tasked with tempting man to do evil (and also the angel of the death), who in both roles is subservient to God and sometimes cast as a trickster; only in the ninth-century Midrash *Pirkei de-*

1. One problem is logical: if the rationale for sounding the shofar is unknowable – effectively senseless -- how can there be any sense in expanding this activity?
2. A second problem is theological: Is the Satan really best conceived as a human-like personality who can be duped?<sup>3</sup> This passage, at face value, is theologically problematic for rationalists, but later commentators tend not to take it at face value.<sup>4</sup>

This passage, and its implications, played a significant role in medieval debates with regard to the limits of human understanding vis-à-vis Divine precepts.<sup>5</sup> In the modern period, new philosophical approaches have emerged with regard to cognizing the inherent mystery in Divine law, as symbolized by shofar – and they are encapsulated well in the divergent approaches of

*Rabbi Eliezer* does the character assume the role of fallen angel and Divine antagonist, similar to Christian and Islamic traditions (even if elements can be identified in prior sources). In the second millennium, the Rishonim are riven between the rationalists like Rambam (*Guide* III:22) who identify the Satan with the evil inclination – an abstraction – and the Kabbalists, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century R. Isaac b. Jacob ha-Kohen of Spain and on through the *Zohar*, who continued the *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s* trend and developed myths supporting a dualistic approach to evil with multiple personified evil forces.

<sup>4</sup> In an innovative reading, Rav Shagar sees demystification beginning within the Talmudic text itself, in the manner in which the Gemara frames R. Yitzhak’s suggestion. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Shiurim ba-Gemara: Yoma – Sukkah – Rosh Ha-Shanah* (Makhon Kitvet ha-Rav Shagar, 2017), 431-434.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Josef Stern, “The fall and rise of myth in ritual: Maimonides versus Nahmanides on the Huqqim, Astrology, and the war against idolatry.” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6:2 (1997): 185-263.

two generations of Rabbinic thinkers, that of R. Moshe Soloveitchik (1879-1941) and his son, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993).

### **Shofar and the Merit of Embracing the Inscrutability of Divine Will**

Rashi (16b s.v. *k'dei le-arbev*) implicitly responds to the question of what good can there be in a content-free edict imposed by Divine fiat. He writes, “to confuse the Satan: so that he does not accuse. When he hears the Jews cherishing the *Mitzvot*, his words are plugged up.<sup>6</sup>” For Rashi, Satan is simply the personification of the accuser, of Divine scales tipping toward the side of demerits. The blasts – and the various ways in which we extend them – celebrate our embrace of blind Divine obeisance. That *itself* is the potent source of merit.<sup>7</sup>

Rashi’s view regarding shofar, grounded in a literal understanding of the Talmudic text – can support a Leibowitzian<sup>8</sup> read. For the Israeli public intellectual and polymath Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994), all *Mitzvot* are observed only because “the Merciful One states ‘sound.’” The climax of religious commitment is exemplified in

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<sup>6</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> A similar view is expressed by Rabbeinu Hananel (16b).

<sup>8</sup> See Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Aviezer Ravitzky, [Vikuhim Al Emunah ve-Filosofyah](#) (Misrad Habitahon, 2006), 111.

the other focus of Rosh Ha-Shanah, the binding of Isaac, the paradigm of the utterly inscrutable Divine command, “the ultimate redemptive act [in which t]he rational and the ethical... are suspended and, finally, transcended when one fully accepts the yoke of Torah and *Mitzvot*.”<sup>9</sup>

This point of view seems to animate a story in R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s [Halakhic Man](#):

Once my father was standing on the synagogue platform on Rosh Ha-Shanah, ready and prepared to guide the order of the sounding of the shofar. The shofar-sounder, a god-fearing Habad Hasid who was also very knowledgeable in the mystical doctrine of the “Alter Rebbe,” R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, began to weep. My father turned to him and said: “Do you weep when you take the *lulav*? Why then do you weep when you sound the shofar? Are not both commandments of God?”<sup>10</sup>

### **Shofar and the Religious Need for the Intractable Mystery of Divine Otherness**

Despite R. Moshe Soloveitchik’s (R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s father) protestations, perhaps the

<sup>9</sup> Haim O. Rechnitzer, “Redemptive Theology in the Thought of Yeshayahu Leibowitz,” *Israel Studies* 13:3 (2008): 139.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [Halakhic Man](#), trans. Lawrence Kaplan (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 60-61.

Habad Hasid's weeping can be seen as consonant with obeisance to an inscrutable Divine command. Indeed, later remarks by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik indicate that he did not identify with his father's approach in this story.<sup>11</sup>

R. Solomon b. Aderet (Rashba) offers a different explanation of the Talmudic passage, which nevertheless works within the same theme and will help us make this connection. He explains the Satan differently from Rashi: as the embodiment of temptation, of the evil inclination. "Some explain that it is to subdue the inclination, as it is written, 'Shall a shofar be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid?' and Satan is the evil inclination, just as Resh Lakish said (*Bava Batra* 16a) 'he is the Satan, he is the evil inclination, he is the angel of death.'"

But how does shofar conquer the evil inclination? By dint of its mystery. The relationship between Divine obeisance and the *yetzer ha-ra* is a theme in R. Soloveitchik's [U-Vikashtem mi-Sham](#).<sup>12</sup> There he writes:

God, who reveals Himself from out of His utter separation as a *mysterium tremendum*, an awesome mystery, walks terrifyingly with the despicable "small creature, lowly and obscure,

endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge" (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 2:2)... Someone who has attained knowledge of God only through personal inner awareness, and who does not feel the pincers of the revelational duress compelling him to adapt to the laws and statutes imposed upon him by a separate supreme authority, is liable to disgrace himself in public... Religious commands (secular moral norms are insufficient) that break out with elemental force are the foundation of objective religious reality; those who deny them make religion a fraud... Religiosity lacking the objective-revelational element that obligates man to perform particular actions cannot conquer the beast in man... From time to time, Satan has taken control over the realm of Western religiosity, and the forces of destruction have overcome the creative consciousness and defiled it.

But whereas revelation begins as a matter of compulsion and "contradicts man's intellectual values," it proceeds through a stage of serenity with this compulsion to ultimately culminate in a third stage, which he summarizes in the final

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<sup>11</sup> See citation by R. Hershel Schachter of a lecture given September 1984, in his *Mi-Peninei ha-Rav* (Beth Hamidrash de-Flatbush: 2001), 126. R. Chaim Jachter of a public lecture in Boston, August 1985, here: <https://www.koltorah.org/halachah/the-rambams-aseret-yemei-teshuva-roadmap-by-rabbi-chaim-jachter>, accessed September 7, 2020. Generally speaking, the conclusion that R. Soloveitchik does not personally identify with the figure of [Halakhic Man](#) is drawn by Dov Schwartz, [Religion or](#)

[Halakha: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik](#) (Brill, 2007), especially p. 350. However, he does question if we can know whether or not he identified with his father's view at the time of his writing [Halakhic Man](#); see p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [U-Vikashtem mi-Sham: And From There You Shall Seek](#), trans. Naomi Goldblum (Ktav, 2008), 50-55.



paragraph of the monograph:

The imperative nature of man's behavior gradually palls at the dawn of the third stage, the stage combining love with awe, when the soul longs for its Creator out of the aspiration for total attachment and strives to achieve this in a running movement without any retreat. While the goal in the second stage is to imitate God, the end of the third stage is to cleave to Him... in the third stage we see the wonder of the identification of wills. (150)

Ultimately, it is precisely the incomprehensible religious commands, those which "break out with elemental force," which vanquish "Satan" and the forces of destruction. It is the shofar – as the commandment which R. Moshe Cordovero (*Or Yakar V*, 199-200) teaches "reaches a place that human understanding doesn't tolerate," that, as per Rashi, manifests the embrace of blind Divine obeisance -- which best inaugurates and encapsulates the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that animates the High Holidays, the period that inspired the very genesis of the term:

Speaking at Rudolf Otto's graveside service, Heinrich Frick recalled "Otto's own description of how he had once, in remarkable circumstances, encountered the power of the Holy with utter clarity":

It was on his journey through North Africa, and he found himself in a poor Moroccan synagogue on Yom Kippur, just at the climax of the ceremony. What a contrast! Here was a pathetic, impoverished building with a tiny gathering of equally pathetic human beings (*Existenzen*) – and in this context the dazzling hymn of the *trisagion*, the seraphim's song of praise from the prophet Isaiah: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." By the flickering light of the candles the full majesty of the Lord of heaven and earth seemed to be present in the midst of our poverty and paltriness. Afterwards Rudolf Otto experienced the Holy in other religions, too, at more magnificent sacred places and in higher cultures. But it seemed to him that the contrast [between the setting and song in the synagogue] made that single impression the most shattering of all. Later he identified that experience as the precise moment (*Stunde*) when he discovered his understanding of the Holy, and he described it in moving words.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding shofar itself, a prominent Israeli Jungian psychoanalyst writes,

For years, as a boy and as a young man, I

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<sup>13</sup> Gregory D. Alles, "Rudolf Otto, cultural colonialism and the 'discovery' of the holy," in Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (Acumen Publishing, 2007), 193. The Yom Kippur synagogue experience seems to have had a similar

impact on Franz Rosenzweig, whose life trajectory was changed entirely thereby. See Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), xviii, 25.

attended services in the synagogue, being part of the Jewish community of Zürich. The Jewish rites connected me to something more spiritual, to God, and the beyond. I vividly remember how I was moved to the core, when I heard the shofar, the ram's horn, blown on the Jewish New Year. The archaic tones reached a level of the soul, which was not touched by prayer or by the reading of religious texts. What is the difference between the numinous experience at the concert I mentioned and the experience on hearing the tones of the ram's horn? The first is real bliss, an elevation of the soul, the latter is a sensation of awe according to Rudolf Otto's book [The Idea of the Holy](#) (1920, passim), as it contains fear of the irrational. The term 'numen' expresses the divine power, the inexpressible, the mysterious and the terrifying. It is also defined as the wholly other.<sup>14</sup>

### **Shofar as a Portal to the realm of the Divine Unknown**

In [Halakhic Man](#), the shofar proceeds to penetrate even further, beyond concrete reality, to the Other – and hence the shofar-sounder weeps.<sup>15</sup> R. Soloveitchik writes:

Man's weeping on Rosh Ha-Shanah, according to this doctrine, is the weeping of the soul that longs for its origin, for the rock from whence it was hewn, that yearns to cleave to its beloved not in

hiding, but openly. The sounding of the shofar protests against reality and denies the universe itself... The shofar heralds the great and awesome [eschatological] day of judgment when the Holy One, blessed be He, will appear and fill His world with a terrible dread... Judgment means an ontological weighing and evaluation of finite existence from the perspective of infinity. The attribute of judgment by its nature tends to tip the ontological scale to the side of guilt and causes existence to revert back to chaos and the void. Therefore, on Rosh Ha-Shanah a person ventures to rise up from the divine realm of strength—i.e. judgment—to the divine realm of grace and from thence to "A God dreaded in the great council of the holy ones" (Psalms 89:8), outside concrete reality.

For R. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, shofar is thus not merely an expression of the revelational duress, of the *mysterium tremendum*; for the initiated, it is also the tool toward achieving his "third stage," to cleaving unto God, "the identification of wills."

By means of shofar, during the High Holidays, the Jew seeks not to comprehend God but to recognize Divine otherness by dint of His mystery – and to protest his own distance from that otherness. He yearns to cross over into His unknowable space. Shofar thus emerges as an apt symbol for the Days of Awe, the forty days from *Rosh Hodesh Elul* until Yom Kippur dusk that are bracketed with and punctuated by shofar-blasts.

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<sup>14</sup> Gustav Dreifuss, "Experience of the Self in a Lifetime," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 46 (2001): 689-696, 690.

<sup>15</sup> Soloveitchik, [Halakhic Man](#), 61-62.

It is precisely that aspect of God and His law – that which is unknowable and irreconcilably other – that distinguishes the sacred from secular, that fills us with fear and dread, but at the same time draws us close to Him.

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*Ed. Note: The following article was originally published in September 2020. We are rerunning it in conjunction with Rosh Ha-Shanah.*

### HUMAN WORDS: RAV ELHANAN NIR'S "INTENTIONS FOR ROSH HA-SHANAH"

***After studying at Yeshivat Orayta and Har Etzion, Levi Morrow received semikhah from the Shehebar Sephardic Center in the Old City of Jerusalem.***

#### **I**ntr oduction

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 theologically

engaged poetry is a series of four poems entitled "Intentions (*Kavvanot*) for Rosh Ha-Shanah" 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.

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

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<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 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).

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

I. Introduction to the Intentions	א. הקדמה לכוננות
<p>Take hold of the word with both hands And even if it delays,<sup>3</sup> Hold it patiently, and say it. But how will you say it<sup>4</sup>—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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, <i>ana mi-zar'a de-Yosef ka atina</i><sup>6</sup> See then the word full of disease After legions have struck it and profaned it<sup>7</sup> 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><sup>8</sup> and how Will you say the word</p>	<p>יאחז המלה בשתי ידיו וגם אם תתמהמה יאחז בה במתינות ויאמר אבל איך יאמר והיא זרקה אל תהומות ואיך יוציא ממנה הקול ויצעק וישבר ממנה ששוברת כל גופו של אדם והיא שבוייה באזקי המחקרים, ומי יפל מן המלה ויתרסק אל העליבות ומי יכה מנה מכות ויתחבל בכל חלומותיו מהם יברח בכל יום. ויאמר מה לכם כי דלקתם אחרי הן אנא מזרעא דיוסף קא אתינא ויראה אז המלה מלאת חלי אחר שהפכו וחללה לגיונות והיא מרבבת אל תוכה וקלשי רב נושמת ויקבר אפס כחה מלבכות ואיך יבטא המלה כשקל מיתריה יבשו והיא צרודה חלושה בכל מלי דעלמא ועוברת לפניו עם כל בנות מרון ואיך יאמר את המלה</p>

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>9</sup> Strict historicism can often tie words to

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the traditional “Ani Ma’amin” affirmation of belief in the messiah found in most Orthodox prayer books.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew here could also be rendered as “how can you say it,” to a very different effect. I have translated it as “how will you say it” in line with the more instructional tone of the poem.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. [Genesis 31:36](#).

<sup>6</sup> Aramaic for “From the seed of Joseph I have come.” See [Berakhot 20a](#), where the speaker is asserting that he is protected from harm due to being descended from the biblical Joseph. Nir’s speaker is thus asserting their own safety in a dangerous situation.

<sup>7</sup> Potentially a reference to the *Nahem* prayer recited on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from [m. Rosh ha-Shanah 1:2](#) & [Rosh ha-Shanah 18a](#), where the male “*bnei*” is used instead of the female “*banot*.” The exact meaning of “*maron*” is debated in the Talmud as well as in modern scholarship. It is therefore likely that Nir is primarily using the word as a reference rather than for its semantic content, and I have left it untranslated accordingly.

<sup>9</sup> “Philologists” renders the various connotations of the Hebrew “המחקרים,” 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](#).

a specific contextual meaning. The goal is thus for the person praying to approach the *mahzor* anew, prepared not simply to dominate the words but to free them from their historical chains.<sup>10</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 Ha-Shanah” and “Intentions for the Second Day of Rosh Ha-Shanah”) 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.

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<sup>10</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.

II. Intentions for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah	ב. כוונות ליום א' דראש השנה
<p>Speak in harsh judgment Gaze into the mirror and throw yourself on the water Shout with all your strength:<sup>11</sup> 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?<sup>12</sup> If you don't come to take account of me<sup>13</sup> To bring me Life</p>	<p>דַּבֵּר בְּדִינָא קָשִׁיא וְיִסְתַּכֵּל בְּרֵאיוֹ וְיִשְׁלִיךְ עַצְמוֹ עַל הַמַּיִם וְיִצְעַק בְּכָל כֹּחוֹ הֲנֵן אַתָּה הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאַתָּה הָאֵין-סוֹף בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יָרַד אֵלַי לְכֹאן, לְהִיכֵן שְׂאֵנִי וְעֲנֵנִי. וְאִם חָשׁ שְׁלֹא נִעֲנֵה סִמְנֵן עַצְמוֹ לְפָנָיו בְּדָג, בְּיַרְקוֹת וּבְרִמּוֹנִים, וְרִקַּע בְּאָדָם הַסּוּדְרִים וְנִיף אֶת כָּל חַיָּו לְפָנָיו וְיֹאמֶר: הֲנֵן אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ לְמוֹת, וְיֹאמֶר בְּקוֹל: הוֹלֵךְ לְמוֹת, וְלֵמָּה לִי כָּל הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְלֵמָּה לִי זֶה אִם אֵינְךָ בָּא לְפָקְדֵנִי לְהַבְיֵאֵנִי חַיִּים</p>

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 Ha-Shanah 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>14</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 Ha-Shanah 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>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The call for “shouting” is likely a reference to Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav, who instructs his readers and followers to do so in a variety of contexts. See for example [Likkutei Moharan I 21](#); [Sihot ha-Ran 16](#). My thanks to R. Zach Truboff for pointing this out.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. [Genesis 25:32](#).

<sup>13</sup> “To take account of me,” “*le-fokdeni*,” recalls the discussion of פקד and זכר in connection with God’s judgment on [Rosh ha-Shanah 11a](#), and it particularly echoes

the theme of conception discussed there. This linguistic element may also be connected to the appearance of זכר in the first word of the next poem.

<sup>14</sup> My thanks to Elli Fischer for his help with this image.

<sup>15</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?”

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>16</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 Ha-Shanah, thus enabling them to become pregnant.<sup>17</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>18</sup>

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<sup>16</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>17</sup> [Rosh ha-Shanah 11a](#).

<sup>18</sup> [Berakhot 31b](#).

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.

III. Intentions for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah	ג. כוונות ליום ב' דראש השנה
<p>Remember that the pathos is already lost            The prophets have run out, and no longer shall            A man rise<sup>19</sup> 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<sup>20</sup>            For how long, this infinite repetition            For how long, these insults and apologies            And why shouldn't it make sense to me<sup>21</sup>            (And mention your name: Ploni ben Plonit)            Then we will come to the room<sup>22</sup> 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<sup>23</sup>            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<sup>24</sup>            Until empty</p>	<p>וזכור שכבר אבד הפאטוס            ותמוז הנביאים וכבר לא קם            אדם ומרגיש עם, אלא יבקש נעימות            ושבת רכה, עטופה ובגלי דינים,            ויאמר הן אתה קרוב            לכל הנקרעים והנשברים והנשברים            עד מתי לחזור האינסופי הזה            עד מתי לכל הפגיעות וההתנצלות            ולמה שלא תהיה מובן לי            (ויזכיר שמו: פלוני בן פלונית),            ונבוא אל החדר ויהיה הנגון            ויעמדו הפנים ויניח הראש            ותשקע האש, שפעם לחכה בנו            והניפה הבער ולמדה קולנו לצעקות            היער,            אבל עכשו אנחנו כבר שוקטים בבית            המסק            שותים התה עם המרוה            נהנים מהכלים המרחיבים            עד שנתרוקן</p>

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 Ha-Shanah a “day of acceptance.”

<sup>19</sup> Cf. [Deuteronomy 34:10](#). Notably, this verse specifically refers to Moses as having uniquely “known God face to face.”

<sup>20</sup> Cf. [Deuteronomy 34:10](#). Notably, this verse specifically refers to Moses as having uniquely “known God face to face.”

<sup>21</sup> It is possible that the third person “it” should actually be a second person “you,” rendering the line, “And why shouldn’t you make sense to me.” The original Hebrew is ambiguous. My thanks to my editor from the *Lehrhaus* for this suggestion.

<sup>22</sup> Potentially a reference to [Song of Songs 1:4](#), though if so it is an appropriative reference. The original refers to the king bringing his lover to his chamber, whereas Nir refers to “we”—God and the person praying—coming to the room together. Similarly, the context in Song of Songs is obviously one of passionate engagement, while the context of this poem suggests a shift away from such emotional intensity.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. [Numbers 11:2](#).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. [Berakhot 57b](#)



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>25</sup> but it is also the driving force behind his first theological work, *Spirituality in Everyday Life*.<sup>26</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 Ha-Shanah" 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 Ha-Shanah irrupt into our lives each year as we traverse the calendar, unable to leave either one of them behind.

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<sup>25</sup> Elhanan Nir, *Just the Two of Us* [Hebrew] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017).

<sup>26</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.

## No Escaping Our Bodies

IV. To Say After the Intentions	ד. דיבור שאחר הכוונות
<p>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<sup>27</sup>            To be held in them</p>	<p>ללכת אליך בהסוס            כמו אחרי כל הדבורים            והנה נפגשים ומבוכת הקרבה            ולספר לך איך האהבה נראית מכאן            ועד כמה הסכנה אורבת לה            חותכת אליה האוירים.            ואיך אדע שבאמת תוכל להחזיק הצער            שתדע את הדאגה לאהובה שאך יצאה מן            הבית            שאפלו בקריצה תדע מצערי הגוף            מחסר היכולת להלך בו בבטחה            מיוחד גבר את העתיד            כשאין לו דמים            להאחז בהם</p>

The fourth and final poem—literally titled “Speech after the Intentions”<sup>28</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.

<sup>27</sup> In rabbinic Hebrew, *damim* can also refer to money. I translated it here as “blood” in line with the contextual emphasis on the body, but the emphasis on anxiety about the future may indicate that “money” is a better translation. Certainly both should be kept in mind.

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.

### “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

<sup>28</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*”).

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 Ha-Shanah” 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

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<sup>29</sup> For more on this group, see David C. Jacobson, [\*Beyond Political Messianism: The Poetry of Second-Generation Religious Zionist Settlers\*](#) (Massachusetts: Academic Studies

number of Religious Zionist poets writing for both religious and secular audiences in Israeli society today.<sup>29</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 Ha-Shanah, 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 Ha-Shanah,” 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.

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Press, 2011). My thanks to R. Zach Truboff for directing me to this text.

Ed. Note: The following article was originally published in October 2018. We are rerunning it in conjunction with Rosh Ha-Shanah.

## RECLAIMING THE AKEIDAH FROM KIERKEGAARD

**David Fried is an editor at The Lehrhaus and teaches Judaics at Ramaz Upper School.**

**A** *havruta* of mine once complained to me that there is nothing anyone says about the *akeidah* (binding of Isaac) that does not boil down to either Kierkegaard or Kant<sup>1</sup>. Kierkegaard and Kant view the *akeidah* as confronting the same moral problem: how to navigate a contradiction between divine command and one's sense of ethics. This reading seems quite natural: what could violate our ethical sensibilities more than the murder of one's son? The two titans dispute the lesson we ought to draw regarding the proper resolution of this conflict.

For Kierkegaard, as his view is classically presented, the message is the "teleological suspension of the ethical."<sup>2</sup> Religious life is fundamentally paradoxical. Normally, God asks us to set aside our temptations in order to behave ethically. However, our faith and devotion to God must be so absolute that we must set aside all

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<sup>1</sup> For additional discussion of this topic, see Herzl Hefter, "[Surrender or Struggle: The Akeidah Reconsidered](#)," Tzvi Sinensky, "[There's No Need to Sacrifice Sacrifice](#)," and Alex Ozar, "[Love \(and Trust\) Conquer All](#)."

<sup>2</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 64-77.

<sup>3</sup> In defense of Kierkegaard, he was keenly aware of this problem and proposed a way to distinguish a legitimate

other sensibilities, including the ethical, as mere temptations, or passions, when they conflict with an explicit divine command.

This explanation makes the *akeidah* one of the most challenging sections to deal with in the entire Torah. This is not because we are all committed to Kant's categorical imperative and believe that the moral law admits no exceptions. Perhaps we could accept that occasionally some greater cause could justify killing an innocent person. The challenge is that every religious zealot believes that his or her cause is the one that warrants the teleological suspension of the ethical. Absent knowledge of the future, we don't have a clear mechanism to determine who is right and who is wrong<sup>3</sup>. We could theoretically contend that Abraham, an established prophet who could be reasonably confident in his understanding of the divine will, differs from the terrorist. However, such an approach would leave the story with an insufficiently enduring lesson, namely to simply revere Abraham for his degree of divine understanding, a level to which none of us can aspire. Additionally, as we shall see, there are other good reasons for rejecting Kierkegaard.

Although I reject Kierkegaard's interpretation, I must challenge those who claim that

teleological suspension of the ethical from an illegitimate one. For it to be legitimate, the person must be fully aware of the paradox, and not believe he is in any way ethically justified. Furthermore, there must be no personal desire other than coming closer to God. Had Abraham felt any hatred or anger toward Isaac at the moment he was prepared to slaughter him, or had he been part of a sect that would have given him approbation rather than scorn for the act, it would have been an act of murder and not an act of faith.

Kierkegaard's line of interpretation is too anachronistic to have been the original meaning because child sacrifice was widely practiced at that time<sup>4</sup>. The ethical problems of child sacrifice are well-known throughout the Torah (See [Deuteronomy 12:30-31](#)). Although child sacrifice was commonplace in the Ancient Near East, it seems reasonable to assume that Abraham's critique of the predominant pagan religion would have already included rejection of child sacrifice<sup>5</sup>. If Abraham had somehow not figured out the moral repugnancy of human sacrifice on his own, we would have expected God to have taught him this lesson early on in his career, not at its apex. Furthermore, rabbinic commentaries have long confronted the challenge of divine commands that seem to violate our ethical sensibilities<sup>6</sup>. It would not have been anachronistic for centuries of Jewish commentators prior to the 19th century to raise the ethical challenge of God commanding Abraham to do something He so clearly forbids elsewhere in the Torah. Yet generations of Jewish commentators looked at the *akeidah* and, with very few exceptions, did not see his test as having to go against his ethical sensibilities<sup>7</sup>. As devotees of the Jewish tradition, then, we must reject

Kierkegaard because his interpretation runs counter to the classical view.

On the other hand, the classic alternative to Kierkegaard is Kant. For Kant, Abraham essentially failed the test. God, the Supreme Ethical Being, could not possibly ask of us to do the unethical. For Kant, as noted, the moral law must be universal and allow no exceptions. If killing one's son is wrong, it is wrong under all circumstances. Abraham therefore should have recognized that since the command to sacrifice his son was unethical, it could not possibly represent the will of God<sup>8</sup>. This interpretation is still viewing the *akeidah* as being about navigating contradiction between divine command and one's sense of ethics, against the classical Jewish view. Yet another problem with this explanation is that there is nothing in the text indicating that Abraham failed the test. On the contrary, the text effuses with praise for Abraham's conduct ([Genesis 22:12-18](#)).

Of course, one could take the middle position that Abraham had to be prepared to do the unethical, but by ultimately sending the angel to tell him not

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert Gordis, "The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Judaism* 25 (1976): 414--419; and Ethan Tucker, "Redeeming the *Akeidah*, Halakhah, and Ourselves," (2016) 19-21, available at: [https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh\\_torah\\_source\\_sheets/CJLVakeidahhh.pdf](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/CJLVakeidahhh.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> It is not my intent here to claim that God had revealed to Abraham the verses in Deuteronomy prohibiting child sacrifice. Rather, as the founder of ethical monotheism, Abraham was presumably a critic of the ethical system of those around him and could not be assumed to believe

something was ethical merely because they did. As child sacrifice was their most morally repugnant practice, it makes sense that if Abraham was going to criticize any part of their ethical system, this would have been it.

<sup>6</sup> See [Vayikra Rabbah 32:8](#). See also [Rashi on Sanhedrin 101b s.v. Nitmakhmekh be-vinyan](#).

<sup>7</sup> See [Bereishit Rabbah 56:4](#).

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *On the Conflict between the Faculties* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 115

to sacrifice Isaac, God teaches Abraham that He would never ask for this kind of service<sup>9</sup>. This, too, is difficult: if the lesson is truly just that God does not want human sacrifice, His methodology seems a bit over the top. Did Abraham really need to experience such immense suffering thinking he was going to have to kill his son? Couldn't he have proven his devotion to God in some other way?

### **How the *Akeidah* Was Traditionally Understood**

Perhaps owing to these questions, unlike Kierkegaard and Kant and contrary to what has become conventional wisdom, most traditional Jewish commentaries did not understand Abraham's test at the *akeidah* as centering on the tension between human moral sensibilities and divine command. Rather, Abraham was being tested in his ability to set aside the natural mercy he felt for his son<sup>10</sup>. Put differently, Abraham was not being asked to do the unethical but to do the ethical despite his powerful inclination to the contrary.

Ralbag makes this implication explicit, adding his own twist by arguing that Abraham must have assumed that Isaac had done something to deserve the deed Abraham was being asked to carry out ([Genesis 22:8 s.v. Elokim](#)). While one might critique Ralbag by saying that the text's usage of sacrificial language does not make it sound like Abraham is being asked to carry out a punishment, this approach does fit very nicely

with Ramban's understanding of sacrifices. Ramban ([Leviticus 1:9 s.v. Olah](#)) explains that when we offer an animal as a sacrifice (including an *olah*, the model used for the *akeidah*), we are meant to see ourselves as deserving of death; the animals take our places only by the grace of God.

It would thus be reasonable for Abraham to assume that if God wants him to bring Isaac as a sacrifice, it is because Isaac deserves to die. And why shouldn't Abraham make this assumption? He has already been assured of God's justice in the story of Sodom. He has every reason to believe that when God commands him something, it is because the dictates of strict justice require it. Kierkegaard specifically said not to compare Abraham to Brutus of the old Roman Republic, who had to carry out the strict justice of the law on his own sons<sup>11</sup>. Yet, in Ralbag's read, that is exactly what Abraham is being asked to do. When Abraham passes the test, it may be said, similar to what Kierkegaard said about Brutus, that while many have loved justice, none have demonstrated it so gloriously as Abraham<sup>12</sup>. While Ralbag may have been the only commentator to explicitly adopt this particular interpretation, we shall see that his view that Abraham believed his son deserving of death not only aligns with the classic reading of the *akeidah* as being about the tension between mercy and justice, but also fits thematically into a careful read of the wider narrative arc of Abraham's

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<sup>9</sup> See Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman's [introduction to the \*akeidah\*](#), especially his quotation from Abraham Geiger in footnote 2. See also Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Iggerot ha-Rayah* 2:43.

<sup>10</sup> See [Bereishit Rabbah \(Vilna\) 56:10](#), *Pesikta Zutartah* 22:14, et al. See also the numerous liturgical compositions

about the *akeidah*. For an unconventional approach that sees the entire incident as a punishment for Abraham, see Rashbam to Genesis 22:1 (s.v. va-Yehi, ve-haElokim).

<sup>11</sup> [Livy, \*Ab Urbe Condita\*](#), 2:5

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68-69.

career. To appreciate this point, we turn to Abraham and Sodom.

### Abraham and Sodom

God reveals to Abraham his intentions regarding Sodom, “For I have known him, that he will instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right (*tzedakah u-mishpat*). ([Genesis 18:19](#)).” Upon hearing God’s plan, the man who was destined to teach his children about justice demands justice from God: Would you save the entire city if there were fifty righteous people? Forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten ([Genesis 18:23-32](#))? To each of these God responds in the affirmative.

There are many strange aspects of this dialogue. It is presented as a demand for justice. “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? ([Genesis 18:25](#))” In contrast with this rhetoric, though, Abraham seems to be asking God to save even the people who are not righteous<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, why does Abraham stop asking at ten? Why not see if God would spare the city for even a single righteous person? Perhaps the biggest elephant in the room, though, is Lot. Abraham and God have

a full conversation about Sodom, yet neither one mentions Lot. Radak ([Genesis 18:32 s.v. Akh](#)) offers two possibilities as to why Abraham does not mention Lot in the course of his advocacy. The first is that he knows Lot is not righteous; it is therefore not in Abraham’s interests to bring up his name. The second is that he is not sure if Lot is righteous or not. I believe this second approach to be more compelling. Lot’s character, after all, is somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, at great personal risk, he shows hospitality to the visitors, even defending his actions against the people of Sodom ([Genesis 19:3-6](#)). And unlike his wife, he is able to refrain from turning back while leaving Sodom ([Genesis 19:26](#)). At the same time, he encourages the Sodomite mob to violate his daughters ([Genesis 19:7-8](#)).

Yet we can take a step beyond Radak. It is not just that Abraham is unsure as to Lot’s righteousness. *He is afraid to know*. Abraham stops at ten and does not go down to one because he fears the answer. Lot has a family of eight (him, his wife, four daughters, and two sons-in-law)<sup>14</sup>. If God were to tell Abraham that there is not a single righteous person in Sodom, that would be telling him that Lot too is not righteous, which Abraham cannot bear<sup>15</sup>. While [Rashi](#) and [Ramban](#) (to [Genesis 19:29](#)) point out ways in which Lot was

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<sup>13</sup> This point is made by Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman in his [introduction to the section](#).

<sup>14</sup> See [Genesis 19:8](#), [19:14](#), and [Rashi ad loc.](#)

<sup>15</sup> Rashi ([to Genesis 18:32](#)) suggests that Abraham stops arguing at ten based on Noah’s family. If God did not save the world for them, Abraham could reasonably assume He would not save the city of Sodom for a group of that size either. Noah’s family, like Lot’s family, consisted of eight people: Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives. In

his comments, Rashi provides an explanation as to why Abraham did not go down to nine, which would apply to my suggestion as well. See also Saadia Gaon, *ad loc.* (long version, available at: <http://mg.alhatorah.org>), where he raises several possibilities as to why Abraham stopped arguing at ten, one of which is based on his limited knowledge about Lot’s family. He suggests that Abraham is not actually aware as to how many of Lot’s daughters are married, and, had all his children been married, the family might have been as large as ten. Contrast this with Radak ([ad loc.](#)), who assumes that Abraham does not mention Lot

more righteous than the other people of Sodom, the verse makes clear that he was only saved because “God remembered Abraham” ([19:29](#)). As [Radak](#) says explicitly (ad loc.), even though he may have been more meritorious than the other Sodomite residents, were it not for Abraham, that merit would have been insufficient to save him from being killed. In this regard, then, Lot is ultimately a failure<sup>16</sup>. For all the years that Abraham was childless, Lot was the closest thing he had to a son. Lot’s failure to live up to Abraham’s mission was, to some degree, also his own failure.

This leads us to a tantalizing conclusion. The verse states that “Abraham arose in the morning and hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord. Looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln” ([Genesis 19:27-28](#)). In that rising smoke, Abraham sees the answer to the question he was afraid to ask. While [Radak](#) ([Genesis 19:29 s.v. Va-Yehi](#)) assumes that God told Abraham at that point that Lot was saved, according to a simple read of the text, Abraham fully believes Lot is dead, and never finds out otherwise. In this vein, we may newly appreciate the nature of the prayer that the

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because he knows Lot has been influenced by the people of Sodom and is no longer righteous.

<sup>16</sup> Rashi’s language suggests that he may disagree with [Radak](#)’s reading, and holds that Lot was saved based on his own merit. On this view, the Torah’s reference to God remembering Abraham indicates not that Lot was unworthy, but that Lot only acquired his own merit on account of his association with Abraham.

<sup>17</sup> The English word ‘prayer’ derives from the Latin ‘precaria’ meaning to beg or entreat, and thus generally

Talmud ascribes to Abraham upon his arisal in the morning ([Berakhot 26b](#))<sup>17</sup>. Of course, we can never know the exact words he spoke to God, but we can imagine him expressing a sense of personal remorse for Lot having gone astray from his mission, and a promise to do better with Ishmael and Isaac.

### **Abraham and Ishmael**

Abraham is given another chance, but again he fails to appreciate the shortcomings of those he loves. Though commentaries disagree widely about the precise nature of Ishmael’s misdeed, he too fails to live up to Abraham’s mission ([Genesis 21:9](#); see [Rashi](#), [Ramban](#), and [Radak](#) ad loc.)<sup>18</sup>. Again, Abraham has difficulty confronting his relative’s failure. Only Sarah notices at first ([Genesis 21:9](#)). When she tells him that Ishmael needs to be banished ([Genesis 21:10](#)), “the matter was very bad in the eyes of Abraham ([Genesis 21:11](#)).” *Bereishit Rabbah* ([53:12](#) in Vilna; [56:11](#) in Theodor-Albeck) associates the verse, “He who shuts his eyes from seeing evil ([Isaiah 33:15](#)),” with Abraham’s failure to acknowledge Ishmael’s demerits. [Radak](#) and [Ramban](#) (to [Genesis 21:11](#)) explain that he disliked the idea because of his great sympathy toward Ishmael; his love for his son obscured his capacity to clearly perceive his

connotes a specifically petitionary communication with God. The Hebrew *tefillah*, for which prayer is an inexact translation, does not have this connotation and can refer to any communication with God. See, for example, Jonah’s *tefillah* ([Jonah 2:2-10](#)), which contains no textual indication of a petitionary element.

<sup>18</sup> A minority of commentators view Ishmael’s behavior as basically innocuous and see the banishment episode as being primarily about inheritance. See [Abravanel](#) for this approach.



faults<sup>19</sup>. God therefore issues a direct command that Abraham listen to Sarah and banish Ishmael ([Genesis 21:12](#)). For a second time, “Abraham arose in the morning ([Genesis 21:14](#))” to face the reality of a son who has not lived up to his values. This time, he passes this test. When given a direct command from God, he trusts God and does not disobey. In a sense, though, he got off easy with Ishmael. All he had to do was banish him, and he had assurances from God that Ishmael would live even after the banishment ([Genesis 21:13](#)).

### **The Akeidah in the Context of Lot and Ishmael**

But what if Abraham’s son deserved more than banishment? What if he had done something so horrific that he deserved the death penalty? Would Abraham be able to carry out such a charge, or would his fatherly love interfere? To answer this outstanding question, God devises a test. He tells Abraham that his “son, the only one [remaining in his household], whom [he] loves ([Genesis 22:2](#))” must be killed. In light of his prior experience, Abraham has no logical choice but to believe that Isaac is deserving of this punishment. He knows that his blind spot is his inability to see the failings of his loved ones. He knows he couldn’t see Lot’s failings or Ishmael’s failings until it was too late to prevent their death (in Lot’s case) or banishment (in Ishmael’s case). Now he has every reason to believe that Isaac has failed him as well. Moreover, Isaac must have failed even more spectacularly than Lot or Ishmael: in neither of those cases did God demand that

Abraham carry out the death penalty himself.

For a third and final time, then, “Abraham arose in the morning ([Genesis 22:3](#)).” He sets out on the three day journey to Mount Moriah. He knows that if he kills Isaac, he is killing not just his son, but his last hope at a legacy. And that is precisely the test. The one whose legacy is to teach his descendants about *tzedakah u-mishpat* must come face to face with the reality that his descendants will sometimes fail to live up to that commitment. He must put his commitment to *tzedakah u-mishpat* ahead of even his commitment to his family. As he raises the knife, God sends the angel to stop him ([Genesis 22:11-12](#)). From here Abraham learns that Isaac was in fact not liable for death. But he will have descendants who are guilty, and Abraham needed to model that when strict justice requires it, we must be willing to carry out harsh punishments even against our own. According to Ralbag’s interpretation of the classical commentators, then, the *akeidah*’s enduring lesson is not about the need to suspend our commitment to the ethical. The *akeidah* ultimately takes no stance on that question since the conflict between divine command and our personal sense of ethics is not its subject. Rather, the *akeidah*’s enduring lesson is about the importance of our commitment to the ethical, even at great personal cost.

### **Abraham Versus Moses**

Did Abraham pass the test of the *akeidah*? On the

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<sup>19</sup> See also the commentary of [Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam on Genesis 21:11](#), who similarly highlights that Abraham had been unaware of Ishmael’s failings. It is interesting to compare this with the midrashic approach

that associates Isaac’s blindness later in life ([Genesis 27:1](#)) with his inability to see Esau’s wickedness (see [Bereishit Rabbah 65:5](#)). Perhaps he inherited this trait from his father.

one hand, assuredly, yes. “For now I know that you fear God<sup>20</sup>, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me ([Genesis 22:12](#)).” It is hard to read this verse as offering anything but praise for Abraham. On the other hand, Abraham’s understanding of God did not reach the highest possible level available to humankind. God says to Moses, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *E-I Sha-ddai*, but by my name Y-H-W-H I was not known to them ([Exodus 6:3](#)).” Rashi ([ad loc.](#)) explains that they did not appreciate the full measure of God’s true attributes for they did not see the promises fulfilled<sup>21</sup>. We can understand Rashi’s comment in light of what I have said. The God Abraham knew was a God of strict justice, Who at times demands the sacrifice of a son. This answers the question I posed above about why, when Abraham argues with God about Sodom, he presents it as a demand for justice when in reality he was asking for mercy for the guilty: *he couches his argument in terms of justice because that is the only God he knows*. Abraham never knew the God who rescued an undeserving Lot on his behalf ([Genesis 19:29](#)). He never knew the God who listened to the supplication of the undeserving Ishmael *ba-asher hu sham* (where he is) ([Genesis 21:17](#)). Abraham, who learned to forego his legacy and God’s promises for the sake of justice, could not possibly relate to a God who would fulfill those

promises even to undeserving descendants.

Like Abraham, Moses too “arose in the morning ([Exodus 34:4](#)).” But when Moses arises, God conveys to him the attributes of mercy ([Exodus 34:6-7](#)). God does not need to test if Moses is capable of confronting the failure of his loved ones. Moses has already demonstrated he can do this. “Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!’ And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin ([Exodus 32:26-27](#)).’” God reveals His attributes of mercy only to the one who, when justice calls for it, is willing to “say of his father and mother, ‘I consider them not,’ to disregard his brothers and ignore his own children ([Deuteronomy 33:9](#)).” What if Abraham had reacted differently at Sodom? What if he had inquired all the way down to one? What if he had been able, from the beginning, to fully come to terms with Lot’s failings? Perhaps, then, God could have revealed His attributes of mercy to Abraham. Perhaps He could have told Abraham that Lot would be saved on Abraham’s behalf. Perhaps Abraham could have asked for the cities to be saved as a pure kindness the way Lot himself did with Tzo’ar ([Genesis 19:18-22](#)). Perhaps the

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<sup>20</sup> The Hebrew for “fear God” is *yerei Elokim*. Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1980), 252-253, notes that whenever the phrase *yerei Elokim* is used in the Torah, it refers to the ethical treatment of the weak and the stranger. Accordingly, that God identified Abraham as *yerei Elokim* as a result of the *akeidah* underscores the point that the test was to see if he would act ethically, not if he would suspend his commitment to the ethical.

<sup>21</sup> Though my focus here is on Abraham, it should be noted that the verse mentions Isaac and Jacob as well. See supra., note 19, for a discussion of this trait as it relates to Isaac. Regarding Jacob, see [Genesis 32:11](#), which Rashi takes to indicate that he, too, believed in a God of strict justice who would not fulfill promises to the undeserving.

entire *akeidah* would not have been necessary.

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### THE BIRTHPLACE OF INFERTILITY

***Prior to making Aliyah, 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.***

**F**ive 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.

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 heart-break 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, warri-

ors. 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.

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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.

## FLOOD

*Ben Corvo recently served as virtual poet-in-residence at MERGEMERGE, and his work has appeared in Salmagundi, Magma, and other publications.*

**T**he five poems in this collection were written over several years yet all hinge on the turning of the year from Elul to Tishrei. Like the season's formal observances, the weave of sound, word, and line in these poems at once evoke and create a kind of associative density—on the one hand, a blurring of divine and human interlocutors; on the other, a peculiarly braided quality of time. Often the flow of time from Elul through Tishrei is full of ripples and hidden depths, cross-currents and back-currents. Sometimes we find ourselves in full flood. Old landmarks are made unfamiliar, and there indeed is no before and after.

## Elul

Even in the wrong season,  
the ground must be turned.

Even if I've made a late start,  
even in the day's heat and congestion,  
even in my more-than-perennial distraction,  
the ground must be turned.

The crows have taken shelter  
wherever crows take shelter,  
chameleons scuttle away  
at the absolute last moment,  
tiny grass snakes stretch themselves  
full length in the leaf litter,  
and the leaf litter itself  
does not stir.

The ground breaks iron tools.  
Weeds suck uselessly  
at its paps, and tears  
roll uselessly away.

Here are the tracks  
they make in the dust,  
a thin dark line at first  
then a fossil groove  
shallow but unmistakable.

In this late season, the ground  
becomes a reliquary  
of tiny marks, to be read blind,  
with fingertips,  
the way a cheek, yours, is caressed  
in old age.

My hands know  
the language of each  
fold and furrow,  
rehearse the ancients tracks  
over hard-baked ground  
then  
turn skyward.

*B'sha-ah tova,*  
the old women say. The rain  
will come "in a good hour."  
Even now  
in this late season  
(say it!) the ground holds so much  
and must be turned.

### ***Kivnei Maron***

I

The insistent question, the petulant question,  
The question that, frankly speaking, gets under  
your skin  
Just a little bit, the statement phrased as a  
question

With a little upglide pigtailed at the end,  
The questions others ask or don't ask but assume  
An answer, somehow they know more about me  
than

I know myself, and really, what do I know,  
The urgent question, the question I return to  
Always, not expecting an answer but somehow

Hoping for one, the question demanding *yes* or  
*no*,  
And the multitude of answers, all contingent,  
Crowding on a *puente internacional*

Or at an airport, its gates, their open-and-shut,  
We are there and not there, shut in, kept out.

II

From one day to the next, sometimes, or one  
moment  
To the next, I find myself, suddenly, strangely  
Unresponsive to the most elementary

Stimuli, looking, I see your hands on me  
Without feeling anything, as if they were touching  
Or holding another body, not my own, a body

Like mine, but whiter, a complete scarification  
Has also left it cold to the touch, I know this  
In the same way that I know the hovering

Of a soul above a deathbed, interested,  
Perhaps a little regretful, or disoriented,  
Maybe momentarily catching its breath,

You are patient, but patience does not last  
forever,  
Soon I'll feel your fists, demanding, *Anyone in  
there?*

III

I just returned from your coronation. Every year,  
Expecting not to be moved, being moved despite  
myself.  
You almost disappeared, again, under all that  
glitter,

I could only imagine the nocturnal  
Hours under your robes, your body was trained  
for this,  
In the same way it was trained for gentleness

And patience, in other seasons and hours, no less  
Strange, really, than the rigors of the  
processional,  
Your face hard, your eyes fixed in the far distance,

And your hands? I could see them nowhere  
And felt them everywhere, which is perhaps why  
I wept  
With such complete abandon, together

With the throngs assembled under the high  
transept,  
And later, here, in my small apartment, joyful,  
bereft.



## **The Tide**

### I. Fast of Gedaliah

The way two calendars can overlap but not  
Coincide, the one marking the date of a wedding,  
Late summer, lakeside, I can almost miss the slant

Of full light, hovering not-quite-perfect stillness,  
The wind only barely ruffling the surface,  
They also seem part of brittle choreographies,

A canoe cutting across the face of water,  
Its bow wave, rise and fall of tiny yellow leaves,  
Silver line of wake, even before it nears shore,

I can pick you out, bride and groom, fore and aft,  
Paddling leisurely but straight-on-toward,  
Your profiles razor-sharp against so much grief,

It never quite pulls us under, does it, the other  
calendar  
Marking, even now, blood spilling across a stone  
floor.

### II. Jeremiah

That relentless chronicler of catastrophe  
Would have approved, I think, of a wedding on the  
cusp  
Of catastrophe, and all the later synopes,

Births, gatherings, anniversaries, interrupting,  
However momentarily, the huge green-black  
wave,  
Its slow build behind rooftops, treetops, which we  
notice

Only when it finally breaks or doesn't quite break  
And we lose each other or hold on to each other  
The best we can, having (please God) found or  
made

Shelter of a kind, the remains of a room, this,  
here,  
I don't know how long it will hold, I don't know  
when  
We will be scattered, again, across the water—

Yet the immense flood cancels, even now,  
nothing.  
How bravely, even now, your tiny vessel shines.

## ***Kol Nidrei***

Try to imagine my vantage point, a stone  
In an upland boulder field, it is evening  
The sun cuts over the ruined outbuildings

Of the old leper hospital into the pines,  
Two hoopoes are taking a dust bath, ecstatic,  
Raising dust-clouds with their wings, which the  
late sun

Disaggregates into a million distinct  
Gilded motes, gilds too their crown feathers and  
the dust  
Clinging to them, and the men and women

In white, passing on the road below or cutting  
Diagonals across the field, you too are here,  
Somehow, taking in my taking this in,

A peace, proof against the calamitous shifts in  
weather,  
An evening in which we find ourselves, somehow,  
together.

## ***Tishrei***

Since you are half a planet away  
You will have to imagine yourself  
At the table, make yourself a place

As a book makes a place for itself  
In the gap between its companions  
When a hand pulls it from the shelf

To be read, culled, or simply mulled upon  
For the touch of other hands that last  
Placed it there, unopened or opened

At random. Imagine, too, the guests,  
Random snatches of conversation,  
Another syncope before bless-

-sing and breaking of bread, and then  
Resumed talk like snowfall or leaf-fall,  
Slow, silent drift of attention.

Can you hear them? Young boys keeping a ball  
Aloft, clean limbs flashing in last summer  
Sunlight, so too voices catching a small

Feather of talk, lofting it skyward  
Again so it turns and dances in the room's  
High reaches and lamplight. Elsewhere, air

Full of late summer dust and goldenrod bloom  
So the boys seem to swim in rich delight,  
Here another trick of substance sweeping down

From low passes, Mediterranean light  
Over our mountaintop city, or when  
Desert winds blow from the east, the bright

Air scoured clean of absolutely everything  
But harsh electricity. We shelter  
In closer air from the kitchen,

At the table, facing each other,  
Let our voices' deft in-and-out stitch  
A patterned tent where we dwell together—

—Imagine this glittering fabric, a hitch  
Every now and then as the wind blows through,  
The circled guests' intelligent rich

Repartee pausing, just slightly askew,  
Half a planet away, suddenly you.

*Ed. note: "Elul" first appeared in [Salmagundi Magazine](#) and is republished here with permission; "Kivnei Maron" was previously published together with a brief introductory essay in [The Lehrhaus](#).*

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## EZRAT NASHIM: NOTES ON HALAKHIC WOMANHOOD

***Naima Hirsch Gelman is a third year student at Yeshivat Maharat and a Rabbinic Fellow at the National Council for Jewish Women.***

### Mikveh

in all the times i've argued with myself about my  
practice  
i never let myself win  
even though all i want is to  
let halakhic misogyny become rote  
a one-size-fits-most ratty bathrobe bleached  
between dunks

and in all the times i've argued with dead men  
about my body  
i was never told that purity burns like chlorine

*this mitzvah is a swimming pool, my friend jokes  
and she's right  
this mundanity (inanity) of ritualizing sex  
or the inanity (insanity) of buying pre-checked  
cotton squares  
instead of trusting underwear that's served me  
well enough before*

yet this all makes me feel adult  
i belong to the club now, a full member  
of the *taharat ha-mishpaha mishpoche*  
a phone tree of *mikveh* ladies rooted in a *genizah*  
of unmentioned rules

*leave your hair wet, lie when they ask you where  
you've been, you'll understand when you are older*

chlorine ought to keep things from growing  
but this swimming pool waters my resentment  
at the same time it names me woman  
and i am grateful

### Dear Daughter

I have not failed you yet.

I tell myself this now:  
as I shuckle over small print & margin notes,  
trace my unmanicured finger down columns of  
densely packed definitions,  
bounce potential understandings back & forth  
with Leah & Talia,  
and do my damned best not to drown in forty  
*se'ah* worth of tears  
collected from traumatized women throughout  
the centuries.

I say to myself now that I have found your father,  
but if I am wrong, I know there will be another  
man  
to make me want to shackle myself  
to this system I cannot seem to shake myself free  
from,  
the only reason I still care about rings &  
reciprocity  
is that I'm only guaranteed one.

Putting the right words to the right feelings  
is not something I struggle with.  
There is always the chance to edit, to return, to go  
back, to say again, to do better.

But with you, I need to get it right the first time  
around.

### Mechitzah

this could not be what God intended  
to weaponize piety into barbed wire  
wrench *kedusha* out of righteousness  
wrestle with our holy indignation

we, women, are not what God intended  
to shackle behind impermeable latticework  
banish past swirling spinning stairwells  
imprison to white space between aleph and bet

we, women, are what God intended  
to hold complexity in the lining of our wombs  
explode the translation of rabbi  
swim through burning *mikveh* waters

this must be what God intended  
to build a *sukkah* without counting walls  
branch out from padded tree houses  
break Aramaic accounts of what rabbis said

for our yet-unborn daughters  
for our already-gone grandmothers  
let us raise the parchment flag high  
let us chisel out of the walls a new temple  
where our song will be heard

