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Yom Kippur and Parashat Haazinu

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Running and Returning: A Personal Reflection on Prayer, Contemporary Poetry, and Yom Kippur's Neilah Service

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Climbing

*This morning,
in the small basement shul,
amidst several Chassidic students lost in prayer,
I looked up from my siddur
to see a man in worker's clothes climb a ladder*

*and enter through an open ceiling panel.
And I thought, Oh yes,
he is just another one
like all of us
trying desperately to ascend,
but knowing full well he must come back down
to perform the work of this earth.¹*

Despite the obvious overlap in the area of liturgy, poetry and prayer hold two different aims for me. If prayer is a direct address to the Divine and poetry "is a projection of the subjective self onto the page," as I once heard the poet David St. John note, then only one of the poems in my three poetry collections qualifies as prayer. And even that single second-person reference to God in "A Religion of Tests,"² a poem I wrote nearly two

¹ Yehoshua November, [God's Optimism](#) (Main Street Rag, 2010), 34.

² Yehoshua November, "A Religion of Tests," [Chabad.org](#), 2008,

decades ago, came as a late—and, in retrospect, somewhat unnatural—addition suggested by an editor.

Why, in my personal experience, do I see prayer and poetry as two activities largely at odds with one another? Perhaps it's because poetry and prayer might be grouped into two different movements which, from a Hasidic perspective, serve as counterweights ensuring the fulfillment of creation's purpose—to connect the physical to the spiritual, the finite to the infinite. Or, to use the midrashic phrasing expounded on in *Hasidut*, the purpose of creation is to transform this lowest world into a home for God, a *dirah be-tahtonim* (*Tanya* 36). Rooted in Ezekiel's vision of angels running toward spiritual light and then returning to their obligatory posts in the Divine chariot, the two motions Hasidic thought associates with the *dirah be-tahtonim* process are *ratzo*, running toward transcendence, and *shov*, returning to the

everyday, the life of a soul in a body.³ As one who prays and writes poetry, it has always seemed to me that prayer parallels the act of “running” from earthly life toward transcendent Divinity, while composing contemporary poetry involves “returning” to the world to uncover the Divine or the wondrous in the ordinary. Like in any two-part system, both modes—running and returning—are essential. Without the transcendent moment of prayer lifting the worshiper (or poet) above the world, it may be difficult to return to the world and uncover the Divine in the mundane or difficult moment. Yet if one remains in, or overly prioritizes, the transcendent moment, he or she will neglect creation's purpose—the midrashic mandate to spiritualize the ordinary, to make the physical world a home for God.⁴ Of the two modes, “returning,” with its earthward focus, plays a more crucial role in the *dirah be-tahtonim* theology of sanctifying the physical world. Yet, as noted, “returning” proves successful only when

<https://www.chabad.org/media/pdf/540/bgYt5404873.pdf>

³ See *Hasidut Mevo'eret: Moadim*, vol. 1, 267-268, and *Hasidut Mevo'eret: Avodat Ha-Tefillah*, vol. 4, 225.

⁴ In a number of his *sihot*, the Lubavitcher Rebbe associates tragic episodes in Jewish history with an overemphasis on “running”—a spiritual shortsightedness that precludes “returning” to sanctify the world. See, for example, *Likkutei Sihot* 4, 1041-1047, where the Rebbe suggests that the spies charged with scouting the land of Israel sabotaged their mission because they wanted to maintain the largely spiritual existence (running) they enjoyed in the desert. They feared that the agricultural life they would commence once they inhabited Israel (return) would distract them from prayer and Torah study. According to the Rebbe, the tribes of Reuben and Gad incurred Moses's criticism for a similar reason: they desired to remain in the Transjordan—to live as

shepherds rather than farmers—so that they could devote their lives more readily to prayer and meditation. See *Likkutei Sihot* 8, 186-191. The Rebbe also links the death of Aaron's two sons to a desire to get “too close” to God: they were seized by an overwhelming urge to “run” toward the Divine in the Holy of Holies and failed to consider that this move might render them incapable of “returning” to sanctify the profane. In the same *sihah*, the Rebbe links this error to that of Rabbi Akiva's colleagues who entered *Pardes*, the mystical orchard, with him. In the Rebbe's reading of the episode, only Rabbi Akiva safely exited the orchard because, going in, he knew that the purpose of “running”—of a transcendent venture—is to harness the inspiration and then “return” to the world. In contrast, his colleagues failed to realize this; as the Rebbe observes, based on the phrasing of the Talmud, they did not “enter in peace.” Thus, they did not “exit,” or return, in peace. See *Likkutei Sihot* 3, 987-993.

preceded by the heavenward impulse of “running.”

On Yom Kippur—the holiest day of the year when we behave more like angels than human beings, wearing white and devoting hours to prayer before suddenly resuming our ordinary existence only at nightfall—the disparity between *running* and *returning* is felt more acutely. The approach of the High Holiday season, therefore, begs a closer look at the run-and-return system. It calls for an examination of the unique spiritual possibilities we run toward on Yom Kippur, followed by the equally—if not more—important return trip we take once we’ve harnessed Yom Kippur’s powers. As suggested, analysis of this system might also help highlight the distinctions between prayer and contemporary poetry, placing poetry in the camp of “returning”—a modality more central to creation’s purpose.

Before focusing on Yom Kippur, it’s useful to explore the run-and-return model more generally, as it plays out throughout the year. As noted, if not in the liturgical wording then at least in the act, prayer is *ratzo*—running away from the world toward a transcendent, supernatural God. Of course, prayer entails requests for basic physical needs, but reciting this wish list takes only a few seconds, and—as those who avoid synagogue attendance know—services run much longer than

⁵ See *Torat Menahem Hitva’aduyot 5713*, vol. 3, 17. Here the Lubavitcher Rebbe also adds that when *ha-tofel* is spelled with the letter *tet* (instead of *tav*), the word links to *taful*, meaning secondary or insignificant. This is fitting, he explains, because in prayer one transcends the parameters of his own selfhood and becomes secondary to—and thus one with—the Divine.

that. As Hasidic teachings emphasize, at its highest state prayer constitutes a meditative moment when we divorce ourselves from our worldly lives—a supremely spiritual exercise when we run toward, and solder ourselves to, God. Thus, the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefillah*, recalls the Hebrew word for solder, as in the mishnaic expression *ha-tofel kli heres*—one who solders a vessel ([Kelim 3:5](#)).⁵ In this sense, prayer embodies an effort to leave the world behind and follow the soul’s magnetic pull as it races headlong toward the spiritual, culminating in a reunion with the Divine.

In contrast, contemporary poetry—with its emphasis on finding wonder in the particular and the mundane—might be rooted in *shov*: a return to the body and the world, the work of incorporating physicality into Divine service via charity and action-oriented *mitzvot*. Or, more broadly, *shov* is the work of uncovering and noticing God in the profane or even the seemingly heretical. Pick up virtually any contemporary poetry collection—the back cover will feature testimonials praising the poet’s ability ‘to render ordinary moments as bright epiphanies,’ to ‘celebrate the sublimity of everyday life.’ In this spirit, Jack Gilbert’s iconic poem “[A Brief for the Defense](#)”⁶ reads as a kind of *ars poetica*, calling upon humanity to celebrate the wonderment held

⁶ Jack Gilbert, “A Brief for the Defense” (2005), *Poetry Society of America*, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://poetrysociety.org/poems/a-brief-for-the-defense>.

in the mundane, even amidst tragedy. The poem closes with the nocturnal scene of a rowboat on the waterfront. Gilbert goes on to highlight the delight felt in “hear[ing] the faint sound of oars in the silence”—a moment so ordinary yet so wondrous that it renders “all the years of sorrow that are to come...” “truly worth” living through.

To spiritualize the physical, to draw the Divine into the ordinary—to *know God in all your ways*, as [Proverbs 3:6](#) puts it—is difficult, given our worldly demands and drives. Indeed, it’s no secret that our earthly lives pull us down, and we soon forget—or see as impossible—the charge to elevate the mundane. Thus, paradoxically, the first step to making the world a home for God, a *dirah be-tahtonim*, is running away from the world: prayer.

And so, we engage in *ratzo*; we flee from the world’s trappings, thirsty for inspiration and a higher perspective. We leave the office, the bills, the deli—all that mires us in the quicksand of responsibilities and distractions—and enter the sanctuary. For a few moments, we give the soul the floor. And maybe the soul speaks in a way that affects the body—if the body doesn’t heckle it, if the body is somewhat refined, if it’s willing to listen to the soul’s song. If, before prayer, we spend some time learning about the One to whom we

pray—,so that prayer is not like going on a blind date or trying to love a stranger—if we learn something mystical that bursts open the mind’s box of time and space, that is very good. If one isn’t worried about keeping up with the other worshipers per se but goes at the pace of his or her individual soul, that’s good too. And maybe the Jew will start to sway. Maybe—as the *Zohar* claims,⁷—as prayer intensifies, the soul becomes a flickering flame trying desperately to escape—to run away from—the wick of the body: a small fire attempting to lose its identity in a larger fire. Because that is the nature of a flame: to rise up, to flee toward its source—an individual soul trying to lose its identity in the larger soul of God.⁸

Indeed, the structure of the prayer service itself facilitates the soul’s escape. And in this case, the soul doesn’t just run; it climbs. As the *Zohar* also notes, prayer is Jacob’s ladder—the base dug into the earth, the top reaching the Heavens. Yes, prayer is a ladder whose words were written by prophets and mystics. It is a four-part *shaharit* service, its words as rungs leading up through the four spiritual worlds,⁹ climaxing at the *amidah*, where the soul is consumed in God and can no longer speak for itself. Therefore, as we begin the silent prayer, we whisper: *God, open my lips, and my mouth will speak Your praise.*¹⁰ And from this

⁷ See *Likkutei Sihot* 4, 1162.

⁸ See *Tanya*, chap. 19.

⁹ Various Jewish mystical texts parse out four parts of the *shaharit* service and suggest that, as the worshiper recites each of the four parts, his or her soul ascends through one

of the four corresponding worlds. See, for example, J. Immanuel Schochet, *Deep Calling Unto Deep*, [Chabad.org](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/114927/jewish/Four-Rungs-of-the-Ladder.htm), https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/114927/jewish/Four-Rungs-of-the-Ladder.htm.

¹⁰ See *Likkutei Sihot* 2, 350.

selfless space, from God's vantage point, the spiritual and physical are equal, not contradictory. For God transcends both equally and—therefore, not locked in either—can fuse the two. In the *amidah*, at the top of the ladder, one makes requests for physical and spiritual needs, seeing neither as an end to itself but as a fusing.¹¹ *Tefillah* is the soul running to and reconnecting with its source, an invigorating preparation for fusing the physical and the spiritual after prayer.

Does anybody really feel these things as we race through the words? At the end of the day, prayer is called *avodah she-hi ba-lev*—the work of the heart ([Taanit 2a](#)). Prayer is work, not a spectator sport or a concert; there are no shortcuts. In my experience, the more I prepare for prayer—the more I learn just beforehand—the more the body and the consciousness share in the soul's journey, in the soul's replenishment. Oftentimes, I fail. At the very least, prayer is submission to God: acknowledgement that God resides beyond nature's rules and is so much greater than them. We reach upward and request that God intercedes from above. But prayer, running toward our source, is only one piece of a two-part framework.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Tanya*, chap. 33. Also see chap. 36. Here the Alter Rebbe notes that, relative to God's Essence—which equally transcends all of creation—the highest spiritual worlds represent no less of a descent than our physical world. It is therefore inaccurate to suggest that God saw the higher spiritual worlds as primary when He envisioned and created the universe. Rather, drawing on *Midrash Tanhuma's dirah be-tahtonim* theology, the Alter Rebbe argues that God created the universe because He desires a home in the lowest realm. This desire, he explains, is rooted in God's Will

Shov—the soul must return to its post. Above all else, God desires a *dirah be-tahtonim*—a home in the lowest realm—and so the soul, God's ambassador, cannot linger too long in the spiritual moment.¹² Though it retains its drive to run toward and be subsumed in light, the soul submits to God's larger plan: for the Divine to dwell in the world through the soul's pairing with the body and its engagement in the mundane. Hence, according to *Hasidut*, the world was designed so that most spend the majority of their days earning a living and tending to life in a body—albeit with Divine intent and purpose.¹³ Similarly, far from transcendent, much of Jewish ritual life incorporates physical items of prescribed measurements whose usage is governed by finite time and space restrictions—a way of drawing God into the details.

As noted, contemporary poetry appears to celebrate and underscore *shov* far more than it does the purely transcendent posture of *ratzo*—of prayer, of running away from the world. And often, poetry goes further than simply unearthing the spiritual behind the everyday, which, as noted, is perhaps poetry's central ambition. Often, poetry

and Essence, a "space" which transcends reason and hierarchies. See also the first discourse in the Rebbe Rashab's *Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah 5666*. Here the Rebbe Rashab elaborates on the notion that the "impulse" for a *dirah be-tahtonim* is rooted in God's Will and inexplicable Essence and is, therefore, the ultimate purpose of creation. In contrast, reasons for creation cited by other Jewish texts are rooted in Divine reason or emotion—more external Divine levels that come into play only once there is a relationship between God and the world.

¹³ See *Likkutei Sihot* 8, 190.

demands that we find redemption—what a believer might label the Divine—behind our darkest moments, the truly lowest realm. Not via transcendence or escape, but head-on. And so, poetry emerges with its unflinching renderings of life’s difficulties as they are (which is another laudatory line one finds on the back cover of so many volumes of contemporary poetry). Not as a prayer for salvation but as an assertion that the imperfect holds a kind of perfection—a holiness filtered through the messy human experience, in the physical world, rather than at the top of a spiritual ladder the soul has fled and scaled for a transcendent recharge.

On the other hand, as mentioned, absent the supremely spiritual experience of *ratzo*—of prayer lifting worshipers above the maze of their everyday circumstances—returning to the world to uncover the Divine in the mundane or the difficult can feel impossible. Only the worldly surface is seen, and life remains too overwhelming or distracting to be spiritualized. In the synagogue, by contrast, we untether ourselves from all that weighs us down and run toward a purely spiritual encounter. Then, newly inspired, we close our prayer books, ready to mine the world for the spiritual concealed within it. And if we are poets, we now stand poised to document what we unearth.

We practice Judaism’s “run-and-return” model daily. Each morning, we pray and then emerge from the synagogue to sanctify our everyday encounters. We repeat the process with the afternoon and evening prayers, which offer additional transcendent boosts that keep us buoyed above the waves of the daily grind as the hours wear on. Yet, the run-and-return model plays out with the greatest poignancy on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year—especially during the day’s fifth and final prayer, *neilah*.

The word *neilah* means “locked” or “closing,” connoting how, as the Yom Kippur sun sets, the gates of Heaven have almost shut. And so, we feverishly utter our requests in a last-ditch effort to secure a year of blessing. Yet in Hasidic teachings,¹⁴ *neilah* means something else entirely: the moment when the rest of the cosmos is “locked out” of a unity shared only between the soul and God—the most transcendent encounter of the year.

It is worth taking a moment to describe the five levels of the soul to better understand the extent to which, on Yom Kippur, we race away from the world and climb to the loftiest heights. Invested in the body, the three lower soul levels animate our thoughts, speech, and actions. A fourth almost subconscious soul level resides in the spiritual

¹⁴ R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson, “Ve-Khol Adam,” *Sefer Ha-Ma’amarim Melukat al Seder Hodshei Ha-Shanah*, vol. 1, 81.

Heavens, basking in Divine light. The fifth and highest level, the *yehidah*, as its name suggests, shares an inseparable oneness with God. And just as God precedes and, in a sense, transcends creation, so the *yehidah*—the soul’s essence that is one with God—inhabits a spiritual “space” loftier than creation, loftier even than the Heavens. Thus, the *yehidah* enjoys a unity with God more profound than the connection forged via Torah study, *mitzvot*, or repentance (the realms of thought, speech and action)—and loftier still than the connection achieved via prayer during the rest of the year, when the soul runs away from the world to revitalize and fuse itself to the Divine. For, at the *yehidah* level, the soul and God are already—and always—one. Relative to this soul level, our daily sins and shortcomings—which blemish our lower soul components related to thought, speech, and action—fade from the radar.¹⁵ For on the transcendent plane of the highest soul level, nothing exists save for God and His oneness with the *yehidah*.

Remarkably, during *neilah*—the fifth prayer of Yom Kippur, the only day on which we pray five times)—this final and loftiest level of the soul-God relationship, the *yehidah*, manifests, overriding all else. *Neilah* is so sacred and otherworldly that it parallels the moment in Temple times when, once a year, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies—and, as the Jerusalem Talmud states, not even an angel was present in that chamber ([y. Yoma 1:5](#)).

¹⁵ See *Likkutei Sihot* 4, 1152.

For even angels were “locked out”—overwhelmed by the oneness God shared at that *yehidah* moment with the High Priest, the representative of all the Jewish people.

And yet, as noted, transcendence—running away from and rising above the world—is only a stepping stone, meant to facilitate the larger Divine plan: *shov*, return, holiness channeled into the ordinary, physical world. Thus, as Maimonides emphasizes,¹⁶ as transcendent as it was, the High Priest’s Yom Kippur service was not officially complete until he entered “the locker room” to put on his ordinary clothes and, with great fanfare, *return* to his home and family life—the mundane stuff of contemporary poetry.

Let me close with one of my own Yom Kippur-themed poems, which appears to fit the *shov* paradigm—or at least whose setting is of this world, not a synagogue or far-off Heaven to which the soul sometimes flees:

ONCE, STOPPED AT A LIGHT ALONG RT. 27

Once, stopped at a light along Rt. 27
on my way home from class,
I saw an older man stretch out his hands
over a younger man’s forehead:
“...May His countenance shine upon you
and be gracious to you...”
A father bestowing the priestly blessing

¹⁶ See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Avodat Yom Ha-Kippurim*, the end of chap. 4. Also see *Likkutei Sihot* 32, 106-111.

on his son beside a Toyota
in a supermarket parking lot
the Eve of Yom Kippur.
“...turn His Countenance to you

and grant you peace.”
The man lifted his body
into the driver’s seat of his sedan.
His son resumed loading groceries
into the back of his minivan. The God of Abraham,
Isaac, and Jacob descending
through the shopping cart’s metal grates
and onto the asphalt
of the state highway.¹⁷

***Lifnei Hashem Tit’haru —
The Hinge of Leviticus and the Heart of Yom
Kippur***

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This essay grew out of a shiur I gave on the occasion of my father’s *yahrzeit*, Yechiel Dov ben Chaim. He loved the davening of the *Yamim Noraim* and it combined two of his favorite topics, *nusach snobbery* and appreciation for how the pauses, phrasing, and sound of the *Torah Trop* impacted our understanding of the text.

The core of this article was developed together

with my havruta Joshua Weinberger during the break on Yom Kippur itself—certainly the most successful Yom Kippur learning I’ve ever done. It is exactly the kind of Torah my father would have loved.

I. Torah Trop and Nusach: Two Grammars of Atonement

Yom Kippur liturgy consists of thousands of words and hundreds of verses or references to them. Yet one verse, [Leviticus 16:30](#), recurs more consistently than any other.

כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכָּפֵר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' וְתִטְהָרוּ.

The Koren-Magerman Tanach translates: *On this day, atonement shall be made for you, to purify you; of all your sins you shall be purified before the Lord.*

This verse appears in each *Amidah* and its repetition (nine times), in the *seliḥot* before *Shema Koleinu* (four times), in the *Avodah* (three times), in *Ma’ariv* just before *Kaddish*, and in the Torah reading. This tracks its four-fold appearance in *Mishnah Yoma*—more than any other verse in that tractate.

Following the Torah’s *trop*, the major pause falls at אֶתְכֶם, marked by the *etnachta*:

¹⁷ Yehoshua November, [Two Worlds Exist](#) (Orison Books, 2016), 60.

כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהַר אֶתְכֶם
מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ

This divides the verse neatly into two halves: “On this day, atonement shall be made for you, to purify you;” and then, “of all your sins you shall be purified before the Lord.”

Sitting in shul one Yom Kippur, only half-attentive during Torah reading, I heard the *ba'al korei* pause at אֶתְכֶם. It jarred me. Why stop there? Isn't the main pause after חַטָּאתֵיכֶם, as we say in *davening*?

Indeed, the common recitation in *nusach ha-tefillah* is at odds with the Torah's *trop*. The *hazzan* generally pauses after חַטָּאתֵיכֶם, such that the ear hears two declarations: “On this day, atonement shall be made for you, to purify you of **all your sins**,” followed by, “you shall be purified before the Lord.” Reflecting this, the Koren *Mahzor* breaks the verse slightly differently than the Torah scroll. Though it places a line break after לְטַהַר אֶתְכֶם, it then adds a comma after מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם, signaling the way the verse is commonly recited:

כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהַר אֶתְכֶם
מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ.

While *hazzanim* are often accused of bending meaning to fit melody, there is more going on here. The *trop* and the *nusach* reflect distinct ways of parsing the verse, and beneath them, two different answers to the deeper question: Who is

the primary actor in the Yom Kippur drama?

II. Reading the Verse in Context: The Hinge of Leviticus 16X

To understand how the verse works in context, we return to [Leviticus 16](#). The chapter opens in the shadow of Nadav and Avihu's death. God warns Aharon that he cannot simply walk into the Holy of Holies whenever he wishes; entry requires a precise rite of purging the sanctum (*kodesh*). The verses then elaborate in considerable detail as to how the High Priest purges the sanctuary of the impurities that Israel's sins have left behind. The movement is from the inside out—first the innermost sanctum, then the altar, and only at the very end the people themselves.

Strikingly, until verse 29, nothing connects this rite to Yom Kippur or to any specific date on the calendar. The focus is exclusively on sacred space and the ritual means of keeping it pure. Then the tone shifts:

29. And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you.

30. For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before ה'.

31. It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time.¹

Structurally, verse 30 sits at the hinge between two movements of the chapter. The first half describes the priestly rite aimed at purging the sanctuary. The second reframes that rite as an annual observance for all Israel. Verse 30 is the pivot as the choreography of the *Mikdash* turns outward, extending into the life of the people.

It is no accident that Mary Douglas, the influential anthropologist of the late 20th century who transformed the study of biblical ritual, notes how the *seder ha-avodah* of Leviticus 16 sits at the literary and geographical center of Leviticus.² The book builds to Aharon's entry into the *kodesh hakodashim* and then moves outward from it. And if chapter 16 is the fulcrum of the book, then verse 30 is the fulcrum within the fulcrum: the moment when ritual centered on sacred space turns outward to Israel, offering the Torah's most sweeping declaration of atonement. This is the verse Hazal chose as the framing device for Yom Kippur.

III. Five Ambiguities

Part of the verse's power is that none of its words are difficult Hebrew, and yet taken together the sentence is riddled with ambiguity, raising multiple questions:

1. Who is the subject of יִכַּפֵּר? In *peshat* it is the High Priest; but the unstated subject leaves room for other readings.
2. What is the scope of absolution "from all your sins"? The phrase sounds expansive, yet the next words "before the Lord" may narrow it. Perhaps not all sins are alike; some fall outside Yom Kippur's reach.
3. What is the force of תִּטְהַרְוּ (*tit'haru*)? It can be read as a result: upon the kohen's successful *avodah* "you shall be pure." But it can also be read as an imperative: "Purify yourselves!"
4. How does the prepositional phrase בַּיּוֹם (*ba-yom*) function? A *bet* can be temporal ("on this day") or instrumental ("through this day").
5. What is the direction of causation? Does atonement of the sanctuary cause Israel's purification, or does standing before God in purity elicit atonement? The Torah's *trop* accents the former; the

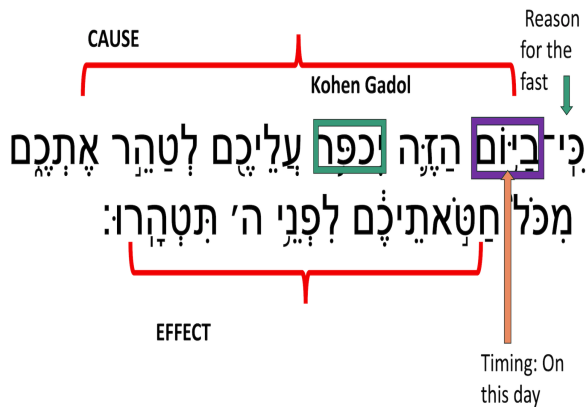
¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Sefaria.

² Mary Douglas, [Leviticus as Literature](#) (1999).

nusach often suggests the latter.

In *peshat* the reading is fairly straightforward: on this day the kohen gadol performs the service to purify you; as a result, you will be purified before God from all your sins.

This can be diagrammed as follows:



It is worth noting that even this *peshat*-based reading is quite remarkable, since atonement is typically far more restrictive within the Torah’s sacrificial system. Leviticus is uncompromising: the *ḥatat* atones only for cases of *shogeg*—unintentional failure, negligence perhaps, but not flagrant defiance. That is the thrust of [Leviticus 4](#), codified by Rambam in *Hilkhot Shegagot*.³ Numbers 15 draws the line starkly: *shogeg* yields a sin offering and forgiveness; *beyad ramah*—“with a raised fist”—incurs *karet*, with no sacrifice prescribed ([Num. 15:27–31](#)).

³ Certain *asham* korbanot which are brought following deliberate acts slightly complicate this picture. Nevertheless,

Leviticus 16 stands out against this backdrop. When the High Priest confesses over the scapegoat, he does not limit himself to the unintentional trespass of the *shogeg* but explicitly names the full range of sin: *avon*, *pesha*, and *ḥatat*.

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities (*avonot*) and transgressions (*pish’eiheim*) of the Israelites, whatever their sins (*hatotam*). (Lev. 16:21).

Here, the Torah expands the bounds of the sacrificial system. By re-sanctifying God’s space and then turning outward to the people, Yom Kippur creates a once-a-year avenue that reaches beyond the ordinary jurisdiction of Temple atonement.

IV. *Ḥazal’s Turn: The Essence of the Day*

If the Torah’s Yom Kippur is about purging sacred space, Ḥazal reframe the day as carrying its own power. Already in the Sifra ([Aharei Mot 8:1](#)), the day itself becomes a force of atonement:

For on this day (בַּיּוֹם) atonement shall be made for you— through sacrifices.

And from where do we know that

these are limited to specific scenarios and only within a structured process of rectification.

even if there are no sacrifices or scapegoat that the day obtains atonement

To teach you it states: *For through* ביום *this day*. . .

The *midrash* begins with *peshat*: the High Priest secures atonement through scapegoat and offerings. But it then presses the verse further. “On this day” can also mean “through this day.”⁴ Even stripped of blood rites, Yom Kippur itself—the sheer essence of the day—achieves atonement. In the Torah, atonement is something the Kohen does; in the Sifra, Yom Kippur becomes the cause.

A. Mishnah Yoma and the Limits of Atonement

This theme is developed more fully in the final chapter of Mishnah Yoma. Like its counterpart in Pesahim, Yoma mostly describes the holiday as if the Temple still stood. Only in its last chapter does the Mishnah pivot to our post-Temple reality.

In principle, atonement requires a *korban hatat* or *asham*, typically limited to unintentional acts, and there is generally no sacrificial remedy for sins committed intentionally. Drawing on the expansiveness of the scapegoat ritual, Ḥazal teach that the key lies in *teshuva*: repentance can

downgrade intentional acts into error, transforming *zedonot* into *shegagot*. And Yom Kippur, with its *sui generis* power, becomes the day when that transformation is possible.

The Mishnah then offers an “algebra” of atonement: repentance alone for lesser lapses; repentance plus Yom Kippur for graver ones; and for the most severe, repentance plus Yom Kippur plus suffering—or, in the final instance, death.

The Mishnah ([Yoma 8:9](#)) is alert to the fact that this system comes with the risk of abuse, and thus warns:

One who says: I will sin and then I will repent,
I will sin and then I will repent,
Heaven does not provide him the opportunity to repent.

One who says: I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone,
Yom Kippur does not atone

Yom Kippur’s power is real, but not mechanical. Its gift demands sincerity.

B. “Before God”: R. Elazar b. Azariah’s Limitation

The Mishnah adds a further boundary. According to R. Elazar b. Azariah, the day atones only for sins

One is to “rejoice *on* the festival.” (בַּחֲגֵךְ). But through what does one rejoice? (בַּמָּה), through wine-בֵּיין.

⁴ The *bet* of *ba-yom* can signal time (“on”) or means (“through”). Consider the rabbinic teaching:

ושמחת בחגך" במה משמחים? בֵּיין

bein adam la-Makom; wrongs *bein adam la-havero* are not erased until one undertakes the harder work of appeasing the injured party.

According to Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya what first seemed the most expansive phrase—‘from all your sins’—is suddenly cut down to size. This is because he reads the qualifier ‘before God’ not as an intensifier but as a limitation.

R. Elazar punctuates the verse this way:

<p>For on this day atonement shall be made for you; To purify you from all your sins before the Lord— You shall be purified.</p>	<p>כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכָּפֵר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה', תִּטְהָרוּ.</p>
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In its own way, this reading circles back to the Torah’s original focus. At the level of *peshat*, Leviticus 16 is concerned with *tum’at mikdash ve-kodashav*—the ritual impurities that desecrate the Temple which is quintessentially *bein adam la-Makom*. R. Elazar preserves that contour. Yom Kippur addresses our standing before God, but it does not wipe away the wounds we inflict on each other. For those, the only path runs through social repair—the hard phone call, the awkward email, the knock on the door.

V. R. Akiva's Re-read: Who Purifies Whom?

Mishnah Yoma closes, however, with Rabbi Akiva offering his famous coda. Since it has become a song belted out with great enthusiasm and fervor, the words are familiar even as few pause to unpack them:

<p>Rabbi Akiva said: Fortunate are you, Israel. Before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven. As it is stated: (Ezekiel 36:25) “And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you, and you shall be purified.” And it says: (Jeremiah 17:13) “The hope [midrashically: ritual bath] of Israel is God.” Just as a ritual bath purifies the impure, so too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, purifies Israel.</p>	<p>אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא, אֲשֶׁרִיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִפְנֵי מִי אַתֶּם מְטַהְרִין? וּמִי מְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם? אֲבִיכֶם שְׁבַשְׁמִים. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְזָרַקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיַּם טְהוֹרִים וְטַהַרְתֶּם וְאֹמַר: מִקֻּוּהַּ יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' מִה מִקֻּוּהַּ מְטַהֵר אֶת הַטְּמֵאִים, אִף הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְטַהֵר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל.</p>
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The key lies in R. Akiva's twofold question: *Before Whom are you purified? And Who purifies you?* The first seems rhetorical. The end of our verse already supplies the answer: Israel is purified *before God*. The second question is less obvious: Who purifies you? Here, R. Akiva makes his decisive move. He assigns the verb **יְכַפֵּר**, not to the priest, but to God. In the drama of Yom Kippur, the Kohen is not the ultimate actor; God is. This drives R. Akiva's reference to Ezekiel, where God takes the place of the kohen and directly performs the ritual of sprinkling the cleansing waters of the *parah aduma* to purify the nation. ⁵

The result is that R. Akiva reshapes the force of **תִּטְהָר**. No longer a simple result clause ("you shall be purified"), it becomes causal: if you purify yourselves *lifnei Hashem*—by standing wholly before God— then you will be purified by God. The human posture before God is the cause, and God's direct act of purification the effect.



The theological implications are striking. In *peshat*, the rites of Leviticus 16 are pre-requisites; atonement is not possible without the *avodah*. Contemplating the absence of the Temple, the Mishnah introduces substitutes: the concept of *teshuva* and the holiness of the day itself. Nevertheless, the Mishnah also hedges with limitations. Yom Kippur only works for certain sins, as some require suffering or even death. R. Elazar b. Azariah adds yet another restriction: the day only cleanses sins between humans and God (*bein adam la-Makom*), but not wrongs against other people.

R. Akiva then goes bolder still. Playing on Jeremiah 17:13, he reads *mikveh* not as "hope" but as "ritual bath." In other words, God is not only the One who purifies; but God is the very medium of purification. Those who immerse in the totality of the Divine are purified, just as the impure emerge cleansed from a *mikveh*.

R. Akiva argues against these views and dispenses

⁵ My colleague, Ethan Schwartz, highlights the literary and theological significance of God assuming the role of the

Kohen in Ezeikiel 36 in his article, [The Red Heifer in Synaqqoue: Purifying Israel from Sin](#).

with intermediaries—the priests, offerings, and scapegoats that occupy the first seven chapters of Yoma. He does not even address the formulas of *teshuva*, Yom Kippur, or death discussed in the final chapter that relate to Yom Kippur which pertain to the post-Temple era. R. Akiva’s move is to collapse the distance: between humans and God, between sin and cleansing. What remains is the unmediated encounter itself. To immerse in God is to become pure.⁶

R. Akiva is not advocating that we skip the fast, confession, or liturgy. But he reframes their function. These practices are not the causal engine; they are the frame for an encounter in which God acts directly. Grammar opens the door; the theology follows. *Mikveh Yisrael Hashem*—immersion in the Divine is the *Avoda*. Hazal chose these words to close the tractate that is mainly about sacrificial technicality, leaving us not with the calculus of sin and atonement, but with the immediacy of total submersion into the Divine.

⁶ Here too, I thank my cousin R. Dudi Goshen for this insight and formulation.

⁷ The Artscroll mahzor makes the note expressly. The first time the verse appears, it notes that “our translation . . . departs from the simple meaning of the verse in its Scriptural context, where virtually all commentators

Vi. Nusach as Commentary

The accepted *nusach* follows R. Akiva’s reading and translates it into music. The Torah’s *etnachta* suggests a cause-and-effect structure: the ritual atones, and purification is the result. But in the *Amidah* and elsewhere, the pause shifts to *mikol hatto’teichem*—“from all your sins.” Recited this way, causation flows in the opposite direction: by standing purified before God, He will bring atonement. This is no accident of cantorial flourish. It is how the verse appears in the *Amidah* and in the introduction to the *selihot*.⁷

At first glance, the *Seder HaAvodah* piyyut would seem to resist R. Akiva’s collapsing of mechanism into God. After all, the entire pageant is a dramatic reconstruction of sacrificial choreography. We narrate the kohen’s immersions and vestments and sprinklings; we recall the goats, the lottery, the incense cloud. And yet, in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic rites, the *sefer ha-Avodah* actually

understand it as a reference to the *Kohen Gadol* and his performance of the Temple Service on Yom Kippur. . . . In the prayer services however, in an era when we cannot perform the Temple Service, we feel that the verse is recited here in the context of the teaching applied in *Toras Kohanim*. *For through this day He will atone. . . .* (p. 77).

	<p>כְּכַתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדְךָ מִפִּי כְבוֹדְךָ. כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה'---</p> <p>וְהִכְהִנִים וְהָעַם הָעוֹמְדִים בְּעֶזְרָה. כָּשָׁהוּ שׁוֹמְעִים אֶת הַשֵּׁם הַנִּכְבָּד וְהַנּוֹרָא מִפְּרֹשֶׁ יֹאצֵּא מִפִּי כֹהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּקִדְשָׁהּ וּבִטְהָרָה</p> <p>הָיוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים וְנוֹפְלִים עַל פְּנֵיהֶם. וְאוֹמְרִים בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְבוֹד מְלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:</p> <p>וְאִף הוּא הָיָה מִתְכַּוֵּן לְגַמֵּר אֶת הַשֵּׁם כְּנֶגֶד הַמְּבָרְכִים וְאוֹמְרֵי לָהֶם תִּטְהָרוּ</p>
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builds on R. Akiva's reading, perhaps even pushing it one stage further. Following the kohen's confession on the head of the animal, both Sefardic and Ashkenazic liturgy recite as follows.

In the climactic moment the piyyut breaks the verse differently. When the High Priest uttered the Ineffable Name, the people in the Temple courtyard fell prostrate, calling out *Barukh shem*

kevod malkhuto le-olam va'ed. According to the liturgical reenactment, the kohen withheld the final word of the verse until the end, and then proclaimed it directly to the people:⁸

Tit'haru—Become pure!

In Musaf, the ḥazzan lingers over that final word, stretching *tit'haru* into a crescendo. Here the nusach itself becomes midrash. The verse is not merely descriptive (“you shall be purified”); but an imperative to act. Yom Kippur is not only about recounting what once happened in the Temple, it is about taking our place before God in the present tense. The lasting takeaway of the *seder ha-Avodah* is not the mechanics of goats and blood, but the urgent imperative that closes the reenactment: ***Tit'haru***.

Conclusion: Hearing the Verse Across the Day

One of the gifts of Yom Kippur is that we do not

merely study this verse; we live inside it. We hear it again and again, in different registers, each with its own theological accent.

First at night, and throughout the *Amidah*, where the placement of the pause highlights the power of the day itself. Here the day steps into the kohen's role: **through this day**—its prayers, fast, and rituals—God will atone and forgive.

In Torah reading we return to the original, the *trop* insisting on the grammar of Leviticus 16: the kohen purifies the sanctuary, and in turn, the people become pure.

And then, in the *Avodah*, we do not just hear but re-enact. Bowed bodies, the Name pronounced, the ḥazzan holding the final *tit'haru* aloft until the room reverberates with its imperative. R. Akiva's message is not just taught; it is sung and embodied. The verse that began as a hinge in Leviticus, parsed by *trop* and reinterpreted by *midrash*, becomes the essence of the day itself.

⁸ Both Koren and Artscroll translate this verse differently in *Seder HaAvodah* than elsewhere in the Tefillah. Each translation aims to emphasize the imperative or declaratory nature of the final word:

Artscroll typically translates the verse:

“For through this day He will atone for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before HASHEM you will be cleansed.”

In the *Avodah*, Artscroll reads: “For on this day he will atone for you to cleanse you; from all you sins before HASHEM—

you will be cleansed!”

Likewise Koren generally translates:

For on this day you will be atoned and made pure; of all your sins before the LORD you shall be purified.

In the *Avoda*, Koren reads: For on this day you will be atoned and made pure of all your sins before the LORD—
Become pure.

Before Erev Yom Kippur

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Before

Erev Yom Kippur,

I
sat in Dunkin Donuts, drank coffee, & pondered
the 10 Days of Awe.

During Rosh Hashanah,
I prayed in the Tree of Life shul. At times, my flesh
failed me.

I suffered much physical pain. I traveled between
2 worlds—
the primitive & the holy, our earthly realm & the
mystical universe of Hashem.

My wife Michelle
is in Menorah Nursing Home. She has a rare
cancer—multiple myeloma.
She too suffers with physical pain. But still, she
illuminates
my wounded soul.

Hashem is unknowable. Yet I long to be close to
Him.

Before
Erev Yom Kippur,

I

pondered the 10 Days of Awe, drifted off &
descended the antediluvian
stairs of my soul to a barren place.

Before
Erev Yom Kippur,

2
young men sat nearby, talked about 2 homeless
men fighting for
20 dollars. They laughed uproariously and
guffawed.

I was silent.

We possess or are possessed by the universe of
good & evil within.

But when I listened to the young men, only
teenagers,
I discovered their beauty.

A few minutes rushed forth like a stallion galloping
toward the Heavens or young and old Chassidic
men
dancing ecstatically at a wedding, and suddenly,
they called their Rabbi.

"Rabbi, how can we help you? What do you need?
We want to help!"

Before
Erev Yom Kippur,

I pondered the 10 Days of Awe. I thought about the unfathomable soul and its struggle between Yetzer HaTov & Yetzer HaRa.

Kabbalists say that the soul exists before birth and after death, it continues to be. Its divine mission is *Tikkun Olam*, “repairing the world.” It also mends itself.

The soul is a mystery.

I thought about the Tree of Life and my wife who nurtures my broken soul. She embraces divinity.

Even in my pain, I rush slowly to Hashem. Hashem is unknowable. Yet I long to be close to Him.

A Day of Remembrance: From Torah Reading to Shofar Blast

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I. The Enigma of the Akeidah: Selection of the Torah Readings for Rosh Hashanah

The association between the Akeidah and Rosh Hashana has become so ingrained in our minds that we hardly bat an eye about its selection as the

Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashana. The truth is, however, that it was not the obvious choice. By showing why it may not have been a clear candidate for Torah reading on Rosh Hashana, we may be able to understand its selection in a new light.

The Mishna in [Megillah 3:5](#) (Megillah 30b) determines the Torah readings for all festivals, and establishes a clear principle: on each Yom Tov, we read Torah portions that teach the laws of the festival. Accordingly, on Pesach, the reading is from [Parashat Emor](#) (Leviticus 22), which details the laws of the Paschal lamb and festival regulations. On Shavuot, the reading is drawn from [Deuteronomy 16](#), focusing on the pilgrimage festivals. On Sukkot, we read [Parashat Emor](#) (Leviticus 23), which outlines the commandments of Sukkot. For Rosh Hashanah, the same pattern holds: the Mishna assigns *Parashat Emor*, the section that includes the brief laws of Rosh Hashanah together with the other festivals ([Leviticus 23:23–25](#)). This approach reflects the Mishna’s pedagogical goal: the public Torah reading serves as a vehicle for instruction in the halakhot of the day.

The Gemara ([Megillah 31a](#)), however, introduces an additional dimension. It records the opinion that, on major festivals, beyond legal material, we should also read narratives connected to the day’s themes or historical events. Thus, for Pesach, the Gemara suggests reading not only sections about the laws of the festival but also the Exodus narrative itself ([Exodus 12–13](#)). For Shavuot, it offers the alternative of reading the story of

Matan Torah, the revelation at Sinai ([Exodus 19–20](#)). For Rosh Hashanah, the Gemara proposes the story of Sarah’s conceiving: *Hashem pakad et Sarah* (“God remembered Sarah,” [Genesis 21:1](#)), chosen because according to [Rosh Hashana 10b-11a](#), it occurred on *Rosh Hashana*. Moreover, it emphasizes remembrance through the term *pakad*, a root that resonates with the day’s designation as *Yom HaZikaron* ([Leviticus 23:24](#)). This choice mirrors the pattern seen on other festivals, where the narrative selected occurred on the festival being celebrated and connects to its themes: the Exodus story for Pesach, the the giving of the Torah for Shavuot.

The Gemara articulates a principle for communities outside of Israel that observe two days of Yom Tov: on the first day, we read the alternative narrative suggested in the Gemara, and on the second day we read what the Mishna prescribed. In practice, this creates a pattern: one day focuses on halakhic material, the other on narrative material. This principle is followed for all festivals, with one exception: *Rosh Hashana*.

Applying this framework to Rosh Hashana, we would expect that on the first day we would read the halakhic passage from *Parashat Emor*. On the second day, we would read the narrative of *Hashem pakad et Sarah*. Surprisingly, the Gemara does not prescribe *Parashat Emor* at all, and shifts “*Hashem pakad et Sarah*” to the first day. For the

second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Gemara selects the reading of the Akeidah ([Genesis 22](#)). This is startling for several reasons. First, the Akeidah is not mentioned in the Mishna’s discussion of festival readings and appears suddenly as a new choice. Second, the inclusion of the Akeidah deviates from one of the principles governing narrative readings for Yom Tov, which are typically stories that occurred on that day. On Pesach, we read the Exodus because it happened then; on Shavuot, we read about the revelation at Sinai because it happened then. The Akeidah violates this logic, as it did not take place on Rosh Hashana¹. Third, it contains no explicit reference to remembrance—no *zachor*, no *pakad*. To illustrate how out of place this is, consider the first day’s Torah reading and the haftarot for the first and second day. On the first day, we read the story of Hannah, who prays for a child and vows to dedicate him to God. Her plea culminates in the words: “And she prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly... and the Lord remembered her” ([I Samuel 1:10, 19](#)). The second day’s haftarah, from Jeremiah 31, likewise pulses with the language of remembrance: “Is Ephraim My dear son? ... Whenever I speak of him, I surely remember him still (*zakar ezkerenu od*)” ([Jeremiah 31:20](#)). Three of the four readings for Rosh Hashanah—the first-day Torah reading and both haftarot—thus contain explicit references to memory. The sole exception is the Akeidah. How, then, did it become

¹ The date of the Akeidah is debated in rabbinic sources. [Pesikta Rabbati 40](#) associates it with Rosh Hashanah, while [Shemot Rabbah 15:11](#) places it near Pesach. Regardless, it is

not listed among the events that occurred on Rosh Hashana in gemara Rosh Hashana.

the centerpiece of the second day's reading?

One suggestion, offered by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom², seeks to resolve this anomaly by proposing that when the Gemara referred to *Hashem pakad et Sarah*, it did not mean the short reading from Genesis 21 alone, but rather the entire narrative arc continuing through Genesis 22 and culminating in the Akeidah. According to this view, the original practice envisioned a single extended reading that encompassed both stories. Once two days of Rosh Hashanah were observed, this long unit was divided: the first day featuring the opening section about Sarah's conception, the second concluding with the Akeidah. On this reading, the Akeidah was not introduced later as a separate idea but was always part of the Gemara's conception of the festival reading.

However, this explanation is not entirely convincing for two reasons. First, if the Gemara intended the Akeidah as the climax of the reading, we would expect it to name it explicitly, just as it does for other readings, such as the haftarah, referred to by *HaBen Yakir Li* (Jeremiah 31), even though that phrase does not occur at the beginning of the reading. Second, the thematic inconsistency remains unresolved. If the Gemara's rationale for including *Hashem pakad et Sarah* is that the event occurred on Rosh Hashanah and exemplifies divine remembrance, then the Akeidah does not belong: it is not listed among the events that the Gemara in *Rosh Hashanah* 10b–

11a says occurred on Rosh Hashanah, and it doesn't mention the theme of remembrance. In short, this theory may explain the mechanics of how the Akeidah could have entered, but it does not explain why it should be included in the readings that occupy this place in the liturgy.

As background for an alternative solution, let us examine the *Musaf* of Rosh Hashanah. Its structure—*Malchuyot* (proclaiming God's sovereignty), *Zichronot* (invoking divine remembrance), and *Shofarot* (sounding the shofar) ([Mishna Rosh Hashanah 4:5](#))—frames the themes of the day. Each section cites ten verses, and the requirement in *Zichronot* is that all ten contain the word *zachor* ("remember") or a direct synonym. The Akeidah does not qualify and so does not appear among those ten verses. However, it is appended at the very end, just before the concluding blessing, almost as an afterthought: *Akeidat Yitzhak le-zar'o ha-yom be-rah'amim tizkor*. Once again, we must ask ourselves the same question: If the Akeidah was not included in the body of the *zichronot* because it says nothing about remembrance, how does it gain insertion, almost as an interruption to the flow just before the end of the section. The reason is that the Akeidah is mentioned here as an intercessory plea: "Remember for us the covenant and the Akeidah of Isaac." Its function is not like the rest of *zichronot*, verses cited to emphasize God's historical remembrance of the Jewish people, rather, it is placed here to intensify and

² Accessed 8/28/2025
<https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecturedata/1072959/%D7%A2%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%93%D7%AA->

[%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%97%D7%A7-part-1The-Selection-of-the-Story-of-the-Akedah-as-Keriat-HaTorah-on-Rosh-Hashanah](#)

focus our plea. It is a prayer: “If You remember one thing, let it be the Akeidah.” The placement is telling. After ten verses reminding us and God that Rosh Hashanah is a day of remembrance, we dare to add a final request: if You are going to remember us, then remember *this*, our finest historical moment of passionate sacrifice.

I would suggest we can borrow this logic and apply it to the Torah reading as well. Just as the Akeidah is appended to *Zichronot* even though it does not meet the technical requirements, so too it becomes the Torah reading of the second day of Rosh Hashanah, even though it does not follow the usual pattern. Strictly speaking, it does not belong—but given the stakes of the Day of Judgment, we could not resist the need to highlight it. Here too, its selection as a reading is itself a prayer: an interruption of the standard framework to plead with God to recall the supreme devotion of Abraham and Isaac. It is not didactic but supplicatory. Unlike any other Torah reading of the year, it serves not to instruct the congregation in law or narrative but to stand before God as a communal petition. In choosing to read the Akeidah, we say, in effect: “Study the laws of Rosh Hashanah on your own time; today we use the public platform of Torah reading to recall before God our ancestors’ supreme moment of faith.”

This viewpoint aligns with [Rashi’s remark on Genesis 22:14](#) that the Akeidah serves as an

enduring annual petition for forgiveness on the part of B’nei Israel. [Rashi on Megillah 31a](#) likewise underscores that the Akeidah is read so that its merit will stand for us, explicitly supporting this understanding of the reading as a plea for God’s remembrance rather than an act of instruction.

II. The Shofar as an Instrument of Memory

This theme of invoking merit through remembrance leads naturally to the shofar. *Rosh Hashanah* (16a) explains the structure of *Musaf*: “*Malchuyot*—to make Me King; *Zichronot*—so that I will remember you for good. And through what? Through the shofar.” The shofar is not merely symbolic; it is the medium through which divine remembrance is activated. In truth, the connection between the shofar and memory is already hinted at in the Torah, which describes Rosh Hashana as *zichron teruah* (Leviticus 23:24), literally meaning remembrance of teruah.³ While the exact meaning of the phrase is cryptic, an association between memory and shofar is drawn.

Furthermore, it is possible that this property of the shofar preceded the Akeidah and was destined to be discovered there, in order to formally enter into the Jewish tradition. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:6) lists the ram that was present at the Akeidah as one of the miraculous objects that was created at twilight on the eve of the first Shabbat. Bartenura, in his commentary on that mishna, explains that it was decreed at the time of creation

³ Although the Rabbis (Rosh Hashana 29b) took this phrase to refer to the times when Rosh Hashana falls out on Shabbat and the shofar is not blown, this does not detract

from the simple meaning of the words themselves making a connection between shofar and memory.

that this ram would become stuck by its horns in the bushes at the time of the Akeidah. In other words, the ram was destined to be discovered by Abraham during the Akeidah, and specific mention is made of it being stuck by its horns. While some commentaries suggest this was simply to avail Abraham of an animal to offer without having to steal one,⁴ there are several Midrashic opinions that imply a greater significance to the selection of this ram for this task with specific mention of the role its horns will play for the Jewish people. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer (31:13) states the opinion of Rebbi Hananya ben Dosa that each part of the ram's body had a future use, either as part of the Temple service, or as garments for future leaders of the Jewish people. The last two parts, likely those of most significance to him, are the two horns, which were to form the shofar that would be sounded at Sinai and the shofar that will be sounded in the World to Come. Second, Yalkut Shimoni (Remez 101) states, "All that day Abraham saw the ram passing from tree to bush, from bush to thicket, continually being trapped, freeing itself and again becoming entangled. Said the Holy One, blessed is he, to him: 'So will your children be trapped through their sins and entangled by foreign Powers, passing from Babylon to Media, from Media to Greece, and from Greece to Edom'. 'Is it to be thus for all time?' 'No,' said He to him, 'They will be redeemed eventually through the horn of this ram.'" These two passages of Midrash suggest that the ram was specifically chosen for its destiny because of the redemptive role its body parts will

have for the Jewish people in the future, with specific focus on its horns.

What we have shown seems to represent a fundamental debate about why the ram was destined to appear to Abraham during the Akeidah. Some suggest that any animal might have been chosen, and Abraham simply needed a potential offering freely available. However, the above two midrashim raise the possibility that the ram was specifically chosen for this destiny because of the parts of its body, and most importantly the horns, that will become features of the future Jewish nationhood and redemption.

Should the latter view be accepted, it would suggest a profound reorientation of the meaning of Abraham's discovery of the ram. We often imagine the causal order like this: Abraham happened upon a ram at the Akeidah, and therefore we blow a ram's horn to recall that moment. Like the Akeidah's unnatural insertion into the *Musaf* prayer and the day's Torah reading, the shofar serves as another powerful request of God to remember that powerful moment from which the shofar was born. But these passages of midrash suggest the opposite: the ram with its horns was created from the beginning of time, destined to be discovered at the Akeidah. It is reasonable to suggest that the ram was specifically chosen for this role because God had planned to have its horns introduced into Jewish practice. Recalling that the gemara already describes the shofar as a tool to invoke memory, it

⁴ See for example the commentary of Yachin on this mishna

is possible that the ram appeared to Abraham precisely in order to provide the shofar for this purpose. The horn was destined from the beginning to serve as the vehicle of remembrance, and the ram appeared in the Akeidah to make that destiny manifest. The Gemara states explicitly: “Why do we blow a ram’s horn?... So that [God] will remember the Akeidah of Isaac” ([Rosh Hashanah 16a](#)). The shofar thus merges two layers: its primordial role, established at Creation, as a vessel of remembrance; and its historical role, as the horn of the ram at the Akeidah.

Traditionally, the shofar is seen as a tool to inspire repentance. The Rambam writes: “Even though the sounding of the shofar is a decree, it contains an allusion: ‘Awake, sleepers, from your sleep, and slumberers, arise from your slumber. Examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember your Creator’” ([Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4](#); cf. *Hilchot Shofar* 1:1). In this conception, the shofar is God’s call to Israel, summoning us to remember Him. But the sources above suggest a complementary dimension: the shofar is also Israel’s call to God, asking Him to remember us: not only because the shofar is symbolic of the Akeidah, but because the shofar itself is a vessel of remembrance. It inherently invokes memory of our deeds, past and present. Its blasts are therefore bidirectional: from God to Israel, as a wake-up call to repentance; and from Israel to God, as a petition that He should recall our merits.

In this way, reading the story of the Akeidah, inserting it into our *Musaf* prayer, and

commemorating it with the shofar are all desperate appeals to God to remember our merits. Although the Akeidah may be the quintessential example of self-sacrifice in our national memory, it is not the only one. Our generation, like so many before it, has witnessed countless examples of people willing to sacrifice themselves for the protection of the Jewish people, especially in these last few years. Their merit need not be any less inspiration for a favorable judgement for our entire nation than that of Isaac himself.

Divine Companionship in the Tokhahah: A Textual Analysis

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Introduction

Leviticus [chapter 26](#) includes a passage known in the Jewish tradition as the *Tokhahah*. It receives its name from the Hebrew word for rebuke, as it contains God’s warnings towards the Israelites about the consequences of transgressing the covenant. This passage may be difficult to read, since it portrays a very vivid and explicit consequence for the people of Israel if they reject the covenant. The *Tokhahah* describes a series of punishments that increase in severity, culminating in the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel. Although Leviticus 26 is often read as a list

of punishments, this article aims to demonstrate how, through a close textual analysis of lexical choices and thematic patterns, it simultaneously portrays divine punishment and an enduring divine promise of companionship.¹

This article uses a multi-layered exegetical methodology in order to uncover a deeper meaning of the biblical text.² Classic rabbinic commentaries, from talmudic and midrashic sources through the middle ages and contemporary commentators, are used as interpretative tools of Hebrew grammar, theological motifs, and recurring biblical paradigms, some of which reflect archetypal patterns identified in broader religious thought. In the language of Jewish mysticism, this article aims

to reveal *hesed she-bigevurah*,³ the divine loving-kindness embedded within the divine judgment in Leviticus 26.

Literary and Lexical Framework

The first half of chapter 26 describes the blessings that will come to those who observe the *mitzvot*. Then, in [verse 12](#), the Torah states a profound promise:

“Ve-hit’hallakhti be-tokhekhem, ve-hayiti lakhem le-Elohim, ve-atem tihyu li le-am.”

“And I will walk within you, and I will be your God, and you will be My people.”⁴

This verse is essential for understanding the chapter. The key word here is the verb “to walk.”

¹ The *Tokhahah* details the consequences of the Jewish people’s failure to uphold the covenant, which includes, but is not limited to, halakhic transgressions. While halakhic observance is implied in the text, its legal dimensions lie beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on theological themes developed from a textual analysis. Such failures can encompass broader moral and ethical lapses, spiritual apathy, a lack of trust in God, or a general breakdown in the holistic relationship with the Divine, such as a careful reading of the Prophets can prove.

² In Jewish exegesis, this methodology is called *PaRDeS*. This is an acronym for: (1) *Peshat*, the simple meaning of the Hebrew text, reflected in this article through the analysis of the Hebrew text; (2) *Remez*, translated as hint, shown in this paper through the finding of thematic similarities throughout the Tanakh with the passages under analysis; (3) *Derash*, the homiletic interpretation of the passage; and (4) *Sod*, represented by the interpretations done through Jewish mystical commentaries. In the present article, Jewish mysticism is kept to a minimum, and, when included, it’s done from a rationalistic standpoint. While this article draws from a range of rabbinic voices, it seeks to uncover a shared

theological insight: that divine companionship is not severed by transgression, but mobilized through it toward *teshuvah* and covenantal restoration.

³ R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal), in his work *Mesilat Yesharim*, and R. Aryeh Kaplan, in his work [Inner Space: Introduction to Kabbalah, Meditation and Prophecy](#) (Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1990), explain that the attribute of divine mercy interacts with, and complements, the attribute of divine justice, balancing each other, in order to allow people who transgress to repent and prevent divine punishment. The reader may benefit by reading [Middot: On the Emergence of Kabbalistic Theosophies](#) (Ktav, 2021), by Moshe Idel, which surveys the interaction of divine loving-kindness and divine justice through rabbinic mystical literature.

⁴ I translated “*be-tokhekhem*” as “within you,” based on the rabbinic understanding of the verse in [Exodus 25:8](#), “Make me a sanctuary and I will dwell within them.” Unless the opposite is indicated, all translations of the *mikra* (Tanakh text) are my own.

As the Torah transitions to describing the consequences of transgression, we encounter this theme of walking repeatedly. In [verses 23-24](#), we read:

“And if through these [punishments] you are not disciplined to Me, and **you walk with Me** in opposition, then **I will also walk with you** in opposition and punish you seven times for your transgressions.”

At this point, a thematic pattern starts to emerge based on God’s response to the people’s behavior. Between verse 12 and verse 24, the idea of “walking with God” has been repeated three times already. The first time, in verse 12, God is walking within the people as a reward for obedience; then, they walk in opposition to God; and, finally, God walks in opposition to the people as a consequence.

This pattern appears to reflect the divine response described by R. Hayyim of Volozhin in his work *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*.⁵ [Psalms 121:5](#) reads: “The Lord is your guardian; the Lord is your protective shade at your right hand.” Commenting on this verse, R. Hayyim explains that God acts with humanity the way a shadow moves with a person’s hand. When someone moves their hand, the shadow follows accordingly. If a person elevates themselves through good deeds and *mitzvot*, God elevates them as well. Conversely, if someone lowers themselves through wrongdoing, God

responds in kind. This principle is clearly demonstrated in the *Tokhahah*, where God’s response mirrors the people’s behavior, in the verses above mentioned and again in [verses 27-28](#).

A closer analysis to verse 24 will reveal something more. The first four words in the verse are as follows: “**Ve-halakhti af ani immakhem**,” that can be translated, in a literal way, as “**I will walk, even I, with you.**” Verse 28 contains similar language:

“**I will walk with you** in the fury of opposition, and I will discipline you seven times for your transgressions.”

The crucial element here is the word *immakhem*, “with you,” in the plural. This represents a significant change from verse 12, where God walks “within” (*be-tokhekhem*) the people when they follow the divine commandments. During times of consequence, God walks “with” (*im*) them.

The Nuance of “Im” vs. “Et”: Partnership and Proximity

The Tanakh, when describing the companionship of two individuals walking, uses two Hebrew words: *im* and *et*. As I will develop in the next paragraphs, according to some biblical commentators, *im* describes a partnership characterized by equality, cooperation, or shared purpose, while *et* implies mere physical proximity without partnership.

⁵ [Nefesh Ha-Hayyim 1:7](#).

Walking with God: Noah vs. Avraham

The first time in the Tanakh where we see an explicit description of a human being walking with God is found in *Parashat Noah*.⁶ Here the Torah describes the righteousness of Noah “in his generations,” portraying his walking with God as follows: *et ha-Elohim hit’halekh Noah*. The sages (*Bereishit Rabbah 30:10*) discussed this verse and contrasted the walking with God of Noah with the “walking before God” of Avraham.⁷ According to the midrashic interpretation of the sages, the description of Noah walking with God represents a weaker walk than that of Avraham. The sages suggest that this description implies that Noah’s righteousness depended on God’s support, indicating a more passive spiritual stance, whereas Avraham’s walking was proactive.

Walking in unity: Bil’am and the Moabites

Another example of *et* vs. *im* appears in *Parashat Balak*.⁸ Initially, God tells Bil’am: Rise, go with [*ittam*, a construct of *et*] them [the Moabites who sought Israel’s destruction]. Later, the Torah describes Bil’am as going “*im sarei Mo’av*,” “with the Moabite officers.”⁹ Malbim, in his commentary on this passage, explains that this change from *et* to *im* indicates equality between Bil’am and the Moabites, in that they shared the same destructive intention towards the people of Israel.

Divine companionship in the context of divine forgiveness

One of the most puzzling events of the Torah is the incident of the Golden Calf, in which the people of Israel created a statue of a calf made of gold as a physical representation of God. As a result of this transgression, God decides to destroy the people of Israel and start again with Moshe’s offspring. After Moshe’s plea, God forgives the people of Israel, but decides that He will not accompany the people Himself; rather, He will do so through an angel. Moshe keeps pleading, and God forgives the people of Israel. As a result, God reveals something known in the Jewish tradition as the “13 Attributes of Mercy.” These 13 Attributes of Mercy (whose application to the *Tokhahah* is discussed in the next section) comprise a prayer to be recited during a time of crisis where divine judgment is imminent. The presence of divine judgment provides a thematic relationship with the *Tokhahah*. In this context, before the introduction of the 13 Attributes, there is a fascinating application of divine companionship in Moshe’s plea for forgiveness. In Exodus 33:16, Moshe states that divine grace and the uniqueness of the peoplehood of Israel are conditioned on divine companionship (*be-lekhtekha immanu*). Notice that in this verse, both the verb to walk and the word for companionship

⁶ [Genesis 6:9](#).

⁷ [Genesis 17:1](#).

⁸ [Numbers 22:2-25:9](#).

⁹ [Numbers 22:21](#).

(*im*) are used here, which could be understood as a hint (*remez*) to the *Tokhahah* via the use of Hebrew words with the same grammatical root in a shared thematic context (divine judgment as a consequence of the transgression).

R. Prof. Umberto (David Moshe) Cassuto, in his [commentary](#) on this verse, states that “by your [God] walking with us will the world know that we have found favor in [Y]our sight and that you have chosen us and we are distinguished.” Therefore, both the peoplehood and chosenness of Israel are a consequence of divine companionship. Another use of the word *im* appears just before the revelation of the 13 Attributes. In Exodus [34:35](#) we read that “the Lord descended in a cloud and stood *with him* (*immo*). The use of the word *im* in this context reinforces the idea of divine companionship as a vehicle of divine grace for forgiveness and for the peoplehood of Israel.

Divine aid and empowerment through divine companionship

Additionally, in the book of Ruth,¹⁰ we encounter the explicit phrase, “The Lord be with [*immakhem*] you,” an expression that the sages ([Rut Rabbah 4:5](#)) equated with a greeting of the Angel of the Lord to Gideon.¹¹ Building on the

distinction previously highlighted between *et’s* implication of passive proximity and *im’s* suggestion of active partnership, these *im*-only examples further underscore the latter.

In Ruth, Bo’az came to the field workers and greeted them with “may the Lord be with (*im*) you,” to which [Ibn Ezra](#) comments that the workers needed divine assistance in order to keep working. It is probable that Ibn Ezra based his comment on *Targum Yonatan*, since the *Targum* interprets this verse as “may the Word of the Lord help you.”¹² In other words, the workers needed God to be with (*im*) them in order to receive divine assistance in completing their work. R. Shem Tob Gaguine, in his work *Keter Shem Tob*, echoes this idea.¹³ He explains that, in the Sephardic liturgy, when an *oleh* is called to read from the Torah scroll, he repeats the words of Bo’az to the congregation, “may the Lord be with you,” and the congregation responds, “may the Lord bless you.” One of the reasons offered by R. Gaguine for this custom is that, given that Torah study exhausts the person’s strength, he requests a divine blessing before reading from the Torah. R. Shem Tob also notes that in Ottoman Arabic culture, a worker is greeted with “*Allah ma’ak*” (“may God be with you”), to which he replies, “*Tubarak Allah*” (“may

¹⁰ [Ruth 2:4](#).

¹¹ [Judges 6:12](#).

¹² [Targum Yonatan on Ruth 2:4](#). *Targum* states, “*Yehei meimera de-Adonai be-sadekhon*.” Here, the Aramaic root *samekh-ayin-dalet* (the root of “*besadekhon*”) means “to help” or “to assist.”

¹³ [Keter Shem Tob, Vol. 1, 244-245](#). R. Shem Tob Gaguine (1884-1953) was a Sephardic rabbi born in Jerusalem under Ottoman rule. He served as the *av beit din* (the head of the rabbinic court) of Egypt between 1911 and 1919. He eventually occupied several rabbinic positions in the Sephardic community of the United Kingdom. His magnum opus was *Keter Shem Tob*, an encyclopedic book in which he records, describes, and explains different customs and practices of Sephardic communities in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and India.

God bless you”). This greeting closely echoes the exchange in Ruth 2:4, suggesting that the association between divine presence and human effort resonates across Semitic religious traditions. While further investigation into linguistic and cultural parallels is beyond this article’s scope, this example illustrates how the biblical theology of divine empowerment continued to find expression in traditional Middle Eastern culture.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the Sephardic liturgy, during the Shabbat morning prayer for the congregation, the text of the prayer switches from Hebrew to Aramaic, and includes the quotation of *Targum Yonatan’s* “may the Word of the Lord help you,” when asking for divine aid and help for the members of the community.

In [Judges 6:12](#), cited in the midrashic commentary of *Rut Rabbah* 4:5, the Angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and greets him with “may the Lord be with you, mighty soldier.” On this, Rashi comments that the Angel was declaring that the presence of God be on Gideon in order to receive divine strength to carry his divine mission.¹⁵

Divine companionship in times of crisis

In [Isaiah 7:14](#), a prophecy highlights divine support for the Kingdom of Judah during the reign of King Ahaz. At the time, Judah was under

pressure from the kings of Aram (Syria) and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who sought to force Ahaz into joining their anti-Assyrian alliance, a move that threatened Judah’s autonomy. It is in this context that the prophet Isaiah visits King Ahaz and delivers a divine message: the threats posed by Aram and Israel will not succeed. As a sign of God’s intervention, Isaiah announces the birth of a child named Immanuel. The name, meaning “God is with us” (*Immanu-El*), serves as a symbol of divine presence and protection. Both Ibn Ezra and *Metzudat David*, in their respective commentaries on this verse, explain that the child’s name indicates that God would be with the king of Judah, offering support amid the crisis caused by these two hostile kingdoms.¹⁶ Interestingly, R. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz [interprets](#) the child as a representative of the whole nation (due to the use of the plural *immanu*), thereby broadening the interpretation of the child Immanuel to symbolize divine companionship to the entire nation during this time of distress.

In Psalms, as well, we find the word *im* in the context of divine help. In [Psalms 91:15](#), the psalmist states that God “will be **with him**, (*“immo”*) [the person who trusts in God] in times of distress.” Psalm 91 seems particularly

cultural-anthropological study beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁴ Rashi to [Judges 6:12](#), s.v. “*Hashem immekha qibor he-hayil*.”

¹⁶ See Ibn Ezra to Isaiah 7:14, s.v. “*lakhein*”; *Metzudat David*, ad loc., s.v. “*ve-karat*.”

¹⁴ This suggests that the concept of divine empowerment for human labor may be shared across cultures in the Middle East. The similarity between the Arabic greeting described by R. Gaguine and the biblical phrase in Ruth 2:4 may reflect common Semitic expressions of divine support in daily life. Determining whether this reflects a shared origin, mutual influence, or parallel development would require further

interesting for the present discussion, given that R. Menahem ben Shlomo Ha-Me'iri (Meiri), in his commentary on [Psalms 91:1](#), homiletically states that this psalm is a prophecy of the redemption of the Jewish people from exile, a topic we will discuss in the following section.

Similarly, [Psalms 23:4](#) presents a clear example of divine companionship during times of distress. The verse states that, even when a person walks through “the valley of the shadow of death,” they do not fear, “for You [God] are **with me (*immadi*)**,” a grammatical form of the word *im*). Both [Ibn Ezra](#) and [Meiri](#) interpret the “valley of the shadow of death” as referring to harsh decrees from heaven, divinely ordained afflictions that may come upon a person, such as those listed in the *Tokhahah*. Meiri explicitly emphasizes that the reason the person is able to endure these decrees without fear is because of God’s presence: “for You are with me.”

This understanding of divine companionship during punishment finds profound expression in the mystical interpretation of R. Ya’akov Abuhateira.¹⁷ He sees the “valley of the shadow of death” as representing *Gehinnom*, a spiritual state where a transgressor is trapped due to their transgressions. In this view, divine companionship is not just a comfort for the individual, but a divine empowerment that enables the *tzaddik*, the righteous person, to descend into this spiritual

abyss and rescue the transgressor. The *tzaddik* does not fear this descent because “You are with me,” meaning that God’s presence empowers him to redeem others from spiritual ruin. *Abir Yaakov’s* reading directly parallels the dynamic we see in the *Tokhahah*: just as the *tzaddik* can descend into *Gehinnom* because “You [God] are with me,” so too can the Jewish people endure exile because God walks *immakhem*, “with” them, through their punishment. This mystical-homiletical reading illuminates how the *im* of divine companionship operates not just linguistically but also spiritually. The *tzaddik’s* ability to rescue others from spiritual ruin mirrors Israel’s journey through the punishments of the *Tokhahah*, both of them requiring divine empowerment (*im*) to transform a place of destruction into a path of return. *Abir Yaakov’s* insight reveals the deeper mechanics of divine companionship in judgment: God’s presence doesn’t prevent the descent into spiritual darkness, but enables redemption *through* it. This is precisely the dynamic at work in the *Tokhahah*: the punishments become instruments of restoration because God accompanies His people through them. This idea will be discussed further in the following section.

Divine help coming from God’s companionship

Finally, an interesting grammatical twist of the word *im* comes from [Psalms 121:2](#). Here, the author indicates that, when hoping for divine help, divine aid comes from (*mei-im*) God himself. In the

¹⁷ R. Ya’akov Abuhateira, [Teachings of the Abir Yaakov, Vol. 1](#) (Artscroll, 2021), 504. R. Ya’akov Abuhateira (1806–1880), was a leading Moroccan rabbi and kabbalist, author of over a dozen works on Jewish thought and Kabbalah and

grandfather of the mystical sephardic sage R. Yisrael Abuhateira, better known as *Baba Sali*. His tomb, in Damanhour, Egypt remains a site of pilgrimage.

context of the present discussion, we can understand this verse as “My help comes from the companionship of the Lord, Maker of heavens and earth.” Malbim [comments](#) on this verse that the psalmist is talking about a providential help that, even when it may appear to be an earthly/natural help, is actually an act of heavenly supervision. This verse reinforces the idea of divine companionship as the source of divine aid and redemption.

These examples highlight the use of the Hebrew word *im*, not only as a divine partnership in equality and shared objective, but as a descriptor of divine companionship with people in need of divine help in order to succeed in a specific duty (as the passages in Ruth and Judges exemplify), or to overcome times of distress (as in Psalms 91:15). On the other hand, the walking with God described using the Hebrew word *et* indicates a passive attitude towards God, perhaps a spiritual lethargy (as exemplified in the story of Noah).

Divine Strengthening for Atonement in Exile

As the reading of the *Tokhahah* progresses, we find the ultimate punishment for the transgression of the people of Israel, the exile. In Leviticus [26:29-32](#), the Torah describes the siege of the Judean cities by enemy armies,¹⁸ culminating with the sentence of the exile from the Land in [verse 33](#). Nahmanides, cited and analyzed by R. Prof.

Jonathan Grossman,¹⁹ noticed an interesting pattern regarding the idea of the exile in the Torah that creates an archetype within the Jewish tradition. This pattern involves the displacement of the transgressors. In other words, transgressions of the divine commandments bring about the loss of the home and, consequently, exile the transgressor from his homeland. Grossman explains that the blueprint for this pattern of transgression-displacement/exile is found in the narrative of the Creation in Genesis.²⁰ Adam and Eve are [expelled](#) from Eden as a consequence of their transgression of ingesting

¹⁸ Much of the prophetic messages of both Isaiah and Jeremiah revolve around the warning of Israel and Judah about the imminent exile due to the failure of the people to stand on the covenant and keep the *mitzvot*.

¹⁹ Jonathan Grossman, [Creation: The Story of Beginnings](#) (Maggid, 2019), 437.

²⁰ The reader may benefit by reading Mircea Eliade, [The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History](#) (Princeton University Press, 1954), 195. Eliade brings the archetype of the “eternal return,” in which, he argues, that time is cyclical and repeats itself. In the case of the present

article, the Torah shows the archetype of a person who sins, is displaced, and then receives an opportunity to return (*teshuvah*) to the place of origin. This motif is repeated throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Prophets. This archetype is found recurrently through rabbinic literature. However, the reader should keep in mind that, while the archetype of the eternal return offers a compelling explanation of the motif being analyzed in the present article, it has been critiqued by contemporary scholars for being overly universalizing or reductive when applied across diverse cultures. In this article, the concept is employed narrowly and heuristically, following its use by R. Prof. Jonathan Grossman as a thematic frame for biblical motifs.

the fruit of “knowledge of good and evil.” Cain, similarly, is [expelled](#) to the east after murdering his brother.

When God inhabits the land, explains Grossman, the human dwellers are expected to behave according to specific religious and moral standards, as detailed in the *Tokhahah*. R. Jonathan Sacks expounds on this idea, explaining that *teshuvah* means both “repentance” and “return,” in the sense of a homecoming, a physical act of return to the place of origin.²¹ When the transgressor “repents” from his transgression, he is “returning” to his place of origin, and, as a consequence, is bringing the exile to an end.

However, between the transgression and the *teshuvah*, there must be a mechanism that enables the transgressor to overcome the displacement and successfully terminate the exile. This is where divine companionship comes into

²¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [Ceremony & Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays](#) (Maggid, 2017), chapter 1.

From a legal standpoint, *teshuvah* is defined by Maimonides ([Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:1](#)) as the process of abandoning the transgression, in which the transgressor firmly resolves not to return to it, regretting the past wrongdoing, and verbally confessing before God. For a more detailed theological and philosophical discussion on the *teshuvah* process, see [Sha'arei Teshuvah](#) by R. Yonah Gerondi.

²² This connection is powerfully demonstrated in the book of Daniel. [Daniel 9:1-3](#) depicts Daniel reflecting on the prophecies of Jeremiah, in which the prophet stated that the people would be exiled for seventy years ([Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10](#)). Once Daniel realized that the seventy years were about to be completed, he prayed to have a proper understanding of Jeremiah's prophecies. After this prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared to Daniel (in [Daniel 9:21](#)) and

action. The use of the word *immakhem* in the *Tokhahah* indicates that, during the process of the punishments described in Leviticus 26, Israel would actively atone for the transgressions committed, and, therefore, the people will need God's being with them to receive divine assistance in order to atone for the transgressions. Indeed, the Tanakh presents a profound theological connection of the two, suggesting that the exile which occurred at the end of the First Temple Eraserved as a means to atone for the transgressions listed in Leviticus 26.²²

As explored in the previous section, the divine companionship expressed with the word *im* indicates divine strength given to the people in order to perform an action. The specific strength-forgiveness interaction can be illustrated through the biblical story of the twelve spies sent to the Land of Israel in *Parashat Shelah*.²³ After the spies come back from the Land, they give a pessimistic

informed him that a period (490 years [according to Ibn Ezra](#)) was decreed over Israel. The sages stated that this period started at the moment of the destruction of the First Temple ([Seder Olam Rabbah 28](#)). This is a crucial point: while the physical exile lasted seventy years, the prophetic decree for atonement was a much longer, multi-stage process. The angel explicitly states that this period is set to “terminate the transgression, sin, [and] to atone iniquity.” The seventy years of exile correspond to seventy sabbatical years desecrated by the Israelites during the First Temple Era; this is in conversation with [Leviticus 26:34](#), where God warns that the exile will serve to let the land rest to atone for these sabbatical years. Thus, Daniel and Leviticus, through prophetic intertextuality, connect the historical event of the exile to the theological process of atonement.

²³ [Numbers 13:1-15:41](#).

report, discouraging the people from entering and conquering the Land and, in turn, triggering divine anger. Eventually, Moshe prays for divine forgiveness for the transgression of the spies. R. Ezra Bick offers a fascinating commentary on the prayer of Moshe, found in [Numbers 14:17-18](#),²⁴ in which Moshe prays for “the increase of God’s ‘strength.’” R. Bick sees the increasing of God’s strength as the basis of forgiveness. In other words, Moshe’s prayer provides a conceptual framework for understanding the punishments of the *Tokhahah*: by God accompanying his people during these punishments, He is laying the foundation to restoring the covenantal relationship between God and Israel by strengthening his people, thereby enabling them to atone for their transgressions.

This argument is further supported by [Leviticus 25:23](#). There, the Torah states, “*ki li ha-aretz, ki geirim ve-toshavim atem immadi*,” “for the land is Mine; you are strangers and sojourners with Me.” Commenting on this formulation, R. Jacob ben Asher cites a *midrash* which teaches that, during Israel’s exile from the Land, the divine presence, the *Shekhinah*, accompanies the Jewish people.²⁵ This is reinforced by the conversation between Moshe and God in *Parashat Shemot*.²⁶ When God appears to Moshe in the burning bush, He

introduces Himself as *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which can be loosely translated as “I will be who I will be.” The sages explain that, through this name, God communicated, “I am with Israel in their current struggles, and I will be with Israel in their future struggles.”²⁷ These textual examples, in synergy with the discussion in the previous section, collectively suggest that God accompanies Israel in times of exile, a distress produced as a negative consequence of her incapability to stand in the covenant, so that the Jewish people can succeed in *teshuvah*.

Similarly, when God revealed the 13 Attributes of Mercy to Moshe after the Golden Calf incident, when divine judgment seemed imminent, these attributes began with “*Adonai, Adonai, Eil rahum ve-hanun...*”²⁸ The four-letter divine name appears twice at the beginning of this revelation. The sages identify these two appearances of the ineffable four-lettered name as two different attributes of divine mercy. [Tosafot, in Rosh Ha-Shanah 17b](#), explain that each occurrence of God’s ineffable name represents a different aspect of the divine relationship with humanity. The first represents God’s desire for human existence, which led the Almighty to create humanity. The second represents the continued divine desire for human existence even after transgression.²⁹ This

²⁴ Ezra Bick, [In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot](#) (Maggid, 2010), 131.

²⁵ *Kitzur Ba'al Ha-Turim* to Leviticus 25:23, s.v. “[ki geirim ve-toshavim atem immadi](#)”; c.f. [Rashi and Meiri to Psalms 91:1](#).

²⁶ [Exodus 3:14](#).

²⁷ [Berakhot 9b](#).

²⁸ [Exodus 34:6](#).

²⁹ For a detailed discussion on the first two appearances of the ineffable name in the first two attributes of mercy, I recommend to the reader the first chapter of [In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot](#) by R. Ezra Bick.

enduring desire for human existence (despite human transgressions against the divine will) serves as a theological foundation for God's companionship. It is because God continues to desire humanity's existence, even in a state of transgression, that He remains with (*im*) them to provide the divine help necessary for atonement.

At this point, the Torah has already reinforced repeatedly the idea of God sustaining and empowering the Jewish people, by describing the divine companionship during the punishments of the *Tokhahah*. The climax arrives in [Leviticus 26:44](#), when God states that, "Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them to destroy them completely and annul My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God." The sages understand this verse as a reference to five periods in history when God protected the people of Israel.³⁰ In this verse, God states that, despite the failure of Israel to uphold the covenant, He does not sever the relationship with the people. The rabbinic interpretation on this verse, found in *Megillah* 11a, reinforces the idea that, through different exiles, God protects the people of Israel. Hence, the principle of God protecting Israel during the fulfillment of the *Tokhahah* by **accompanying** them can be seen in

action. Even after transgression, God does not reject Israel. We can exemplify this idea with R. Yehuda Ha-Levi's explanation in his book *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*,³¹ that even after the Golden Calf incident, the Jewish people never ceased being God's people, nor did the clouds of glory cease to protect the Israelites. Despite transgressions, the Almighty remained their God.

In [Leviticus 26:45](#), God states: "I will remember My covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be their God; I am the Lord." This is the divine loving-kindness shown to Israel during the time of punishment. And it serves a specific purpose: R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal) explains that, by the letter of the law, a transgressor should be punished immediately after the transgression; however, the divine loving-kindness provides time to engage in a proper *teshuvah* and make a rectification of their wrongdoings (*tikkun*).³² This explanation leads to a logical conclusion: this divine loving-kindness embedded within the divine judgement of the *Tokhahah* is the mechanism divinely designed to empower and allow Israel to survive during the punitive period, in order to do *teshuvah* and rectify their wrongdoings, and, eventually, bring the exile to an end.

³⁰ *Megillah* 11a.

³¹ [Sefer Ha-Kuzari, l:103](#)..

³² At the end of *Mesilat Yesharim* chapter 4, Ramhal explains how the attribute of divine judgment is balanced through

the attribute of divine loving-kindness, and how this principle can be used by the people in order to obtain an awareness of the divine judgment and the severity of transgression (a concept called *zehirut*, loosely translated as vigilance).

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article suggests that the *Tokhahah* is not merely a catalog of punishments for disobedience, but a powerful affirmation of enduring divine presence. Beneath the language of rebuke lies a theology of covenantal loyalty in which God does not abandon His people, even in exile or in moments of failure. The exile, which is the ultimate punishment in the *Tokhahah*, is not only a geographic reality that affects the Jewish people as a nation, but it can be understood, homiletically, as a psychological or spiritual state that can affect each individual, in which the absence of truth destabilizes the mental state of a person, making them a prisoner of their own mind.³³ As *Abir Ya'akov* taught regarding psalm 23, divine companionship empowers the ones who descend into darkness for the sake of redemption. The *Tokhahah* operates on this same principle, when, in those moments of internal disconnection from God, whether caused by missteps or compounded by inner struggle, the divine presence remains nearby, inviting one to do *teshuvah*.

Psalm 121 reminds us that, when we lift our eyes

to the mountains in search of help, our help comes from companionship (*mei-im*) with the Maker of heaven and earth. This help is a divine empowerment of the individual so that s/he may be able to come back to the divine way. The message is not merely one of comfort or consolation but of orientation, a message of return to the divine, to the source of life; in other words, it is a message of *teshuvah*. It is a path back from disconnection, a rejoining of the relationship with God that, despite the transgression, was never fully severed. R. Jonathan Sacks explains it as follows: "Exile is not an immutable fate. Returning to God, we find Him returning to us. We can restore the moral harmony of the universe."³⁴ The *Tokhahah*, then, should not be read as a passage of rejection and punishment, but as a deeply relational expression of divine concern. It becomes a profound testimony to God's unwavering presence with His people in both blessing and suffering, obedience and failure, exile and return. The *Tokhahah* is, ultimately, an embodiment of the concept of *hesed shebigevurah*, divine loving-kindness embedded within divine judgement itself.³⁵

³³ See Chapter 21 of Chaim Kramer, [*Mashiach: Who? What? Why? How? Where? When?*](#) (Breslov Research Institute, 1994), in which Kramer discusses the idea of the exile as a mental state, characterized by falsehood as a style of life in which the mind "journeys" from the truth and, as a consequence, ventures far from God.

³⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays* (Maggid, 2017).

³⁵ The author thanks R. Yitzchok I.M. Yagod of Beth Avraham in Easton, PA, for his insights and feedback on the early drafts of this article.

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