

זכרנו לחיים

MEMORY & PROMISE

HIGH HOLIDAYS

ימים נוראים

תשפ"ב | 5782



זכרנו לחיים

MEMORY AND PROMISE

We are so often carriers of the past—the paths traveled, our personal narratives, the realm of memory. And yet our minds simultaneously dwell upon the future, the journey that lies ahead, the realm of hope and promise. In this Reader, we offer you opportunities to explore both past and future, reflecting on the memories and experiences we carry with us, and daring to dream of the yet unfulfilled promise of what the future may hold.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, we insert a prayer into the Amidah: זכרנו לחיים (*zokhreinu le-hayyim*, remember us for life). In these two words, we encapsulate the great task of these High Holidays. We awaken זכירה (*zekhirah*, memory), inviting reflection upon what has transpired to bring us to this very moment, and we direct it forward, לחיים (*le-hayyim*, to life), peering down the road, imagining what good we can accomplish, and what blessings we can aspire to, in the year to come.

By learning together during these Days of Awe, we hope to share in an upward trajectory, bringing our great past into an even greater future, and looking forward to a year of health, peace, and joy.

May we all be written and sealed for a sweet new year,
The Hadar Team

The Hadar Institute

Hadar empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed. Hadar offers learning opportunities for people from all walks of Jewish life, including online courses, public lectures, week-long immersive experiences, and our online Torah and Tefillah library.

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This reader contains words of Torah, so please treat it with appropriate reverence.

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CHILDREN & FAMILIES DIVISION

Hadar's Children and Families Division is building a network of families and young adults aspiring to a shared religious vision. Through ongoing classes, a tutoring network, and meaningful resources, we are investing in the next generation and building a world animated by our core values of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed.



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Pedagogy of Partnership is an approach to Jewish education that teaches text through relationships—between learners and each other, and learners and the text. Powered by Hadar, PoP creates educational resources that instill empathy, curiosity, and responsibility toward others and Torah.



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Project Zug empowers Jews to take ownership over their learning through one-on-one *havruta* learning. We supply curated, high-quality Torah resources and a guided learning framework that enables Jews to build deep connections to each other and to our tradition. Combining facilitation and flexibility, Project Zug provides participants with the resources to learn from anywhere and at their own pace.



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Powered by Hadar and supported by Maimonides Fund, the Maimonides Moot Court Competition is the premier program for students to debate modern ethics using Jewish legal wisdom. Our high school and collegiate competitions are structured around a detailed case alongside a sourcebook of traditional and modern Jewish texts. Students construct arguments from the curated texts to address the questions presented by the case. Cases in recent years have addressed timely issues including tainted money, whisper networks, and artificial intelligence. This Reader includes the case students explored at our 2021 competitions.

HA-YOM HARAT OLAM: We Are the Creators

Rabbi Avi Strausberg

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the birth of this world that God created. In Musaf, we sing, “Today is the day the world was birthed.”¹ In the section of Zikhronot (Remembrances), we remember and acknowledge God as the One Who was there from the beginning of creation, the One Who brought all creatures into this world.

Today, the world is created, and God is its Creator. But, we, too, like God, are creators of worlds.

Every morning, in my home, creation begins anew. Each day, when my daughter wakes up, the first question we ask her is: “Who are you today?” Each morning, she has not only reinvented herself as any one of a number of characters from her favorite books and television shows, but she gives her family members corresponding new identities as well. To complete her newly created world, she similarly imagines her bedroom transforming into a doctor’s clinic, a treehouse, or a ship’s deck, as her imaginary universe comes to life.

As adults, we forget that we, too, were once builders of worlds. What comes so easily to children is more difficult for us. The moment my daughter dreams a

world into existence, she is already building it, piece by piece, character by character. And just as quickly as she builds it, she destroys it, moving on to the next world. For me, creating worlds doesn’t come so easily. As an adult, I seem to lack the imagination I once had to dream these worlds into existence. I lack the confidence to believe in my ability to build them. And I can feel the fear holding me back from destroying worlds that need to be deconstructed for the sake of the next world, a better world.

In his essay, “Destruction and Building,” Rabbi Natan Zvi Finkel teaches that this is what it means to be human: we, like God, are creators of worlds. Rabbi Finkel, also known as the Alter of Slobodka, emphasized the importance of incorporating *mussar*, ethical teachings, into the standard curriculum for traditional *yeshivot*, schools of learning. In his essay, Rabbi Finkel points to a *midrash* from Bereishit Rabbah (3:7), which imagines God creating and destroying many worlds before finally arriving at our world. According to the *midrash*, time after time, God would create worlds only to destroy them, and each time God would say, “These do not please me.” Finally, God arrives at our world, and God says, “This one pleases me.” Our world passes the test. Our world is allowed to stand, but

¹ Rosh Hashanah, or, more specifically, the month of Tishrei, is associated with the creation of the world, based on a reading of Rabbi Eliezer in Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 10b. Rabbi Eliezer proves this association between Rosh Hashanah and the creation of the world from a verse in Genesis. In the beginning of the account of creation, we read, “And God said: Let the earth bring forth grass, herb-yielding seed, and fruit-tree yielding fruit after its kind (Genesis 1:11).” Rabbi Eliezer reasons, in what month does the earth bring forth grass and the tree yield fruit? It is none other than the month of Tishrei, its beginning marked by Rosh Hashanah.

only on the ruins of so many previous iterations.

The successful creation of the world is only made possible by the creation and destruction of previous attempts. Rabbi Finkel writes,

ובעל כורחנו שגם בחורבן העולמות יש חכמה רבה,
שמתוך חכמה זו צמח בנין העולם הקיים, שהכתוב
אומר עליו: "בחכמה יסד ארץ" (משלי ג: יט). אין זה,
איפא, חורבן כלל אלא זוהי דרך החכמה, שעל ידי
הנסיגות השונים של בנין העולמות וחורבנם הוקם
היסוד שממנו נתבסס העולם.

We are forced to say that also in the destruction of the worlds, there is great wisdom, and from this wisdom, the world that exists emerged. As Scripture writes, "God founded the earth with wisdom" (Proverbs 3:19). However, this is not really destruction at all, rather it is the way of wisdom: through the different attempts to build worlds and their destruction, the foundation is established upon which the world is based.²

Rabbi Finkel teaches that in each act of destruction, there is wisdom.

This lesson runs contrary to what we instinctively believe, that destruction marks the end of something. We mourn the loss of the thing that came before; it is difficult for us to imagine a way forward out of the wreckage. Rabbi Finkel teaches us that, rather than seeing destruction simply as ruins, we must also look for the wisdom contained within destruction.

There are times when, like God, we have to take apart in order to reassemble, when demolition serves the purpose of new construction. But there are also times when destruction is forced upon us, when walls crumble against our will and for no greater purpose. In situations where destruction is foisted upon us, what lessons can we glean from the brokenness? How can this learning help us ensure that the next world is a better world?

Growing up, my dad was the center of my Jewish world. My parents were divorced, and I spent all the Jewish holidays with him. Pesah, especially, was his holiday. With a well-marked Humash in one hand and Haggadah in the other, he not only led his way through the Seder, he led us each out of Egypt. When my dad died while I was in college, my Jewish world was destroyed. I lost not only my father but my Jewish center. If I wanted a Jewish life for myself, I would have to step into the role of creator and build my own Jewish world.

His death was the end of something, but it was also the beginning of something. Had I not been forced to build a Jewish world for myself, seeking out Jewish learning and taking ownership of my own holiday and Shabbat observance, I would not be the rabbi and educator I am today. In fact, I doubt I would be a rabbi at all. But his death was also a huge loss, the destruction of a world I continue to mourn, a destruction that I didn't and wouldn't have chosen for myself. As Rabbi Finkel suggests, almost against my will, I was forced to make meaning out of the destruction. I have been taught the difficult lesson that worlds can, in the end, emerge from wreckage and loss.

Not only does God have the power to create out of destruction, but we, like God, are gifted this same ability—to find wisdom in the ruins and to create worlds on the backs of those destroyed. Rabbi Finkel writes: "this is what it means for the likeness of man to be created in the likeness of God."³ To be created in God's image means that we, like God, have the power to create and to re-create, to rebuild when there has been destruction.

Rosh Hashanah offers us a time to take stock and reflect on the events of the past year. In a year in which we've suffered so much loss, in which we've witnessed the destruction of so many worlds, this teaching calls on us to regain something many of us lost in our youth: the ability to see ourselves as builders and destroyers of worlds. This moment challenges us to be like God and, in doing so, to find wisdom in destruction and, through this wisdom, to

² Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, *Ohr Ha-Tzafun Volume III*, p. 71.

³ Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, p. 72, quoting Genesis 1:27.

not only build worlds worthy of establishment, but to destroy worlds that are not fit to stand. What did the pandemic that wreaked havoc across an entire globe teach us about our world pre-pandemic? What weaknesses were exposed? What fault lines were revealed? While we may mourn the losses that came with the destruction of these worlds, we are called to build again. We are encouraged to see ourselves as builders and creators, capable of new beginnings.

But how do we build worlds out of the ruins? Based on Rabbi Finkel's teachings, we learn that the world was founded on wisdom gained through the creation and destruction of previous worlds. However, we also learn in Psalms that the "world was built with *hesed*" (Psalm 89:3). This is a subject that Rabbi Finkel explores in another one of his essays, that from our first entrance into this world, we are the recipients of *hesed*, of a gift that cannot be repaid.

Therefore, while the world was founded on wisdom, it was built on *hesed*. If we are to be builders like God, creating from the ruins, we, too, must build worlds with wisdom and through generative acts of *hesed*. In his essay, "Attributes and Knowledge," Rabbi Finkel writes,

כל העולמות התחתונים והעליונים... כולם נבראו
במדת החסד, ובה נוצרה הבריאה כולה. ומכיון
שנתייב האדם להיות דומה אל השי"ת במדותיו, הרי
שגם עליו לברוא עולמות כמותו: (שבת קלג): 'מה הוא
רחום אף אתה היה רחום וכו' "

*All of the lower and upper worlds... were created with the attribute of hesed, and with hesed, all of creation was formed. Because a person is obligated to be similar to God in all of God's attributes, so, too, it is upon a person to create worlds like God, as it is taught, "Be similar to God. Just as God is merciful and compassionate, so, too, you should be merciful and compassionate."*⁴

We are not only endowed with the potential to build worlds as God does. According to Rabbi Finkel, we are also obligated to create worlds in the same manner as God, worlds founded on *hesed* in their very essence.

Just as God creates with wisdom out of destruction, so, too, we must take stock, reassess, and rebuild new worlds that are more just, more elevated than the ones that came before. Just as God creates worlds built upon *hesed*, so, too, we must create through *hesed*.

The past year and a half has brought with it the destruction of many worlds that we may have loved and taken for granted. For many months, we found ourselves cut off from our family and friends, facing experiences of work and community drastically different from those to which we were accustomed. But now is the moment to begin rebuilding. We have the opportunity to reconstitute these worlds; the way to do so is through acts of *hesed*. Acts of *hesed* imbue us with hope. They help us imagine that there might be a path forward. They tether us together more tightly, one act of caring at a time.

What does a world built upon *hesed* look like? It looks like sending over a care package of unicorn stickers and a slice of cake to friends with young kids with the hopes of giving them twenty minutes of pure delight. It looks like making an extra *hallah* each week and dropping it off at a neighbor's. It looks like bringing someone several hand-chosen plants, a promise of new life to come.

The destruction and creation of worlds didn't stop with the creation of our world. Rather, throughout our Jewish story, we have seen worlds destroyed and recreated thanks to human resilience and perseverance. After a flood that nearly wiped out all of humanity, after hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, after exile after exile, after the Holocaust, worlds were destroyed and yet, on the ruins of each of those worlds, we began again. We took stock, we reassessed, we rebuilt. This year, on this day in which we celebrate the creation of the world, let's act like kids again. Alongside God, we can imagine the next world to come and step into the role of builders ourselves. As you look forward to the months of rebuilding to come, ask yourself: how will you help to rebuild? What acts of *hesed*, what possibility and hope will you bring to the world? How will you be like God? ♦

4 Rabbi Natan Zvi Finkel, p. 9, citing Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b.

THE GOD OF HAGAR

Rabbi Tali Adler

There is a script for mothers of sick children.

There are imperatives: do everything. Seek a second opinion, and a third, and a fourth. Learn to sleep sitting up. Show up to doctors' appointments prepared with a binder the size of a local phonebook. Ask every question; pursue every option.

And never, ever give up.

Mothers who give up are our collective societal horror. We need to know that we were once loved unconditionally. A mother who leaves—even if only for a moment, even if only for a night of rest, even if only to look away from the chaos around her—makes us wonder if we ever really were.

And so, mothers of sick children stay silent about the moments when they fail. When you are the mother of a sick child, there is no one to tell about the day you left the NICU too early because one more second of beeping machines and sudden alarms would have been too much, or the moment you looked away from your own child because the sight of your baby hooked up to tubes was unbearable. When you are the mother of a sick child, you become afraid to admit those moments to anyone, even to yourself.

For those mothers, when our world offers nothing, Bereishit offers the God of Hagar.

Hagar is unique among the mothers in Bereishit. She is, according to so many of our societal standards, a dubious mother at best. She does not long or pray

for a child like the other matriarchs. Her pregnancy is planned, but not by her. Her child was a dream to fulfill someone else's destiny, and the day that she is banished, the day that her son becomes, according to everyone's understanding, truly hers, may have been the worst day of her life.

Alone with her son, expelled from Avraham's house, Hagar wanders alone in the desert. When the water runs out, Hagar places her son under a tree and walks away because she can't bear to see her child die.

In a book of believers—men who follow God to unknown lands and offer their long-awaited children up for sacrifice, and women who pray for babies at any cost—Hagar is the first parent to despair.

In our world, we might expect Hagar to be met with frowns and whispers. In the world of the Torah, we might expect divine reproof. Reading the story for the first time, we have every reason to expect Hagar's moment of weakness to be met with anger and disappointment by the God who issued Hagar promises that she no longer believes.

Instead, God offers compassion.

בראשית כא:יז-יח

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּזְכֹּר מִלְאֵף אֱלֹקִים
אֶל־הַגֵּר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֵה־לֶּךָ הַגֵּר אֶל־תִּירָאִי
כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם: קוֹמִי
שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר וְהִזְזִיקִי אֶת־יָדְךָ בּוֹ כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל
אֲשִׁימְנוּ:

Bereishit 21:17-18

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

God guides Hagar back to her son, teaching her how to be with him. In this moment, before He is an issuer of promises, God is the gentle presence Who teaches a frightened mother how to hold her own child's hand. For Hagar, God is the One Who understands human frailty and maternal fear. In this story, God becomes the One Who will sit at a child's hospital bed when his mother needs to walk away, Who will welcome her back without judgment.

The God of Hagar is the God of every mother who has flinched, every mother who has stolen an extra five minutes outside the hospital room. The God of Hagar is the God of every father who has doubted whether his teenage son will survive this bout of depression. The God of Hagar is the God of every parent of an addict who has wondered whether it is time to lock the door.

The God of Hagar is the God of failed believers.

The God of Hagar is the God of each of us who has violated the ultimate imperative: never give up.

In those moments, when our faith wavers, the other paradigms we are given on Rosh Hashanah can be inaccessible. We cannot always be Avraham, believing in impossible promises. We cannot always be Hannah, ready to negotiate with God after years of dashed hopes.

Some days, we are Hagar, hopeless in a way the world around us cannot tolerate.

On those days, Hagar's story becomes a promise: God's love for us is not dependent on our strength. God is with us even when we flinch, even when we look away. God is with us even in the moments when we have given up. God is with us even when, if only for an instant, we have walked away from the people we love most.

And God will be there, when we are ready, to teach us how to walk back in and hold their hands again. ♦



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A Passing Shadow

An Excerpt of a Project Zug Course from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

IN THIS SECTION, WE WILL LOOK AT PART OF ONE OF THE CENTRAL PRAYERS OF THE HIGH holiday experience: Unetaneh Tokef, which we pray in the repetition of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This prayer has the famous lines, so poignantly clear, that ask: “Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by water?”

In approaching this poem from a literary perspective, notice a guiding word (*leitmotif*) in the poem: the root, עבר, meaning, “to pass.” This root appears seven times in the prayer, and serves as the key to unlock a deeper set of meanings in this prayer. Specifically, we will look at the root, עבר, and its references in the Bible to discover a picture of God that is much more complex and nuanced than is offered by only a first glance at the poem.

First, we will look at the root, עבר, as it appears in the liturgical poem itself. What image of God is presented in each of these passages? How do you feel about this kind of God?

SOURCE #1

וּנְתַנֵּה תִקְוָה

Unetaneh Tokef

(translation adapted from Joel Hoffman,
Who By Fire, Who By Water)

...וְכֹל בָּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבְרוּן לְפָנֶיךָ כְּבָנֵי מִרְוֶן.

...And all who enter the world will pass
before Him like soldiers.

כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עֹדֵרוֹ. מַעֲבִיר צֹאנוּ תַּחַת שְׂבָטוֹ. בֵּן

As a shepherd searches for his flock /

<p>תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נִפְשׁ כָּל חַי... כַּמֶּה יַעֲבִרוּן וְכַמֶּה יִבְרָאוּן מִי יַחֲיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת... וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתִפְלָה וְצִדְקָה מִעֲבִירִין אֶת רַע הַגְּזֵרָה... אָדָם יִסּוּדוֹ מֵעֶפֶר, וְסוּפוֹ לְעֶפֶר בְּנִפְשׁוֹ יָבִיא לְחִמּוֹ מִשׁוּל כְּחָרָם הַנִּשְׁפָּר כְּחֹצֵיר יָבֵשׁ וְכֹצִיץ נוֹבֵל כְּצֶל עוֹבֵר וְכַעֲנַן כְּלָה וְכָרוּחַ נוֹשֶׁבֶת וְכֶאֱבֶק פּוֹרֵחַ וְכַחֲלוֹם יַעֲוֶף. וְאַתָּה הוּא מֶלֶךְ א-ל-חַי וְקַיִם...</p>	<p>passing his sheep under his staff / so too will You cause to pass and record and recount / and review every living being... How many will pass on, and how many will be created / who will live and who will die?... But repentance, prayer, and charity help the misfortune of the decree to pass... A person's origin is from dust / and their end is dust. At their peril gathering food / like shattered pottery / like withered grass and like a faded blossom / like a passing shadow and like a vanishing cloud / and like blowing wind, and like floating dust / and like a dream that will fly away. But You are King / the living and everlasting God...</p>
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Now that we have seen the *leitmotif* in the poem itself, let us turn to Psalms to see the intertext for the final image from Unetaneh Tokef that draws on the root, עבר, that of a passing shadow.

SOURCE #2

<p>תהלים קמד:ד-ז אָדָם לְהֵבֵל דָּמָה יָמָיו כְּצֶל עוֹבֵר: ה' הִטְשָׁמִיד וְתִרְדַּ גַּע בְּהָרִים וַיַּעֲשָׂנוּ:</p>	<p>Psalm 144:4-7 4A person is like breath; his days like a passing shadow. 5O YHVH, bend Your sky and come down; touch the mountains and they will smoke.</p>
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בְּרוּק בְּרֵק וּתְפִיִצֵם שְׁלַח חֲצִיךְ וּתְהַמֵּם:

⁶Make lightning flash and scatter them;
shoot Your arrows and rout them.

שְׁלַח יָדְךָ מִמְּרוֹם פְּצַנִי וְהַצִּילֵנִי מִמַּיִם רַבִּים מִיַּד בְּנֵי
נִכְרִ:

⁷Reach Your hand down from on high;
rescue me, save me from the mighty waters,
from the hands of foreigners.

Explanation from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

We might understand the phrase “his days like a passing shadow” in two ways. In our first reading, the Psalmist notes his own frailty and vulnerability. He says to God, “I am like breath, I am nothing without You,” and then asks God to intervene on his behalf. “His days like a passing shadow” reflects the smallness of human beings and their need for God’s help. But, at the same time that these words seem to suggest a person’s smallness, the Psalmist musters the courage to call out directly to God. Perhaps, if the Psalmist is able to stand before God, demanding that God make lightning flash and rescue him, he feels himself worthy after all.

Take a Step Back

1. *If we place ourselves in the shoes of the Psalmist, what is the experience of standing before God on the Day of Judgment as we say these words?*
2. *Do we experience ourselves as frail and vulnerable before God? Or, do we stand with a sense of self-worth?*
3. *Should the forgiveness we seek be seen as an undeserved gift, or as something we are justified in requesting?*

GOD, OUR MOTHER

Rabbi Miriam-Simma Walfish

The images of God as “Father” and “King” reverberate throughout the High Holiday liturgy. On Rosh Hashanah, however, another aspect of God’s presence in our lives comes to the fore as well: God as mother.¹

1. RACHEL’S TEARS

The Haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah showcases the maternal side of God by featuring our biblical foremother, Rachel, weeping for us, her children:

ירמיה לא:טו-יז

בַּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רָחֵל
מִבְּכָה עַל-בָּנֶיהָ מֵאֲנָה לְהִנָּחַם עַל-בָּנֶיהָ כִּי אֵינָנּוּ:
בַּה אָמַר ה' מִנְעִי קוֹלֶךָ מִבְּכִי וְעֵינַיִךְ מִדִּמְעָה כִּי יֵשׁ
שָׂכָר לְכַעֲלֹתְךָ נְאֻם-ה' וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ אוֹיֵב: וְיֵשׁ-תִּקְוָה
לְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ נְאֻם-ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגִבּוֹלָם:

Jeremiah 31:15-17

Thus said God: A cry is heard in Ramah—wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. Thus said God: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor—declares God: They shall return from the enemy’s land. And there is

hope for your future—declares God: Your children shall return to their country.

In these verses, Rachel weeps, and God promises that her children will return to their land. According to a *midrash* in Eikhah Rabbah (Petihta 24), it is Rachel’s role as mother that encourages God to return to God’s people. There, the forefathers and Moses all try to convince God to take the Israelites out of exile, but none of them succeeds. Rachel is the only one who can change God’s mind. She implores God not to be jealous, saying “You, Who are an everlasting, merciful King, why should You be jealous of idols that have no substance, and You exiled my children, and they are killed by the sword, and their enemies have done with them as they will!”

The *midrash* is an acknowledgement of the different relational modes through which we might view our relationship with God. Rachel’s argument for God’s forgiveness is not that Israel has done nothing wrong. It isn’t even that Israel longs for a relationship with God. To the contrary—she says that Israel has sinned; Israel has worshipped idols. In the common prophetic trope of Israel as a straying wife, this infidelity is damning; it abrogates the bonds that tie the nation to God.² But jealousy has no place, says Rachel, if

¹ In her book, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2018), Mara Benjamin argues that the physical and psychological work of caring for young children, which was considered “women’s work” for centuries, is fruitful ground for exploring the relationship between us and the divine. Following Benjamin, I use the terms “mother” and “maternal” not as an attempt to link these attributes to a specific gender, but to elevate traits once seen as feminine and maternal as desirable traits for all genders to embrace. Benjamin’s influence on this essay can be seen throughout.

² See, e.g., Hosea 2:4.

God is our mother, rather than our spouse. When a child disobeys her parent, the parent cannot simply sever that tie. As Mara Benjamin writes: “This bond [between Israel and God], unbreakable once forged, comes from a wellspring at the heart of God’s being.”³ Once God enters into a maternal relationship with us, it is unshakable. A spouse or a sovereign can be betrayed, but jealousy has no place in the maternal relationship. God is bound by the bonds of maternal connection. Rachel’s words and tears call God back to that maternal mode, a mode God inhabited at the time of the Exodus.⁴ God rewards Rachel’s tears, promising to return the exiled nation to its land.

The Zikhronot (Rememberances) section of Rosh Hashanah Musaf quotes God’s recognition of this reframing from the continuation of the Haftarah: “Is Ephraim my darling child? Is he a beloved boy? For when I speak of him, I very much remember him still; therefore My insides yearn for him, I will surely have compassion (*raheim arahamenu*) upon him—declares God” (Jeremiah 31:20). In this verse, God expresses an ambivalence that will feel familiar to many parents. On Rosh Hashanah, God may be disappointed in our transgressions; God may lament that we fall short of our best selves. But as a mother, God will have *rahimim*, “wombiness,” towards us, compassionately forgiving those sins and reconnecting.⁵ The indestructible relationship between parent and child, even in the face of the child’s betrayal, is a lesson that God can learn only from Rachel Immeinu, our mother, Rachel. Her pleas to God were preceded by similar attempts from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and even Moses. But only Rachel can remind God of the eternally durable maternal bond.

The Haftarah and the Zikhronot section of Musaf, therefore, offer an alternative model for imagining God. In these moments, we beg God to approach us

from the vantage of maternal *rahimim* rather than kingly *din* (judgment). Although we have sinned this year, and though we have not held our relationship with God as tightly as we should have, God holds us in God’s maternal arms.

2. MATERNAL KNOWING

When we put on this lens, we can see the maternal even in Unetaneh Tokef, one of the most king- and judgment-focused of prayers. A central moment in that prayer imagines God as a shepherd, scrutinizing each creature, one by one, as it passes under God’s staff:

וְכָל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבִרוּן לְפָנֶיךָ כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן בְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה
 אֶדְרוּ מֵעֵבִיר צֹאנוּ תַחַת שֶׁבֶטוֹ בֵּן תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּד
 וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נַפְשׁ כָּל חַי וְתִחְתֹּף קִצְבָה לְכָל בְּרִיָּה
 וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר דְּיָנָם.

And all creatures shall parade before You as a herd of sheep. As a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do You pass, count, and record the souls of all living beings, and decree a limit to each person’s days, and inscribe their final judgment.

This paragraph highlights the *din*-focused nature of God’s kingship. God judges each creature and records its verdict for the coming year. The image is a powerful one—it invites us to examine ourselves, subjecting our own souls to that same scrutiny, which, for some of us, is a necessary step towards repentance. But this image is also an impersonal one. Sheep have no free will or agency; so too, in this image, our fate has already been determined by our actions, and God’s examination is critical, seeking out blemishes. However, this paragraph also brings to life the second *mishnah* of Rosh Hashanah:

³ Benjamin, p. 26.

⁴ Ilana Pardes sketches the ways that the Exodus narrative reads as a birthing: “The plagues in Egypt, coming wave upon wave with momentary reprieves, suggest painful labor contractions. Israel’s passage through the ‘narrow straits,’ and the Red Sea evoke the breaking of the waters and the journey through the birth canal” (summarized in Benjamin, pp. 64-65). A *midrash*, too (Yalkut Shimoni Va’Era 182) imagines God providing breasts from which the Israelite infants suckle.

⁵ The word *rahimim* comes from the same root as the word *rehem*, meaning womb. See also Isaiah 49:15, where the prophet chastises the people for believing that God has abandoned them, playing with words for mercy and womb: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb (*meirahem ben-bitnah*)?”

משנה ראש השנה א:ב

בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון. בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון. שנאמר (תהלים לג:טו) "היוצר יחד לבם המבין אל כל מעשיהם" ...

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2

At four times, the world is judged:... On Rosh Hashanah, all the world passes before God like benei maron, as it says, "The One Who fashions the hearts of them all, who considers all their doings" (Psalm 33:15).

The *mishnah* says that, on Rosh Hashanah, all the creatures of the world pass before God like *benei maron*, a cryptic phrase that the poet of Unetaneh Tokef understood to mean "sheep."⁶ Mysteriously, the verse that this *mishnah* cites as support for the *benei maron* image is Psalm 33: "The one who fashions their hearts, who understands all of their deeds." On the surface, this verse might be understood to mean that because God created us, God knows us inside and out and can evaluate our every motive and intention. But is it really true that creating something leads to understanding it? Additionally, if God already understands all of our actions, why must we pass before God for scrutiny?

Attention to the maternal model of the relationship with God highlights the connection between creation and understanding. The psalmist invokes the word *yotzer*, meaning to create or fashion. The prophet Isaiah refers to God with the same root in the context of the womb: "who formed me from the womb (*yotzri mi-beten*)" (Isaiah 49:5). God's creation here is an act of birthing and of parenting.⁷ Benjamin writes, "God's maternal teaching... consists not primarily in birthing but also in the nurturing, tedious, and frustrating work of caring for the newborn nation."⁸ As much as parents might wish that their children were blank slates onto whom they can imprint their culture and values, in reality, children have their own wills,

desires, and personalities, which the parents must learn and respond to adaptively. So, too, God, with all of God's children, must wrestle with our distinctive wills, desires, and personalities. This, then, is perhaps what the Psalmist means when he writes "the one who fashions the hearts of them all is the one who understands all of their deeds." Understanding one's children is not a one-and-done event. Rather, God needs us to pass as *benei maron* on Rosh Hashanah because this "understanding" is the continual process of parenting—an understanding here, a misunderstanding there, and a re-understanding over and over again. Parents of young children cannot possibly know their children when they emerge, nor can they understand their every action. The act of parenting is a constant activity of coming to know. God's birthing us does not instantaneously create God's knowledge of us; rather, it puts God in a maternal relationship with us. That maternal relationship obligates God to seek knowledge of us, continually re-understanding us and our actions. Indeed, "God's love for his people is maternal love amplified: dynamic, volatile, and keenly attentive."⁹

The liturgy of the months of Elul and Tishrei is littered with cries of "Avinu Malkeinu / our Father our King." The paternal and sovereign aspects of God take center stage. But in the Haftarah, in Zikhronot, and even in the allusive background of Unetaneh Tokef, we remember that God also has a maternal relationship with us. God is our Mother, and it is precisely that maternal role that demands that God not give up on us. It is this relationship, specifically, which generates the forgiveness we so desperately seek, despite our obvious guilt. This mother-child bond will bring us into greater understanding with God, and ultimately, will be the catalyst of our redemption. ♦

6 The poet follows the Babylonians' interpretation found in Talmud Rosh Hashanah 18a. Of the three interpretations given by the Talmud, the one offered there by Shmuel is likely the correct, historical explanation: it is probably a corruption of the Latin "numeron = soldiers." See, e.g., Albeck's commentary to this *mishnah*.

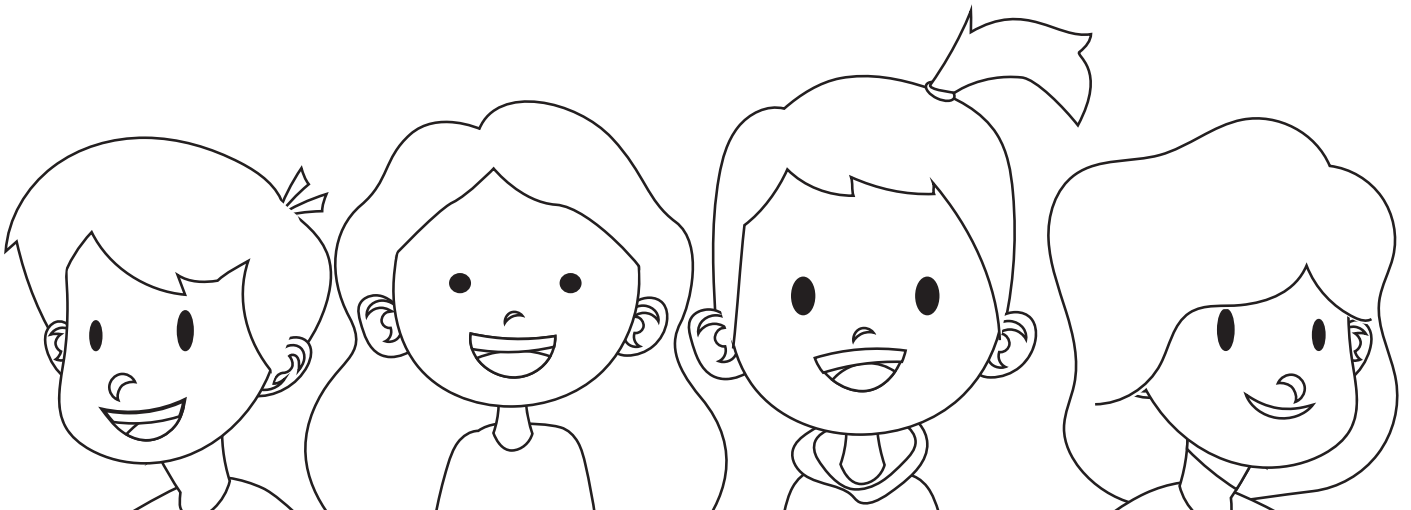
7 It is fitting that God in the verse from Psalms is a birther, a *yotzer*, because the verse also says that God understands, *meivin*, our actions, a word that relates to *binah*, which, in Kabbalah, stands for God's womb.

8 Benjamin, p. 65.

9 Benjamin, p. 32.

Make a time capsule!

One of the traditional names of Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance. As we begin a new year, we invite you to use these questions to think back on the year that is ending, and look ahead to the year that is beginning. You can do this on your own or as a family, and you can save your time capsule to open together next year for Rosh Hashanah 5783.



Questions for kids:

1. How old are you today?
2. What makes you special?
3. What are five things you are thankful for?
4. If you could have any superpower, what would it be and how would you use it?
5. What is a *mitzvah* you are proud of doing this year?
6. When were you brave this year?
7. What is something you want to learn next year?
8. What is something you want to get better at next year?
9. What do you want to be when you grow up?
10. If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

Questions for adults:

1. Where were you last Rosh Hashanah? How will this one be the same or different?
2. What inspired you this year?
3. What are ten things you are thankful for?
4. What are two accomplishments you are proud of from this past year?
5. What is something you want to let go of from this year?
6. Where is a place you hope to visit next year?
7. What is the most important lesson you learned this year?
8. What are three ways you would like to grow and improve yourself this coming year?
9. What relationship do you want to strengthen this year?
10. If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

THE PRIEST WITH BLOOD ON HIS HANDS:

The Limits to *Teshuvah*

Dena Weiss

Teshuvah is one of the most powerful and most necessary elements of living a life of goodness and growth. What would become of us if we could not atone for our sins, and what kind of people would we be if we did not feel compelled to right our wrongs and become better people? Throughout these Days of Awe, we rightly focus on the ways in which *teshuvah* is great, the ways in which it is essential and healing. We revel in and rely on *teshuvah's* incredible capacity. What we don't focus on, but perhaps should, is the way in which *teshuvah* is also tragically limited. There are things that even the most sincere *teshuvah* cannot rectify and cannot fully address. Perhaps, on a metaphysical level, we become new people and turn a fresh page, but, in the real world, much remains irreversible and, unfortunately, unredeemed.

We learn about *teshuvah's* limitations from the laws of who can and cannot recite the Priestly Blessing. Bestowing God's *berakhah* is an important job. Not everyone gets to be a Kohen and not every Kohen is considered qualified to bless the people. And, in fact, one type of Kohen, no matter how stellar his lineage and how pure his pedigree, is disqualified from performing this most basic priestly function:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות לה:

א"ר יוחנן כל כהן שהרג את הנפש לא ישא את כפיו שנא' "וּבְכַפְרֵשְׁכֶם כְּפִיכֶם אֶעֱלִים עֵינֵי מִנְּכֶם גַּם כִּי תִרְבּוּ תִפְלֶה אֵינֶנִּי שְׂמַעַן יְדִיכֶם דְּמַיִם מְלֵאוּ" (ישעיה א:טו).

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 35b

R. Yoḥanan said: Any Kohen that killed a person

shall not lift his hands [to recite the Priestly Blessing], as it says: "[When you spread out your hands, I will avert My eye from you; even when you pray copiously, I will not listen;] your hands are full of blood" (Yeshayahu 1:15).

The Gemara in Berakhot disqualifies the Kohen with blood on his hands but fails to discuss an important "what if:" what if the Kohen has done *teshuvah*? If the Kohen has asked for and received forgiveness, is his status reinstated? May he now bless the people?

This question is addressed in the halakhic literature and finds clear expression in a debate between R. Yosef Karo, author of the Shulḥan Arukh, and R. Moshe Isserles (the Rema), who glossed the Shulḥan Arukh with his differing opinions:

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים קכה:לה

כהן שהרג את הנפש אפילו בשוגג לא ישא את כפיו אפילו עשה תשובה.

הגה: ויש אומרים דאם עשה תשובה נושא כפיו ויש להקל על בעלי תשובה שלא לנעול דלת בפניהם והכי נהוג.

Shulḥan Arukh Orah Ḥayyim 128:35

A Kohen who has killed a person, even accidentally, may not lift his hands [to bless the people], even if he has done teshuvah.

Gloss: There are those who say that if he did teshuvah, he may lift his hands. And it is appropri-

ate to be lenient with penitents, so as not to shut the door in their faces. And this is the practice.

The Rema's approach seems quite reasonable and in line with the Rabbinic emphasis on the importance and efficacy of *teshuvah*—once someone has done *teshuvah*, we reinstate them. A Kohen who was invalidated can return to his post if he does *teshuvah* because we want to encourage this person, and people like him, to repent. However, the Shulhan Arukh maintains a hardline stance and reads the Gemara in Berakhot as having a maximizing, disqualifying effect. He states explicitly that, even if the killing were accidental and even if the Kohen has done *teshuvah*, he is still not allowed to bestow the blessing. The *teshuvah* he does has no effect; it does not matter. A Kohen who is responsible for loss of life can never recite the Priestly Blessing again.

The Shulhan Arukh is simply not willing to readmit this rehabilitated Kohen. Even once he does *teshuvah*, his hands are still considered to be full of blood; nothing he says or does can reverse that. I think the explanation of this position is as simple as it is devastating: though sincere, the Kohen's repentance has not done a thing to bring his victim back to life. *Teshuvah* works when it comes to bringing us closer to God, when it comes to mending relationships; it helps us to reform our behavior, to make us better people. But *teshuvah* is not a time machine, and it does not and cannot undo what happened in the past. Some wounds will heal, but some acts are profoundly irreversible. Maybe after he repents, we no longer consider this Kohen a murderer, but we cannot forget that he has killed. To allow him to raise the hands that have taken a life and use them to bless the people with peace is too incongruous. We forgive, but we don't forget.

This is not to say that *teshuvah* is pointless because what is done is done and we cannot change the past. The lesson to be learned here is not that sometimes we should not bother with doing *teshuvah*! Rather, it gives us insight into the fullness of what *teshuvah* requires and what it might look like. What we learn is that a proper course of *teshuvah* incorporates an awareness of the impact of our actions and does not attempt to use repentance as a way to pretend that we haven't done what we have. We learn from this Kohen to acknowledge the way that *teshuvah* is limited

and to act responsibly within those limits. Part of the *teshuvah* process is identifying and fully accepting the irreversible effects of our behavior. Sometimes, what it means to truly repent is to be prepared to live out the rest of our lives continuing to bear responsibility for our actions. A truly penitent Kohen will understand this and gracefully step away from this role.

Sometimes, in our attempts to reconcile and to feel atoned for, we try to go back to the way things were, to put the past behind us. But, sometimes, we need to acknowledge that total closure may be impossible. And that's ok. A person can forgive us and nevertheless not want us to be a presence in their life anymore. That is their prerogative as the aggrieved. Maybe seeing us is triggering or painful. Or maybe having us in their life keeps them from moving on. As awkward as it is, after the apology should come the question: would you like us to go back to being friends? Would an invitation to my home be welcome or unwelcome? Do you need time, and would you like me to wait to contact you until you contact me first? This does not make our repentance any less complete; it makes it more realistic and more respectful.

R. Yoḥanan's principle isn't only about the extreme cases of priests and murder. It is about each and every one of us. It teaches us that a complete and authentic *teshuvah* requires us to know our place and to be willing to step aside in order to spare the feelings of others. To truly do *teshuvah* and to understand how it works involves accepting how it and we are limited. There is much we can do to engender healing, and we must do all that we can, but it is also important for us to acknowledge what will not heal and learn to live with what we cannot change. ♦

GOING IN DEEP: What It Takes to Really Change

Rabbi Shai Held

Deuteronomy imagines a day when, after harrowing exile, Israel will repent and be reconciled with God. Commenting on what he takes to be the text's insistence that *teshuvah* (repentance) is accessible and close at hand, one Jewish philosopher lauds repentance for its "ease." Yet for many of us, the very opposite seems to be the case: we experience real repentance as difficult and demanding, and sometimes even grueling.

After suffering torturous punishment, Deuteronomy tell us, Israel will undergo a change of heart.¹ It will return to God and wholeheartedly heed God's command. God, in turn, will restore the people's fortunes and bring them back to the Land. Israel will take possession of the Land and be showered with blessing (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). In the span of ten verses describing the reconciliation between Israel and

God, Parashat Nitzavim uses the root *shuv* (return/repentance) no fewer than seven times. The theme of divine-human reciprocity is emphasized through a chiasmic pattern: Israel acts twice, then God acts twice, and then Israel, followed by God, and finally Israel again.² These verses suggest, Walter Brueggemann writes, "a glad, unrestrained, uncalculating mutuality of two parties, [God] and Israel, who are glad to be back together after the hiatus of exile. They are eager to make the new relationship work."³ There is thus enormous (and obvious) power in these verses being connected to the Days of Awe (Yamim Nora'im), when Jews are engaged in the work of soul-searching and return. R. Meir Leibush Weiser (Malbim) observes that the process of Israel's repentance also intensifies as it goes. While at first Israel returns only "toward" (*ad*) God (30:2), ultimately it returns "unto" (*el*) God (30:10).⁴

¹ Most scholars understand our chapter to be suggesting that the people will return to God, after which God will turn back to them. See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004), pp. 1028. But cf. Marc Zvi Brettler, "Predestination in Deuteronomy 30.1-10" in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Linda S. Schearing (1999), pp. 171-188, who sees the restoration of Israel in Deuteronomy 30 as a result of God's actions rather than a mutual process set in motion by the people's repentance. And cf. the different manuscript versions of Nahmanides' commentary to these verses, which I have briefly discussed in my essay on Parashat Eikev, "Will and Grace, Or: Who Will Circumcise Our Hearts?," available here: <http://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/will-and-grace>.

² Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (1996), pp. 283-284.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (2001), p. 269.

⁴ Cf. Nehama Leibowitz' interpretation of Malbim's words: "In verse two the first stage of religious awakening is being described, the turning towards God, when man directs his attention to the right path and is ready to listen. Verse 10 speaks of the consummation of actual repentance, the final stage of turning to God... and not merely focussing himself in the right direction." Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim-Deuteronomy*, trans. Aryeh Newman (1993), p. 312.

Four striking verses follow upon this scene of repentance and restoration:

דברים ל:יא-יד

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלְאֹת
הוּא מְמֻדָּה וְלֹא רְחוּקָה הוּא: לֹא בְשָׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי
יַעֲלֶה־לָנוּ הַשְּׁמַיְמָה וְיִצְחָקָה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָה:
וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם
וְיִצְחָקָה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָה: ידְבִי־קְרוֹב אֵלַיךְ
הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּכִפְיךְ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

Virtually all modern Bible scholars agree that the "Instruction" spoken of here is "the law and teachings of Deuteronomy,"⁵ "the instruction which the people should follow in its entirety and by which they exemplify their devotion to God."⁶ This is also the interpretation of at least one talmudic Sage (Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 55a) and of Rashi (on Deuteronomy 30:12). But an array of traditional commentators insists that these verses are continuous with the ones that immediately precede them. Since those verses dealt with the charge to repent, so, too, do these.⁷ Nahmanides (Ramban), for example, avers that God

wants Israel to remember that even in the very depths of exile, *teshuvah* is "not too hard, not far off from you, but is rather 'very close to you,' such that you can do it at any time and in any place." In a similar vein, R. Joseph Albo argues that our verses point to "the importance of [*teshuvah*] and the ease with which it may be done" (Sefer Ha-Ikkarim, IV: 25).

For many readers, there is no doubt something odd, even jarring, about R. Albo's insistence that *teshuvah* is "easy."⁸ If the possibility of self-transformation leading to renewed closeness with God is really "very close to us," why do so many (most? all?) people find it so hard to change? Why is it that, in the words of a classic popular song, "after changes upon changes we are more or less the same"?

The Hasidic Master, R. Shalom Noah Berezhovsky, maintains that although many of us are convinced that we genuinely want to repent, most of us lack the courage required to go deep inside our inner worlds and repair what is broken. We thus prefer to tinker rather than transform.

R. Berezhovsky offers a powerful—and disturbing—parable. "The task of a person," he writes, "is like that of a person who is building an elaborate house on a foundation of rubble." If we are unwilling to invest the money and effort required to build a solid foundation, the building will be unstable, and cracks will appear again and again. Time and again we will spend money on fixing the latest crack, but these repeated investments will accomplish nothing because more cracks will inevitably emerge. Under such circumstances, "the house remains perpetually in danger of collapse." There is only one alternative to this futile flushing

⁵ See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 286.

⁶ Dalit Rom-Shiloni, in Beth Alpert Nakhai, in Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *Torah: A Women's Commentary* (2008), p. 1226.

⁷ Beyond the two cited in what follows, additional commentators who maintain that these verses deal with repentance include R. Obadiah Seforno; R. Shlomoh Ephraim Luntschitz, Keli Yakar (second interpretation); R. Isaac Abravanel; and R. Meir Simḥah of Dvinsk, Meshekh Hōkhmah, to Deuteronomy 30:11.

⁸ I am not certain whether Ramban would embrace Albo's description of *teshuvah* as easy. One could argue that there is a difference between saying that *teshuvah* is "not too hard" and "not far off from you," as Ramban does (following Deuteronomy), and maintaining that it is easy, as Albo does. Although the contention that "you can do it at any time and in any place" surely sounds like a statement about ease, it may refer to *teshuvah* being possible rather than easy (on which see below). The matter requires further investigation. If Nahmanides would in fact agree with the interpretation I suggest below, how much the better.

away of energy and funds, Berezovsky avers: “to have the courage to destroy the whole structure of the house and to dig deep and strong foundations. On top of those foundations, [a person] can build and establish a strong building.”

The point of the parable should be clear: changing who we are has a great deal in common with erecting a building. Each year, says Berezovsky, we introduce improvements of various kinds into our “spiritual home” (*bayit ruhani*), “but nevertheless when [the edifice] isn’t built on solid foundations, new cracks and fissures appear year after year, and [our] spiritual home remains always in danger of collapse.” Unless we find the courage to go in deep inside ourselves, our fixing of cracks will be frantic but fruitless. We are challenged to learn, Berezovsky writes, that “none of these [minor] repairs will solve the problem of [our] lives until [we] dig deep foundations and first root out the root that yields gall and wormwood [i.e. the root of our sinful behavior]—then [we] can build a structure that endures forever” (Netivot Shalom, Teshuvah, #9).

The image of tearing down a building may be jarring,⁹ but it points to a crucial lesson—one which many of us generally resist learning: if we are not willing to deal with the deep issues that all too often lie beneath the surface of our consciousness, those issues can sabotage our lives—cause the building to collapse, in Berezovsky’s words—over and over again. Let’s take a concrete example from the interpersonal realm. Aware that we have spoken cruelly about a coworker, we reprimand ourselves and commit to speaking differently about her in the future. But then, seemingly despite ourselves (at least at first), we find ourselves disparaging her again—or, if our resolve in this one instance holds up, we notice ourselves belittling someone else instead. Or perhaps, if we manage to guard our tongue, we find other means to undermine and devalue those around us. Unless and until we are

willing to turn inward and ask what it is that makes us jealous, petty, competitive, and unforgiving—we will not change in deep and enduring ways. Just as we fix one crack, another will appear. We can try to repair this pattern of action or that, but in order to repent fully, we need to work on who we are at the deepest levels, not just on what we did.

Taking Berezovsky’s parable to heart, we would surely not conclude that *teshuvah* is easy.

The plain sense of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 is that it is discussing Deuteronomy as a whole, and not merely Israel’s obligation to repent. But let’s assume for a moment that we wish to maintain the view that in these verses the Torah has *teshuvah* in view. What do the phrases “not too baffling” and “not beyond reach” suggest about repentance? “Not too baffling” means that what is required in order for us to repent is not beyond our comprehension; though our resistance may be strong, the path is, in fact, known to us. “Not beyond reach” means that repentance is doable. If we set our hearts to it,¹⁰ we can change who we are and re-engage more deeply with God. But doable and easy are decidedly not the same thing. Authentic repentance is doable, but it is far from easy.

In Deuteronomy’s words, the key to repentance “is not in the heavens,” nor is it “beyond the sea.” Where is it? It is “very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart.” To repent, in other words, is to turn inward. But crucially, turning inward is not the final goal; on the contrary, we turn inward so that we may again—and more deeply—turn outward, to God and to one another.

Addressing a newly restored community living under Persian rule, the prophet Zechariah exhorts the people not to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. “Return (*shuvu*) to Me,” he hears God say, “and I will return (*ashuvah*) to you” (Zechariah 1:3).¹¹ With these

9 What is lost in the parable, I think, is the fact that the process of turning inward to “repair the foundations” often requires extreme care and gentleness. The image of tearing down a house has the potential to obscure that crucial psychological dimension of *teshuvah*.

10 But cf. Deuteronomy 30:6, which suggests that we need God to circumcise our hearts. And cf. what I have written in “Will and Grace, Or: Who Will Circumcise Our Hearts?” cited above, n. 1.

11 Cf. also Malachi 3:7.

few short words, the prophet teaches the same lesson: *Teshuvah* (repentance/return) is, at bottom, about the restoration of relationship and reciprocity.¹² God calls the people back not merely to the Law or to the way of life mandated by Torah, but also—and primarily—to genuine relationship with God.¹³ As Bible scholar Ben Ollenburger puts it, Zechariah's words "provide more than a call to repentance; they are an invitation to reunion."¹⁴ For all the centrality of inwardness and soul-searching, repentance is inextricably bound up with relationship. ♦

12 Some readers may be tempted to imagine that the initiative for re-establishing rests unequivocally with Israel. After all, the people are called to return first; only then, presumably, will God follow suit. But in fact, God's call is already a first gesture; as imagined here, repentance is an irreducibly reciprocal process.

13 Cf. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (1981), p. 90.

14 Ben Ollenburger, "Zechariah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (1997), p. 748. Ollenburger adds: "The book of Zechariah thus opens with an invitation to its first readers and to contemporary readers to claim their identity as God's people and to return to the God who defines their lives and is the source of hope for their present and their future."

JUST TEN DAYS OF REPENTANCE?

Beth Levy

The Yamim Nora'im (Days of Awe) are undeniably powerful days. At this time of year, many people feel compelled to intensify their religious observance in all sorts of ways. More than any other time of year, these days bring Jews into synagogues, and Jewish practice into people's lives. Even those who generally do not observe halakhic norms often fast on Yom Kippur. Is this inconsistent practice—e.g. fasting on Yom Kippur without keeping Shabbat—just hypocritical? Or can we understand it in a more positive light?

It turns out increased observance at this time of year is not a modern phenomenon. The Yerushalmi reports the following conversation:

תלמוד ירושלמי שבת א:ג / דף ג טור ג
רבי חייא רובא מפקד לרב: אין את יכול מיכול כל
שתא חולין בטהרה אכול. ואם לאו תהא אכיל שבעה
יומין מן שתא.

Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:3 / 3c

Rabbi Hiyya the Great instructed Rav: If you are able to eat your food in purity all year round, you should. And if not, you should eat [in purity] for seven days out of the year.

Rabbi Hiyya is referring to the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.¹ He is saying to Rav that,

ideally, all food should be eaten in a state of ritual purity. However, if that is not possible, one should at least eat food in a state of ritual purity at the most intense and holy time of year: the Ten Days of Repentance.²

This text is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it reflects the same instinct that many of us have today to increase religious intensity during the Yamim Nora'im, and it shows that this is an old instinct. Secondly, it is a pragmatic text. Rabbi Hiyya holds an ideal of ritual purity. In an ideal world, Jews would only eat in a state of purity all year round. However, if that ideal is not possible, rather than giving up the ideal completely, he compromises. Ten days out of the year is better than none.

This willingness and even desire for compromise should not be taken for granted. It is easy to imagine an uncompromising position, that the community should not lower its standards—either you keep the laws, or you don't. Indeed, this desire for religious purity and consistency is voiced by others in the tradition, who argue that whatever you think you should be doing during the Ten Days of Repentance, you should do every day of the year.³

1 See the commentator, Penei Moshe: והן הימים שבין ר"ה ליוה"כ

2 The seven days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, combined with the three days of the holidays themselves, gives you in total Ten Days of Repentance. So, in this case, seven equals ten!

3 See below.

This conflict between religious purity, on the one hand, and the acknowledgment that these days hold power for people—in a way that is not sustainable for everyone—on the other hand, plays out in a halakhic debate about eating *pat akum*, bread baked by non-Jews. Mishnah Avodah Zarah (2:6) forbids Jews from eating *pat akum*. The Gemara explains that the reason for this prohibition is to prevent intermarriage.⁴ However, it is clear from early on that this practice is not taken on by all in the community, seemingly because it is a difficult prohibition to keep.⁵ This led to certain Jewish communities abandoning the prohibition entirely, buying regularly from non-Jewish bakers.⁶ The Rosh⁷ records the following practice:

רא"ש מסכת ראש השנה ד:י

וכתב ראב"י העזרי ז"ל קבלתי שאלו שבעה ימים הן שבין ראש השנה ליום הכפורים על כן נהגו באשכנז אף אותן שאין נוהגין מפת של נכרים כל השנה בעשרת ימי התשובה נוהגין:

Rosh Avodah Zarah 4:14

The Ra'aviah⁸ wrote: "I learned that during the seven days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even those in Ashkenaz who are not careful about pat akum, are careful during the Ten Days of Repentance."

The practice described here in the name of the Ra'aviah seems to be based on Rabbi Hiyya's prescription in the Yerushalmi that those with a lower standard of practice should increase their observance during the Ten Days of Repentance. The Mishnah laid out an ideal practice of refraining from eating *pat akum*. For a number of reasons, that practice was not taken on by all Jews in Ashkenaz. Nonetheless, during these important days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, all Jews, regardless of their practice during the rest of the year, should refrain from eating *pat akum*.

The Tashbatz⁹ refers to this position of the Ra'aviah. However, he also brings a dissenting position:

ספר תשב"ץ קטן סימן קיז

ירושלמי גרסינן התם מאן דמצי למיכל חולין בטהרה בכולה שתא ליכול ואי לאו ליכול בהני עשרה ימים בין כסא לעשור. מכאן הוכיח רבינו אבי העזרי שאין לאכול פת של גוים בין כסא לעשור. והר' שמואל מבומבערג אמר דדוקא חולין בטהרה דלית בה איסור אך טוב לטהר עצמו. אבל פת של גוים דמשום איסורא אי נהיג איסורא בהני י' ימים בכולה שתא נמי לא ליכול:

Sefer Tashbatz Katan Siman 117

[On the basis of the Yerushalmi,] the Ra'aviah argued that one shouldn't eat pat akum between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. However, Rabbi Shmuel from Bamberg said that [the Yerushalmi] only applies to eating food in a state of purity—as [in the case of purity] there is no prohibition involved, it is simply good to purify oneself. However, pat akum, where there is a prohibition, if one recognises that prohibition during those ten days, they should also refrain from eating it all year round.

Rabbi Shmuel¹⁰ here is making both a technical and substantive claim. He says that *pat akum* is different from the case of eating in purity described in the Yerushalmi. There is no prohibition against eating in a state of impurity any day of the year. Therefore, when the Talmud Yerushalmi suggests eating in a state of purity during the Ten Days of Repentance, it is not to avoid a transgression which had previously been ignored, but simply to increase purity, if possible. However, there actually is a prohibition of eating *pat akum* laid out in the Mishnah. If someone acknowledges that prohibition for ten days out of the year, then they should recognize it as applying all year

4 Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 35b.

5 See Talmud Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah 2:8; Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 35b.

6 See Tosafot Avodah Zarah 35b s.v. *mi-kelal de-ika*; Or Zarua Avodah Zarah 4:188.

7 Asher ben Yehiel, 14th century Spain.

8 Eliezer ben Yoel, 12th-13th centuries Germany.

9 Rabbi Shimshon son of Rabbi Tzadok, 13th century Germany and France.

10 13th century Germany.

round. Unlike the pragmatism of the Ra'aviah, Rabbi Shmuel is advocating for a more all-encompassing and consistent approach.

The risk of Rabbi Shmuel's approach, however, is that he might prevent some people from accessing this part of Jewish law at all. Someone might feel it is only feasible to refrain from eating *pat akum* on these particularly intense days of the year, but not all year round. Furthermore, the Ten Days of Repentance can be a trigger for deeper and more sustained observance throughout the entire year. What he gains, on the other hand, is a robust sense of consistency for those who are able. Having a consistent religious practice can feel deeply grounding. Indeed, the cost of the Ra'aviah's proposed practice is a sense of instability that can be disruptive to one's sense of integrity.

Perhaps there is a middle ground, one which respects the insights of both approaches. Such an approach might acknowledge the problem with destabilizing robust norms by observing them inconsistently. But at the same time, it would identify areas of practice that can be understood as going above and beyond what is halakhically required. These areas could be utilized to harness the intensity felt during the Ten Days of Repentance.

The Beit Yosef¹¹ offers a version of this approach:

בית יוסף או"ח סימן תרג

ואין זו טענה דכיון דאין איסורו ברור אלא תלוי במנהג מאחר שבשעה שהוא נזהר מלאכלו אין בדעתו ליהרר כי אם באותן הימים בלבד פשיטא שלא נאסר בשאר ימות השנה:

Beit Yosef Orah Hayyim 463

And this argument [of the Tashbatz] is not compelling, since the prohibition [on pat akum] is not clearly established, rather it depends on one's tradition. When someone [follows the guidance of the Ra'aviah] and is careful not to eat [pat akum],

they only have the intention to refrain on those days alone. Therefore it is obvious that it is not prohibited to them for the rest of the year.

The Beit Yosef here seems to accept the Tashbatz' technical claim that, if something is prohibited, there should be no difference in one's practice between the Ten Days of Repentance and the rest of the year. However, *pat akum* is different, because it is not a clearly established prohibition.¹² Therefore, someone can choose to withhold from it for the Ten Days of Repentance, even if they have every intention of eating it during the rest of the year round.

The Beit Yosef here is staking a middle ground. For serious prohibitions, he cannot accept that someone would only recognize the prohibition for a few days out the year. That would be too disruptive to the communal taboo. For those sorts of prohibitions he, like the Tashbatz, takes an all or nothing approach, and there is not room for compromise. However, the Beit Yosef welcomes people taking on a practice only for the Ten Days of Repentance for less serious prohibitions, such as eating *pat akum*.¹³

The guidance of the Ra'aviah is codified in the Shulhan Arukh, and the Hayyei Adam¹⁴ offers the following comment in which he explains why this practice of only taking on stringencies during the Ten Days of Repentance developed and is encouraged:

חיי אדם קמג:א

ולכן מהראוי שיתנהג האדם בעשרת ימי תשובה בדברים וחומרות, אף שאינו נזהר בהם כל השנה, כי גם הקדוש ברוך הוא מתנהג בחסידות עם בריותיו

Hayyei Adam 463:1

And therefore is it fitting that a person practices stringencies during the Ten Days of Repentance, even if they are not careful with them during the rest of the year. This is because God, too, is practicing loving-kindness with his creations.

¹¹ Rabbi Yosef Karo, 16th century Spain and Eretz Yisrael.

¹² See the sources cited in nn. 5-6.

¹³ A similar point is made by R. Hayyim Zvi Ehrenreich (20th century) in his Ketzeih Ha-Mateh (463:1): People should take on stringencies for the Ten Days of Repentance alone, but not complete prohibitions.

¹⁴ Avraham Danzig, 18th century Poland.

The Hayei Adam explains that there is a power to this time of year that means that taking on extra practices is appropriate. This is the time of year when God is acting from a place of loving-kindness and is paying extra attention to His creations. God wants to judge people favorably at this time. During these days, we have an opportunity to emulate God by paying special attention to our behaviour.

This instinct for intensity during the Ten Days of Repentance is felt strongly by many people today. The Tashbatz brings in a countervoice to this instinct, a voice that we should take seriously. Perhaps this should be a time of year where we make resolutions and stick to them. If going to shul is so important for us on these days, maybe it should be as important for the rest of the year. The position of the Tashbatz can encourage us to use these ten days to think about how we want to live the rest of our lives. However, the other voices we have seen are a reminder that sometimes our highest aspirations are not sustainable. But that should not mean we do not practice them ever. In this way, the ten days can hold a moment of intensity when we do things that are not possible the rest of the year. And we can do that with the knowledge that God takes notice of this and cares. ♦

WHEN GOD TAUGHT US TO PRAY:

Lessons from the 13 Attributes of Mercy



With the approach of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there is a certain change in the spiritual air. This is particularly evident when it comes to the liturgy. As early as an entire month before these holidays, many begin rising early in the morning—or staying up late at night—for *Selihot* (penitential prayers), featuring heartfelt words and the sound of the *shofar*. God's Attributes of Mercy (in Hebrew: *שלש עשרה מידות*) take on a greater presence in our prayer services, along with other additions like *Avinu Malkeinu*. All of these changes culminate in the High Holy Days themselves where these 13 Attributes again play a prominent role.

What is this change in the spiritual air and in the liturgy about? On one level, these changes are really there to highlight what is present all along, but for which we need special reminders; things like our connection to God, one another, and the ideals that we seek to hold as guides in our daily lives. On another level, the changes provide unique insight for this time of year specifically, and how they can shape the days afterward.

The following family text study and activity bring us on an exploration of these ideas. In this section, you will find:

1. A guided study of classic Jewish texts exploring the 13 Attributes of Mercy;
2. An activity for families with children of older elementary school age and above, that brings the learning to life by having participants create mini “vision boards” inspired by the textual exploration.

The texts selected for this study were chosen in part because of their ability to hold many different ways of thinking about God. We invite you to bring your own ideas into conversation with them. Particularly as the pandemic and its residual effects have motivated many to consider things with new perspectives, engaging in this study and activity as a family unit creates unique moments of connection and meaning.

The text study and activity set the stage for families to reflect on ideas together, and invite members to support one another in that process. While the study and activity have been crafted with families in mind, people of all ages will benefit from delving into them. We invite you to find a conversation partner and process together. During both these activities, we encourage you to practice “attentive silence”—listening closely and asking follow-up questions—while others share their responses.

Text Study

SOURCE 1

Note: The exact numeration of the 13 Attributes is not necessarily obvious from the literal meaning of the original text. The translation here reflects traditional understandings and delineations of these attributes as filtered through the Rabbinic sources.

שמות לד:ו-ז	Exodus 34:6-7
וַיַּעֲבֹר יְקֻוֹק עַל־פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא	<i>And the Eternal passed before him (Moses) and proclaimed,</i>
(א) יְקֻוֹק	"(1) I am the Eternal Who is merciful before a person sins
(ב) יְקֻוֹק	(2) the Eternal Who is merciful after a person sins
(ג) אֶ-ל	(3) God, merciful even in judgement,
(ד) רַחוּם	(4) compassionate and
(ה) וְחַנּוּן	(5) gracious,
(ו) אַךְךָ אַפִּים	(6) slow to anger,
(ז) וְרַב־חֶסֶד	(7) abounding in kindness and
(ח) וְאֱמֶת	(8) faithfulness,
(ט) נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפֵי־יָמִים	(9) extending kindness to the thousandth generation,
(י) נֹשֵׂא עוֹן	(10) forgiving wrongs that were done knowingly,
(יא) וְקַשְׁעַת	(11) forgiving rebellious misdeeds, and
(יב) וְחַטָּאת	(12) forgiving unintentional sin, and
(יג) וְנִקְוָה	(13) pardoning those who change their ways"

SOURCE 2

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה יז:
וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן
אֵלְמֵלֶא מְקֻרָא בְּתוֹב אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְאֹמְרוּ
מְלַמֵּד שְׁנֵתַעֲשֵׂי הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּשָׁלִיחַ
צְבוּר וְהָרְאָה לוֹ לְמִשְׁה סֵדֵר תְּפִלָּה אָמַר לוֹ
כֹּל זְמַן שֶׁיִּשְׁכָּחֵל חוֹטְאִין יַעֲשׂוּ לְפָנַי בְּסֻדֵּר
הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי מוֹחֵל לָהֶם

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 17b

"And the Eternal passed by before him, and proclaimed." Said Rabbi Yohanan: If it weren't written in Scripture, it would have been impossible to say! This teaches that the Holy Blessed One wrapped [Godself in a tallit] like a prayer leader, and showed Moses the order of [this] prayer. God then said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me according to this order, and I will forgive them.

LISTEN, QUESTION, AND DISCUSS:

The two texts above describe God's revelation of the 13 Attributes of Mercy to Moses, and then how those attributes became part of Jewish liturgy.

1. Some of the 13 Attributes of Mercy make a lot of sense to us. Others are puzzling. Which one intrigues you the most? What might it mean?
2. Have each person in your group choose two attributes from the thirteen that feel the most relevant or meaningful to you (it is okay if some are the same). How do you understand those attributes? Provide examples.
3. The Torah provides numerous positive attributes for God. In the talmudic story, God chooses these particular ones for the Jewish people to include in their prayers when asking for forgiveness. Why might that be?

The next source further investigates the meaning of having the 13 Attributes of Mercy in our liturgy and the purpose of prayer in general.

SOURCE 3

עץ יוסף על עין יעקב ראש השנה יז:

רבים מקשים כי הרבה עשו בן בי"ג
ולא הצליחו. וכתב האלשיך... שעל
כך לא אמר אמרו לפני כסדר הזה אלא
עשו לפני כסדר הזה שכונן לאמר כי
לא באמירה לבדה תליא מילתא אלא
בעשיה כי אותן המדות שזוכרין רחום
וחנון ארך אפים כ' תעשו אותם כסדר
ההוא ועל ידי כן לא ישובו ריקם עב"ל

Etz Yosef (Rabbi Hanokh Zundel ben Yosef, 19th c. Poland) on Ein Ya'akov, Rosh Hashanah 17b

Many have challenged [this passage of the Talmud] because they have recited these 13 attributes but not accomplished anything. The Alshikh (Rabbi Moshe Alshikh, 16th c. Ottoman Empire) wrote... "that this is why the passage does not say 'recite before Me in accordance with this order' but rather, 'act before me according to this order.' Because it is not the reciting that really matters, but the doing. Those qualities that we mention, 'compassionate, gracious, slow to anger' and so on, you must do them in accordance with this order and through that, you will not return empty."

LISTEN, QUESTION, AND DISCUSS:

1. What does the Etz Yosef argue is the intent in God's revealing the 13 Attributes?
2. What does this suggest is the connection between reciting prayers and action?
3. What larger lessons might this source carry about prayer in general and specifically during the High Holidays?

Activity

This 15 minute activity builds on the idea that the 13 Attributes of Mercy can and should inspire action, and guides participants in creating a mini-vision board of ideals and actions for the coming year. It is a wonderful chance to prepare for or even reflect after the High Holidays. If you decide to do this activity on Yom Tov itself, you can easily follow the instructions minus the elements for making the physical mini-vision board.

1. Gather your group around the table! Bring some joy and positivity along with a sheet of paper for each participant, as well as a bundle of markers, crayons, or colored pencils. You can also use the next page and make a copy for each person to use!
2. Have everyone take their sheet of paper and fold into thirds, width-wise along the horizontal lines.
3. In the top third, note which two attributes of the 13 Attributes speak most to you. Write them out and feel free to add colors, drawings, and embellishments that reflect your understanding of them.
4. In the middle third, write out three concrete ways you can embody these attributes. For example, if you chose “abounding in kindness” as one of your choices, you could note “blood donation” as a concrete way of embodying that. Again, feel free to use colors, drawings, and other decorations to reflect your thinking.
5. In the bottom third, write out a game plan to help you accomplish the concrete ways you noted in the middle section. In the example of blood donation, this would be something like downloading a donation app on your phone to facilitate finding the nearest location, scheduling, etc.
6. Share your board with your family! Follow this brief outline to conduct a family discussion:

Have a member of your family share about the choices they made for their board for 1-2 minutes; the rest of the family should then take turns expressing how they see the chosen attributes in the sharer, as well as appreciation for the concrete ways of expressing them that the sharer noted. E.g. “I really see ‘abounding in kindness’ in you when you do things like decorate your friends’ lockers for their birthdays. What I appreciate about your blood donation idea is that it goes to whoever needs it, no matter who they are. It takes your kindness and extends it to new people.”

Repeat the above for each member in your family.

THE TWO ATTRIBUTES THAT MOST SPEAK TO ME ARE....

THREE CONCRETE WAYS I CAN EMBODY THESE ATTRIBUTES ARE...

MY GAME PLAN TO ACCOMPLISH MY THREE GOALS IS...

AFTER DEATH, THERE IS RITUAL

Rabbi Avi Killip

The Yom Kippur ritual stages the ultimate drama. The danger is real, and the thrill of coming closer than ever to God is almost palpable. On this one day, the High Priest literally peeks behind the curtain to see God. You can imagine his heart racing as he draws near. Through the liturgy of the Avodah, we engage in a dramatic storytelling of these events. We don't just read about the High Priest's fears—we live them.

The Yom Kippur ritual inspires us to be better people and to better appreciate the gift of our lives. Through the words of the Mahzor and the reenactment of the Avodah, we approach the edge of the abyss, and together, we look over that edge. We imagine a world where our deeds determine our fate, and where we can be saved through *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, through repentance, prayer, and charity. We allow ourselves to have a near-death experience, to remember our mortality and be humbled by it. The Yom Kippur ritual allows us to experience “post-traumatic growth” without ever having been through a trauma.¹

But what happens when we *have* been through trauma? What happens when we enter the sanctuary directly from the hospital room or the cemetery? While some deaths feel like the natural next step of a life cycle, others feel traumatic and deeply unfair. The promised logic of sinners who die and righteous who live doesn't prove true. Sometimes, the good die first. Sometimes, children die. Is there room inside the

experience of the Yom Kippur ritual for the pain of traumatic loss?

In the years when we have witnessed real trauma—as we all have in recent years—the Yom Kippur liturgy can feel off-putting. It can seem as though the ritual was designed for those who have experienced death purely as a metaphor, certainly not for those who have seen death, as it were, “in the flesh.” What does the Yom Kippur ritual have to say to those of us mourning friends, teachers, parents, even children?

The context of the Yom Kippur service in the Torah is comprised of exactly such a moment. The first verse of Leviticus 16 reminds us that Aaron is not just the High Priest. In the precise moment when God gave us the rituals of Yom Kippur that we so faithfully reenact every year, Aaron is a father in mourning:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹוֹם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן
בְּקֹרְבָנָם לִכְנִי־יְקֹוֹם וַיִּמָּתוּ:

God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of God.

The entire ritual of Yom Kippur is framed by this opening line. The Torah makes painfully clear that the ritual is meant to be practiced alongside real, personal, untimely death. Not only is the Yom Kippur ritual

¹ I am grateful to Rabbi Jason Rubenstein for this brilliant insight.

not anathema to the reality of a parent in mourning, it is inextricably linked to real, devastating loss.

Aaron's sons have died, and their death is traumatic. They died young and without a clear reason. The Rabbinic tradition struggles to understand this loss.² Some attempt to apply the logic of Yom Kippur—if they died, they must have been guilty of something grave and deserved their deaths. Many commentaries and *midrashim* also offer possible explanations for the severity of their punishment. What horrible thing must these boys have done? What had their father done to deserve this? Other interpretations try to spin their deaths positively as a mysterious outcome from a noble attempt to reach God.

One *midrash* instead uses their deaths to grapple with the ultimate truth that “the same lot [falls] to the righteous and to the wicked.” This text warns us against the instinct to try to find fault where it never existed:

מדרש תנחומא אחרי מות ו

בְּאַרְבָּעָה מְקוֹמוֹת מְזַכֵּיר מִיִּתְּנוּ לְשׁוֹל בְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן וְהַזִּכֵּיר
אֶת טוֹרְחָנָן. כֵּל כֵּךְ לְמָה. לְהוֹדִיעָךְ, שְׁלֹא מִצָּא בְּיָדָן אֶלֶּא
אוֹתוֹ עוֹן בְּלִבָּד.

Midrash Tanhuma Aharei Mot 6

In four places, [Scripture] mentions the death of Aaron's sons, and it also mentions their transgression. And why all this? To inform you that they had only this sin on their hands.

Aaron's children died attempting to reach God. They seem to have made a mistake, not committed a mortal sin. How can this “transgression” possibly justify their deaths? The answer is: it can't. It doesn't. The *midrash* acknowledges the human instinct to invent reasons as we search for order in moments of trauma. We struggle to understand a world where children die, so we try to look for more sins. The instinct is logical, and yet, we must refrain. You cannot use suffering and death as proof that someone sinned. The math won't add up. If you attempt to justify death, you will get it wrong.

We are given the rituals of Yom Kippur in the same breath as the news of the death of these righteous boys. We are forced, from the very origin of Yom Kippur theology, to hold both images together—the way the world is, and the way we wish it were. We must hold the chaos and pain of reality alongside the order and promise of carefully crafted, ritual theater.

Like Aaron, we enter Yom Kippur—each year, but especially this year—holding recent tragedy in our hearts, struggling with hurt and loss. And together, we pray. We pray for a world where parents are never forced to mourn for their own children. We pray that reaching out to God brings us peace, never pain. We pray for a world of order and justice and comfort. We pray to enter another year, together. ♦

² For a collection of many of these traditions, see the continuation of the shortly quoted Midrash Tanhuma passage.

"FORGIVE US, FOR WE HAVE SINNED"

Rabbi Ethan Tucker

For as long as I can remember, I have appreciated when people admit they are wrong. I am not sure I can fully tell you why, but something about a person's ability to change course mid-journey, to learn something and model that process for others, fills me with hope. Admitting error has never seemed to me a sign of weakness, whether in leaders or others, but rather the hallmark of fidelity to sources of truth that lie beyond our individual will and perspective.¹

Moreover, I so highly regard the acknowledgement of being wrong because of how hard it is to do. We so easily retreat into intellectual and political camps; the fraternal bonds of collegial thinking that embrace and support us when we first discover them can quickly become restraints that imprison us. We can become incapable of reevaluating things because we are not prepared to reevaluate our past and present selves that have become so intertwined with certain ways of thinking and talking. Fortunately, the Mishnah records that our greatest role models—"Shammai and Hillel, the giants of the world"—were not so bound, and encourages us to emulate them.

It is one thing to change your mind, to make room for a new argument or position, even to mentally process failure. It is another to *confess*. When the error is no mere intellectual mistake, but an acknowledgment

of something we have *done* wrong, the stakes are entirely different. Confession is a wrenching act: an audible articulation to ourselves, to God, and any others who are present, that we have actually done harm. We know it, and we own it. The words—when said not emptily and cheaply, but with sincerity and authenticity—leave our mouths and thereby live beyond us, judging us from without.

As hard as confession is, our tradition insists that it is an essential practice, embedded into our High Holiday liturgy. The rote words of the Maḥzor are not, however, the end of confession. When we turn to Hazzal, we find some surprising answers as to the centrality of confession throughout our lives. On the one hand, confession is understood as critical, suffusing the routine of our lives. On the other hand, the confession that is required is fairly minimal—but this minimum is in itself harder to achieve than you might think.

If you scan the Torah for ויודי/confession, a verbal process of admitting guilt, you will find a highly limited record. When describing the חטאת/sin-offering, for unwittingly entering the sanctuary while impure, the Torah says, "He will confess for the sin upon him" and proceeds to detail the sacrifice that must be brought (Vayikra 5:5). Elsewhere, when the Torah is discussing one type of אשם/guilt-offering, it specifies that the

¹ In that sense, I am a devotee of the statement of Mishnah Eduyyot 1:4: "Why do we mention the [minority] opinions of Shammai and Hillel for no apparent reason? It is to teach later generations: a person should never stubbornly stick to his words, for the giants of the world didn't stick to theirs."

man or woman who commits this sin shall confess (Bemidbar 5:7). And most famously, the Torah says of the High Priest on Yom Kippur: “He shall confess [on the scapegoat] all the iniquities of the Israelites and all of their transgressions, whatever their sins” (Vayikra 16:21). Confession surely plays a significant role in these rites, but on a surface level, the role seems highly circumscribed. For a few key moments of ritual sacrifice—quite plausibly limited to cases where the purity of the Temple is at stake—those bringing their offering must confess in the presence of God. It is not obvious from the Torah that confession has a place in private life or that it has any real meaning outside of the Temple service and its myriad sacrificial requirements.

A pious reader of the Torah might therefore conclude that confession, like the garments of the priests, was an essential part of a now defunct system that has little to do with contemporary repentance and personal improvement. That possibility is what makes the following *midrash* so arresting. In this excerpt from the Sifrei Zuta, we find a determined effort to break confession out of the potential prison of the Temple and to situate it everywhere we find shortcoming and sin:

ספרי זוטא (הורוביץ) במדבר ה:

אין במשמע שיתודה היחיד אלא על ביאת המקדש,
ומנין את מרבה שאר כל המצות? אמרת “דבר...
והתודו” (במדבר ה:ו-ז)

...[יכול בזמן שהן מביאין מתודין, ומנין אף בזמן שאין
מביאין? אמרת “בני ישראל” “והתודו”... אין במשמע
ודוי אלא בארץ, ומנין אף בגלות ודוי? אמרת “והתודו
את עונם ואת עון אבותם” (ויקרא כו:מ)...

Sifrei Zuta (Horowitz) Bemidbar 5:5

The Torah only really implies that individuals need to confess when they violate the sanctity of the Temple; how do we know that one must confess after violating any of the mitzvot? The Torah says: “Speak to the Israelites... They shall confess” (Bemidbar 5:6-7).

... *Could it be that confession is only required at times when sacrifices are brought? How do we know the obligation to confess applies even when no sacrifices are being brought? The Torah says: “Speak to the Israelites... They shall confess.”*

...*The Torah only really implies that confession takes place in the Land of Israel, how do I know this obligation applies in the Diaspora as well? The Torah says: “And they shall confess their iniquities and the iniquity of their ancestors” (Vayikra 26:40).*

When should we practice confession? According to this *midrash*: all the time. You think only special sins require confession? Every misstep does. You think this is merely an adornment on the lost practice of sacrifice? No, it is completely severable and eternally vital. You think it is geographically bound, its effectiveness tied to the ghost of a Temple that might stand again one day? No, this is an obligation for any Jew, anytime, anywhere.

Consider the context of this interpretation, and you will feel its power even more. This text springs from the years following the Temple’s destruction, an era in which the contours of what Judaism will be are being contested and sketched out. Some voices despair of ongoing meaning and connection to God, fearing that the covenant with the Jewish people has been broken.² Others loudly proclaim that, absent a Temple and a sacrificial rite, a new pathway must be forged, perhaps one that flows through a messiah, now the new pathway to God in heaven.³ Hanging over it all is the question: is there really still a way to come back from sin without the scapegoat, without the High Priest?⁴ Amidst this religious and existential tempest, the Sifrei Zuta rises and asserts: our relationship with God is as intact as it ever was. The sacrifices augmented it in their own time, but they are not the essence. What is? Confession. The one constant throughout time and space is the ability and the obligation of the Jew to sincerely admit wrongdoing. That is the gateway to return and renewal.

2 See, e.g., the apocryphal book of 2 Barukh who fights against this view.

3 The group that eventually became Christianity.

4 As Rabbi Yehoshua asks his teacher Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai in Avot de-Rabbi Natan (Version A), chapter 4.

Perhaps most notable in this *midrash* is the absence of Yom Kippur. Confession is something we are expected to do every day, *every hour*, as we confront our shortcomings. It is, as the Sifrei Zuta envisions it, fully embedded in our religious lives. We pray upon waking, we bless food before eating, and we confess upon sinning. This is how we make and remake ourselves and how we continually fine-tune our relationship with God and with other people.

The Sifrei Zuta blazes the trail for Maimonides' summary of the matter:

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה א-ב, ב:ז

כל מצות שבתורה... כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו
חייב להתודות לפני הא-ל ברוך הוא... וידוי זה מצות
עשה...

וכן בעלי חטאות ואשמות בעת שמביאין קרבנותיהן...
אין מתכפר להן בקרבנם עד שיעשו תשובה ויתודו
וידוי דברים...

שעיר המשתלח לפי שהוא כפרה על כל ישראל כהן
גדול מתודה עליו...

יום הכפורים הוא זמן תשובה... והוא קץ מחילה
וסליחה לישראל, לפיכך חייבים הכל לעשות תשובה
ולהתודות ביום הכפורים...

Rambam Hilkhoh Teshuvah 1:1-2, 2:7

Whenever a person repents from having violated anything in the Torah, they are obligated to confess before God... This confession is a biblical command...

And so, too, those who bring sacrifices... cannot achieve atonement, unless they repent and verbally confess...

Since the scapegoat is atonement for all of Israel, the High Priest must confess upon it...

Since Yom Kippur is a time of repentance... a culminating moment of absolution and forgiveness for the Jewish people, everyone must repent and confess on Yom Kippur.

Instead of treating confession today as a faint echo of a Temple-based ritual, Maimonides asserts that the appearances of confession in the Temple are just windows into a fundamental *mitzvah* that applies at all times and places. The rule is confession for every failing, and yes, the Temple service followed that rule. Yom Kippur is a time when we should confess, but only because it is a time designated for repairing our relationship with God and with other people. Nonetheless, the *mitzvah* here, the practice that is supposed to become second nature to us, is to confess whenever we are doing that work. We don't turn over a new leaf by burying things in the past. We confront them, we name them, we speak them. And we must do it often.

So what exactly does this confession require? Now that we know we must confess, how do we confess? We have to say something, but what? During COVID-19, the question of minimalist *vidui* emerged as well. As synagogues and *minyanim* desperately tried to compress services into more limited timeframes, many people inquired: what is the least I must say?

If you took the *Mahzor* as a guide, you would conclude: quite a lot. Pages and pages of the *Mahzor*, in all of the services of Yom Kippur, are taken up with private and communal confessions. "You know all the secrets of the world"—You can see everything I have done! "What are we or our lives worth"—behold our failures! "I am full of embarrassment and shame for all that I have done!" And then pages of chest-beating in grand alphabetical acrostics.

But a look at the classical and medieval sources that discuss all this reveals something remarkable. The famous "Al *Heit*" prayer is found nowhere in the Talmud and only emerged as a practice in some communities in the Middle Ages.⁵ We also find that the lengthy passages of *vidui* in the traditional *Mahzor* are in fact mash-ups of competing suggestions from our great Sages of the past as to how to confess. Rav, R. Yoḥanan, Levi, Rav Yehudah—each of them had their own text and we, good collectors that we are, say all of them. But, most important for us, the passage enumerating these different options culminates in this statement by Mar Zutra:

5 Referred to in the Tur Orah Hayyim 607:1 (14th century).

תלמוד בבלי יומא פז:

אמר מר זוטרא: לא אמרן אלא דלא אמר אבל אנחנו
חטאנו. אבל אמר אבל אנחנו חטאנו - תו לא צריך.

Talmud Bavli Yoma 87b

Said Mar Zutra: [All of these versions of the vidui] are only needed if one did not already say, "Indeed, we have sinned." But if one said, "Indeed, we have sinned," nothing more is needed.

"Nothing more is needed!" The words "Indeed, we have sinned," says Mar Zutra, do the work we need here. And this is affirmed as a matter of *halakhah* by subsequent commentators, up to and including R. Moshe Isserles in the Shulḥan Arukh.⁶ Well, that is surely a boon for those looking to trim the Yom Kippur davening. But this ruling should interest us not for the latitude it gives us, but for the focus it demands. What does it mean to say that the *vidui* can be accomplished by three simple words? It means, I would submit, that these words get to the essence of the matter, and you have to really mean them.

And here is where you may find this abbreviated ritual harder to do than you think. I cherish the slightly bruised spot on my chest and hoarse voice that I usually develop each year over the course of the tenth of Tishrei. All those hours of chest beating and words of confession truly drive a spiritual metamorphosis through repetition and a sense of physical strain. But let's also be honest: it is frighteningly easy to evade true confession by cloaking ourselves in verbosity. The words, meant to be prompts to deeper introspection, can become shields that keep our confessions at bay. Mar Zutra is not just setting a floor; he is stripping away the liturgical crust in order to get to confession's core: looking in the mirror and saying out loud:

"I messed up."

"I made a mistake."

"I did something really wrong."

Try saying that, slowly, without evasion. Try saying it to another person. Try saying it to a person you mistreated. Try saying it in public. Then sit with the silence that follows. You will find, I wager, that the

silence that follows is as hard as the confession itself. Nothing more is needed, because that is quite hard enough.

When we realize just how hard and important this is, we can unlock one of the great mysteries of the Tanakh. How is it that Sha'ul, the first king of Israel, is rejected and despised for failing to completely wipe out Amalek, a sin of misplaced compassion, whereas David, an adulterer and a murderer, is given an eternal dynasty and earns the distinction of "the favorite of the songs of Israel" (II Shmuel 23:1), in whose name we praise God on a daily basis? Perhaps the difference lies in how they deal with their sins when confronted by them, in how they do and do not confess.

Sha'ul, in the wake of his battle with Amalek, evinces no indication that anything has gone wrong and proudly strides out and proclaims: "I have fulfilled God's word!" (I Shmuel 15:13). When harshly confronted by Shmuel, Sha'ul fights back: "But I did obey God!" (15:20). And when his attempts at rationalization totally fail to convince, and Sha'ul does finally say, "I sinned" (15:24), he still makes excuses: "I was afraid of the troops, and I yielded to them." And he tries to move on: "Please, forgive my offense and come back with me, and I will bow low to God" (15:25). Sha'ul never really learns how to sit with his failings.

David, by contrast, is confronted with a scathing rebuke by the prophet, Natan (II Shmuel 12). He is threatened with a violence that will plague his house for all time. He is told that he treated God with contempt and the murder of an innocent man is laid squarely at his feet. What is his response? As if channeling Mar Zutra: "חטאתי/I have sinned—you are right." The scribal text of II Shmuel 12:13 has an open space there, right in the middle of the verse, telling us not only that David said this, but that he sat with the silence of it all.

Why do we revere and cherish David? Why can a man with such a corrupt record be the ancestor of our future Messiah? How can we trust the repentance of a man who has ruined his reputation and now asks for rehabilitation? Because he knew how to confess.

6 See the Rema's gloss on Orah Hayyim 607:3.

He is meant to be the model for us. Mar Zutra and the Sifrei Zuta, together, push us to punctuate our lives with frequent, specific, audible, and searingly honest admissions of where we have been wrong. And, oh, how hard that is. How many of our leaders simply cannot admit error? Look how hard “Indeed, we sinned” is for people to say—they can’t!

Reuven Rivlin, former President of Israel, did something so extraordinary in the Fall of 2020 by simply doing what our sources tell us should be ordinary. He had invited guests to the Seder from outside his immediate family, something that the rest of the country was forbidden from doing. As new lockdown restrictions were going into place prior to Rosh Hashanah, Rivlin got on national television and asked forgiveness for his behavior. In short, he looked the country in the eye and said, “אבל אני חטאתי” / indeed, I missed the mark.”

Without confession, there can be no honest reckoning. We can’t really ever confront the wrongs of the past without saying them aloud, to ourselves, to God, to others in our lives. But with a true confession, almost anything is possible. We can ascend from the lowest place of failure all the way to the throne of God. ♦

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

Judaism is a religion of life against death. Death negates redemption; it marks the end of growth, of freedom. Death is so contradictory to liberation that a talmudic sage exempts a mourner preparing for the funeral from fulfilling the the central, daily act of Jewish memory, remembering the Exodus: “That you remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life—on days that you deal with life but not on the days when you deal with death” (Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 3:1 / 5d).

Death is a denial of dignity. Metaphorically, the Talmud tells that the great King David died on a holy day. Seeing the body lying there, unable to help itself, untreated (until after the holy day), decaying, Solomon burst out: “Even a live dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecclesiastes 9:4).¹ What greater tragedy can there be for the living than the death of another loved human being? Someone of infinite value, someone irreplaceable has been snatched away. The power, the beauty, the uniqueness of that person is mocked by the inert, empty body that remains. In the presence of the unburied dead, the religious universe collapses into a void. “He whose dead one lies before him is exempt from the Shema, from prayer [i.e. Amidah], from *tefillin*, from all the commandments stated in the Torah” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b, Berakhot 17b).

In a world growing toward life, death is a contradiction, so to speak, to God, who is pure life. In the end, therefore, death must be overcome. “God will destroy death forever. My Lord God will wipe the tears away from every face” (Isaiah 25:8). Judaism’s ultimate dream, then, is to vanquish death totally. In fact, since God is all good and all life, ideally there should have been no death in God’s creation in the first place. Classic Judaism therefore taught, that when the ultimate redemption is achieved, when the Messiah comes, all those who have died will come to life again. Resurrection of the dead will nullify death retroactively.

Death is treated as the enemy. “Behold, I place before you today life and good, and death and evil... Choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). In daily ritual, death is set up as the negative pole of contact with God. The human corpse was considered the most intense archetype of ritual impurity. No burials were allowed inside Jerusalem, the holy city.² People who came in contact with the dead were not allowed to enter the Holy Temple without first going through an elaborate purification rite, including immersion in a body of living water, that is, a symbolic rebirth from the grip of death.³

Yet, Judaism does not deny the facts of death. When death strikes a family, the tradition prescribes

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- 1 Solomon is traditionally identified as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes.
 - 2 See Tosefta Nega'im 6:2.
 - 3 See Numbers 19.

unflinching recognition and acceptance rather than evasion. The proper response is to show love through caring treatment of the corpse and expression of grief and loss.

This is the concession Judaism makes to the universality of death. Otherwise, it is almost as if death is to be quarantined as a dangerous antagonist. Holiness, which is the fullness of life, is incompatible with death. Priests who were consecrated to the full-time service of God were not allowed to have any contact with the dead. They were prohibited from entering a graveyard or attending funerals, except for those of their closest relatives; in such a case, denial of attendance would be inhumane.

Yet death is a fact of life. How one reacts to it can critically shape all of one's values. When other systems of thought encounter death, some decisively turn away from the worldly life as an illusion and snare. The famous Roman phrase, "Eat, drink, and be merry! For tomorrow, we die!" indicates a hedonistic approach, that death should stimulate frantic excess. The common American approach to death has used euphemism to obscure the fact of mortality, and cosmetic treatment to prettify the corpse.

Judaism's general response to the fact of death is to fight back. Life is given the highest priority. All but three laws of the Torah are overruled to save a life from death.⁴ The physician is commanded to heal.⁵ Even partial triumphs—a sickness cured, some months of life snatched from the domain of death—constitute a fulfillment of the command. When someone dies, the mourner steps forward and, through recitation of the Kaddish, testifies that this family has not yielded to the crushing defeat. In effect, the survivors pledge to carry on, for the deceased as well as for themselves, in the army of the Lord, among the soldiers of life. In essence, the Kaddish prayer affirms that God's kingdom of total perfection and total life will be brought speedily into being, preferably in this very lifetime.

The one notable exception to the arm's-length treatment of death is the period of the High Holy Days. During this cluster of days, the tradition deliberately concentrates the individual's attention on death.

Human beings cannot be mature until they encompass a sense of their own mortality. To recognize the brevity of human existence gives urgency and significance to the totality of life. To confront death without being overwhelmed is to be given life again as a daily gift. This gift of appreciating mortality often comes at too high a cost, through personal trauma: an accident or a critical illness or the death of someone close. In addition, the encounter too often fades as the presence of death recedes, and the cycle of normal life becomes routine reality. In the Jewish calendar, the Yamim Nora'im structure the imaginative encounter with death into an annual trauma-free experience in the hope that the experience will recur to liberate life continually.

In the period of the High Holy Days, tradition guides the individual to take up the challenge of death on three levels.

FIRST LEVEL

One is to deal with the constant gradual, partial encroachment of death in one's own life. Life is also a process of dying. Routine and stagnation are forms of death in life, and prevent one from becoming an agent of redemption. The tradition holds that the key to vital living is perpetual renewal of life; it seeks to attain that renewal by generating a continual process of examining life and constant rebirth. The awareness of being judged for life and death is a stimulus to stop living routinely.

SECOND LEVEL

The second level of the challenge is to deal with encountering abrupt, total death itself. Starting before and going through this period, the Jew focuses on the vulnerability of life and the limits of the human being. People rediscover that "our entire life is God's mercy;

⁴ See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a.

⁵ See commentaries to Exodus 21:19.

by miracle we stand—but miracles may not happen every day.”⁶

The encounter with nonexistence is set off by the awareness of creation. Whatever is born, dies. By tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the “birthday” of the world or of humanity. This birthday, that is, New Year’s Day, is not the occasion for a party to wipe out the passage of time in the oblivion of celebration, but a time for taking stock. The possibility of non-being leads one to the questions: what is it all worth? What has been accomplished? By what merit does it still stand?

The Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgies focus on creation and on God as Creator and Ruler of the Universe. “To say of the world that it is created is to say that it is not its own ground but proceeds from a will and a plan beyond itself.”⁷ In Jewish tradition, creation also implies the goodness of the world: “And God saw everything that God had made and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). In other words, the question of whether the world was created by God is less a theological issue than a moral one: the concept of creation teaches that this is a world of divine purpose, a universe of value and meaning. Human beings can be judged by the standard of creation. Are they acting in consonance with the fact that this is a universe with value, purpose, and meaning?

From the combined themes of death and judgment come the central image underlying the Days of Awe: the trial. Jews envision a trial in which the individual stands before the One Who Knows All. One’s life is placed on the balance scales. A thorough assessment is made. Am I contributing to the balance of life? My life is being weighed; I am on trial for my life. Who shall live, and who shall die? This image jolts each person into a heightened awareness of the fragility of life. This question poses the deeper issue: if life ended now, would it have been worthwhile? Is one aware and grateful for the miracle of daily existence?

The trial image captures the sense of one’s life being in someone else’s hands. The *shofar* of Rosh Hasha-

nah proclaims that the Judge before whom there is no hiding is now sitting on the bench. Sharpened self-awareness, candid self-judgment, and a healthy sense of responsibility are activated by the possibility that a death sentence may be handed down. Like standing before the firing squad, a trial for life wonderfully concentrates the mind.

THIRD LEVEL

Then, the High Holy Days move to meet the third challenge of mortality—to harness death into a force for life. On Yom Kippur, Jews enact death by denying themselves the normal pleasures of life. It is not a morbid experience, however, because this encounter with death is in the service of life. The true goal is a new appreciation of life.

To know how fragile is the shell of life is to learn to handle it with true grace and delicacy. Only one who realizes the vulnerability of loved ones can treasure every moment with them. The encounter with death turns the individual toward life. Death can only be opposed by life, just as death-in-life can only be opposed by growing in life. Instead of standing there, letting death constantly invade life, Judaism strikes back by raiding the realm of death and turning this encounter into a spur to life.

The climax comes in living out death on Yom Kippur. On this day, many Jews put on a kittel, a white robe similar to the shroud worn when one is buried.⁸ The processes most associated with bodily life—such as nourishing oneself with food and drink, cleaning one’s body, or enjoying intimacy with one’s partner—are stopped for twenty-five hours. Guilt (in the form of confession), encounter with the dead (in Yizkor memorial prayers), and the final trial judgment dominate the days. But then relief from sin emerges on Yom Kippur. God forgives! “The Lord your God will open your heart and your children’s hearts... for the sake of giving you life!” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

⁶ Rabbi Israel Salanter, *Or Yisrael* (Vilna: n.p., 1874). Reprinted edition (New York: Friedman Press, n.d.), p. 44.

⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

⁸ This practice is recorded in the Rema *Orah Hayyim* 610:4.

This is why the tone of the Days of Awe is, at its core, hopeful, even joyful. This is why the liturgy bursts forth with life: “Remember us for life, King who loves life; write us in the book of life, for your sake, Lord of Life.”

This period seeks nothing less than the removal of sin and the renewal of love. Those who confront their own guilt and failure in human and divine relationships—in the context of community oneness and divine forgiveness—can correct errors, develop new patterns, and renew life. “For I do not desire the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his paths—and live” (Ezekiel 33:11). To turn is to be reborn. The people of Israel come out of Yom Kippur reborn, forgiven and pure, at one with the living God. ♦

Adapted from The Jewish Way, pp. 182-187

YITZHAK AND YISHMAEL: The Arbitrariness of Our Fate

Rabbi Micha'el Rosenberg

The Torah readings for the days of the High Holidays could hardly be more different.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read of a barren woman blessed by God and given a child (Genesis 21). This story is followed by a narrative of two women competing for pride of place in the household, with one machinating to get the other thrown out of the home; and then a heartrending and dramatic telling of that exiled mother, giving up hope not only for herself, but also for her infant child, only to, once again, be answered by God directly. For the second day, the Torah ups its game, introducing a seemingly tyrannical God demanding the slaughter of Sarah's long-awaited child, a faithful Avraham submitting to the divine decree, a heroic Yitzhak going along with the plan, and then a last-minute rescue as an angel steps in, provides a ram, and releases the human sacrifice at the last possible moment (Genesis 22).

You come back on Yom Kippur expecting a similarly majestic, complicated, dramatic narrative—and you get Leviticus 16. And not the ethical monotheism of the second half of Leviticus, but the heart of the sacrificial cult: real, bloody, ritualistic Leviticus, an extraordinarily detailed description of what should happen in the *mishkan* so as to clean it of its accumulated ritual impurity. The High Priest comes into the Holy of Holies with precisely one bull and one ram—the former becomes an expiation offering, a *hatat*, and the latter a burnt offering, an *olah*. He has to bathe, and then put on a particular set of clothing. Then he takes two communally owned goats, and he

marks one off to be exiled, the prototypical scapegoat, the *se'ir la-azazel*, and the other to be offered as another expiation offering to God. And so on, and so forth, complete with sprinklings of blood and specific changes of clothes.

Why the sudden genre shift from the narratives of Rosh Hashanah to the sacrifices of Yom Kippur? Something deeper is at work in this Torah reading, something external to the actual details of what the High Priest is supposed to do on this day, something that ties back to the Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah, and gives us a vital lesson for the internal, penitential work of this period.

The Mishnah clarifies the requirements for the two goats, one for God and one for Azazel:

משנה יומא ו:א

שני שעירי יום הכפורים מצותן שיהיו שניהן שוין
במראה ובקומה ובדמים ובלקיחתן כאחד

Mishnah Yoma 6:1

The two goats selected for this ritual should be identical in every way—they must look exactly alike, they must cost the same amount; you even have to purchase them at the exact same time.

Why is the identity of these two goats so important?

Two identical goats, but with two very different designations, and two astonishingly distinct fates. One is for God, and one is for Azazel; one is a divine offering,

and the other is its almost demonic inversion. One is offered on the holy altar, in the heart of God's home on earth, while the other is left to live, but a wandering, meandering, seemingly pointless existence on the margins, sent out to the wilderness, out of the community, out of the world as we know it.¹

In the Torah, there is only one other time when something or someone is sent into the wilderness—and that is Yishmael, Avraham's firstborn son, child of Hagar, in the reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Avraham took Hagar and her son Yishmael, and he sent them out (*va-yeshalheha*), out into the wilderness of Be'er Sheva (Genesis 21:14). In a very basic sense, then, Yishmael is an iteration of the scapegoat of Yom Kippur. Yishmael was the first offering to be sent out into the wilderness; when we see the ritual of the scapegoat on Yom Kippur, we are meant to see it with that lens.

Of course, the scapegoat in the Torah, though it holds a powerful place in our cultural vernacular, is only one half of an offering; its identical twin, the goat for God, gets offered up on the altar. And here, too, we find a kind of prefiguring in Genesis, because just as Yishmael is sent out into the wilderness, so, too, Yitzhak gets brought up on the altar. This takes place on Har Ha-Moriyah, which is, according to tradition, the Temple Mount, in the center of God's domain.² True, Yitzhak does not actually get sacrificed, but a number of traditions hint at the chilling idea that Avraham went through with the ritual murder,³ a telling of the tale that some biblical scholars argue you can actually see hidden in the text of the Torah itself.⁴

The interdependent relationship between the scapegoat and the offering for God is not a new

convention first appearing in Leviticus; rather, it is the ritual commemoration of the first paired offering, the brothers Yitzhak and Yishmael, one offered up and one sent out, one to remain in God's domicile, and the other exiled to the margins. And this is why the offerings in the Temple must be identical. Despite their very different ends, Yishmael and Yitzhak are, fundamentally, identical. Consider this *midrash*:

רש"י בראשית כ"ב

את בנך - אמר לו שני בנים יש לי, אמר לו את יחידך,
אמר לו זה יחיד לאמו וזה יחיד לאמו, אמר לו אשר
אהבת, אמר לו שניהם אני אוהב, אמר לו את יצחק.

Rashi on Genesis 22:2⁵

"Your son"—[Avraham] said to [God]: I have two sons! [God] said to him: "Your beloved." He said to Him: Each of them is beloved to his mother! He said to him: "That you love." He said to Him: I love both of them! He said to him: "Yitzhak."

God's need to identify the victim with greater and greater specificity—all to no avail—can end only when God claims Yitzhak by name, because, ultimately, each of these children is the same in their father's eyes. A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but if the only thing that can separate between Yishmael and Yitzhak is their respective names, then what truly marks Yitzhak as worthy to be the offering for God and not for Azazel?

Indeed, on further reflection, the banished son is the one with the far more auspicious, theologically meaningful, Jewish name: Yishmael, "God will hear," a proper theophoric name, that is, a name with God's name included within it. By contrast, Yitzhak—the chosen son—has a name that does not mention God

- 1 According to the Mishnah, this goat is also killed, by being pushed off of a cliff (Mishnah Yoma 6.6). Leviticus' description, however, describes this goat as "going free" (Leviticus 16:22). A friend who grew up on a ranch once suggested to me that the Mishnah's interpretation may reflect practical concerns: a goat released from its home would likely wander back to that home, ruining the symbolism of sending the goat, bearing our sins, away.
- 2 See, for example, Rashi on Genesis 22:14.
- 3 See references to "Yitzhak's ashes"—implying that there was indeed some kind of sacrifice here—in Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 16a, its earlier parallels, e.g. Sifra BeHukkotai Chapter 8. Regardless, the point of the story is that Yitzhak *could—and maybe should!—have been sacrificed*, if it weren't for God's direct intervention.
- 4 See, e.g., Tzemah Yoreh, *Genesis: Israel's Origins* (Kernel to Canon Vol. 14, 2014).
- 5 Rashi is citing Bereishit Rabbah 55:7.

at all, that, according to the Torah, recalls Sarah's *lack* of faith, the inauspicious beginnings of this second Jewish patriarch as his mother laughed at the possibility of her giving birth (Genesis 18:12).

The upshot, both in the Torah and in the *midrash*, highlights the interchangeability of Avraham's two sons. This is specifically to deny the claim that we *want* to make: that Yitzhak somehow deserves the birthright that he receives and which is denied to his brother.

And so, just as Avraham's two sons are identical, so, too, says the Mishnah, must the two goats offered on Yom Kippur be identical. To teach us this: Yishmael's fate, and that of Yitzhak—and *each of our own* fates—is in many respects, deeply, fundamentally, random. Yishmael is exiled, Yitzhak is chosen, not through some divinely ordained justice but rather by the chances of their births, no less arbitrary than the choice of a name or the drawing of lots.

Yishmael's lot in life is random—it has to be. Think about what happens to the scapegoat: the High Priest places his hands on it, literally transferring the sins of the Jewish people onto this animal. This goat, the Torah tells us, then carries *our* sins off into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:21-22). That's what a scapegoat does—it's a place-filler. By rights, we deserve such-and-such consequence for our actions, but by placing the guilt onto another party, we get let off. We watch that goat wander off into the desert, and we say to ourselves, "There but for the grace of God go I." This is what makes the ritual work. If the participants don't identify with the scapegoat, then the whole thing becomes a morally reckless endeavor in avoiding responsibility. It's only through the recognition that *we are the scapegoat* that the ritual both brings home the severity of our sins, while also lightening our metaphysical load, allowing us to go on, rather than being crushed by the weight of our guilt.

And so it is with Yishmael. Yishmael is not less deserving, and in truth, Yitzhak is not—or, better, is not *yet*—more deserving. Only the act of selection, God's choosing Yitzhak to be Avraham's inheritor, bestows on Yitzhak the privilege of being the ancestor of the

Jewish people. Yitzhak could have been Yishmael. Any one of us could have been Yishmael.

The Temple ritual of Yom Kippur, then—the exiling of a goat *selected by lot* to be excluded, and the inverse selection of an identical animal to be God's choice—demands that we come to terms with the very arbitrariness that has brought us to this moment, for better and for worse. Each of us has been constrained in all sorts of ways by the happenstance of our birth: denied the generous inheritance that a neighbor received last year; limited by a mediocre vertical leap to be never more than a mediocre basketball player; burdened by the emotionally abusive parents who did not support their child's dreams. These and many more are not our fault—they are as quirky and idiosyncratic as the name our parents imposed on us, a fluke of history.

The inverse is, of course, true as well. There is *nothing* that any one of us has achieved that we have earned solely through the sweat of our own, individual brows. Many of us have been fortunate enough to benefit from comfortable lives, good school systems, parents who encouraged us to pursue our educations and set high goals for us. And many of us whose upbringings and personal journeys do not fit the standard storylines of middle- and upper-class American Jewish life did not benefit from that comfort; some of us have borne the fate of Yishmael more often than that of Yitzhak. The benefits that we have been privileged to receive cannot be graded on a binary scale—are you privileged or not?—but rather, come in countless shades, and in a hundred different varieties. We are all, each of us, privileged in some ways and not in others. The point, it seems to me, is not to assert or deny our dependence on our pasts in achieving whatever it is we may have accomplished, but rather, to accept the truth that those very accomplishments—as well as our failings—are not our unique, personal possessions.

The story that the Yom Kippur Torah reading tells us is essentially this: appreciate the contingency that has brought you to this moment. Even as you should recognize your effort and work which have brought you to this point, you must acknowledge as well the

good fortune that not one of us in any way earned.⁶

Our task on Yom Kippur, then, is to come to terms with this reality. It must affect both how we judge others—recognizing the ways in which those who have hurt us or offended us, *even as they maintain their moral culpability*, are themselves the products of a set of circumstances beyond their control. And it must also affect how we view ourselves, allowing for the forgiveness that comes from appreciating the hurdles we've had to leap, and also limiting the pride and self-aggrandizement that lead us, too often, into looking out at our own accomplishments as a Pharaoh, and saying, "My power and the strength of my hand have made this."⁷ ♦

6 This is the meaning behind the pithy, if perhaps unnuanced phrase, "check your privilege."

7 See Ezekiel 29:9: "And they shall know that I am God—because [Pharaoh] boasted, 'The Nile is mine, and I made it.'"

TRUTH: Cast Down and Resurrected

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

People have an ambivalent relationship with truth. On the one hand, truth forms the basis of any real relationship; on the other hand, we “can’t handle the truth.” Of all the attributes ascribed to God, perhaps the most difficult is *emet* / truth. How do we relate to truth on the High Holidays? What might we learn from its presence—and absence—in our liturgy?

Truth has long been viewed as the enemy of human existence. Indeed, according to a classic *midrash*, were it up to truth, people would never have been created:

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) ח:ה

אמר ר' סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לבראות אדם הראשון נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים וחבורות, מהם אומרים יברא, מהם אומרים אל יברא ה"ה "חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלוה נשקו" (תהלים פה:יא), חסד ואמת יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, אמת ואומר אל יברא שכולו שקר... מה עשה הקב"ה נטל אמת והשליכה לארץ

Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) 8:5

*Said Rabbi Simon: when the Holy One was about to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and companies, some of them saying: "Let him be created," while others urged: "Let him not be created." Thus it is written: "Love (*hesed*) and truth (*emet*) fought together*

(*nifgashu*), righteousness and peace combated each other (*nashku*)" (Psalm 85:11). Love said: "Let him be created, because he will perform acts of love." Truth said: "Let him not be created, because all of him will be falsehood."... What did the Holy One do? He took truth and cast it to the ground, as it says: "You cast down truth to the ground" (Daniel 8:12).¹

In this conception, people can't live with truth. By contrast, God's seal is truth,² and in the 13 Attributes following the sin of the golden calf, Moses describes God as "full of grace, merciful, patient, and great in love (*hesed*) and truth (*emet*)" (Exodus 34:6). A God of truth seems destined for a difficult relationship with human beings, who can't coexist with truth.

But a funny thing happened to God's attributes over time: the aspect of truth disappeared. It was, as it were, thrown to the ground. In the eight other appearances of the list of Attributes in the Bible,³ only one (Psalm 86:15) retains *emet*. Moses himself doesn't mention it when defending the people later in the sin of the spies (Numbers 14:18). Perhaps most daringly, the review of the sin of the golden calf, as recorded in Nehemiah 9:17, simply removes this attribute, even though it is retelling the story of Exodus 34, which

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- 1 Translation from: *The Book of Legends*, eds. Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, trans. William Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p. 13. Note that the verse from Daniel is in their translation but does not appear here in Theodor-Albeck's Hebrew text.
 - 2 See Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 55a.
 - 3 Namely: Numbers 14:18; Joel 2:13; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; Nahum 1:3; Jonah 4:2.

introduces truth as one of the 13 Attributes.⁴ It seems we prefer a God who is not known for truth. After all, if God were truthful about our sinful behavior, who would be able to survive?⁵

And yet, truth never fully disappears. Even in the *midrash* which notes that truth was flung to the earth in order for people to be created, truth is resurrected. As Bereishit Rabbah continues:

אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבון העולמים מה
את מבזה אלטיבטייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ ה"ה
"אמת מארץ תצמח" (תהלים פה:יב).

*The ministering angels dared say to the Holy One:
"Master of the universe, why do You humiliate
Your seal? Let truth arise from the earth." Hence
it is written: "Let truth spring up from the earth"
(Psalm 85:12).*

I want to examine three places where truth re-emerges in our High Holiday liturgy, as a way of understanding better how we might relate to this most difficult attribute.

1. JONAH AND TRUTH— A CAUTIONARY TALE

Jonah repeats the list of attributes of God, but strikingly removes truth from the list:⁶

יונה ד:ב
אֲתָהּ אֵל-ל חַנוּן וְרַחוּם אָרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנֶחֱם עַל
הַרְעָה

Jonah 4:2

*You are a God, merciful and gracious, patient,
abounding in love, repenting of evil.*

As noted by Devora Steinmetz, Jonah stands in contrast to Moses here. While Moses—in Exodus and Numbers—recites the attributes in order to protect the people, Jonah is upset with God's merciful ways, preventing his prophecy of destruction to the people of Nineveh from coming true.⁷ For Jonah, God's entirely merciful ways are something to scorn. Jonah wishes for a God of truth, but sees only a God of mercy.

Where does truth re-emerge in the story of Jonah? It appears in the narrative connected to Jonah himself: he is Jonah ben Amitai, that is, Jonah, son of Truth.⁸ God may embody mercy, love, and forbearance, but Jonah embodies truth. He complains against a God who is missing this attribute. Ultimately, God's mercy defeats Jonah's truth: the people of Nineveh are not destroyed in forty days, as the prophecy predicted (Jonah 3:4). Rather they repent and, appealing to the hope that their returning (*va-yashuvu*) will be mirrored in God's returning (*shav*), are saved (3:8-9). Truth is nowhere to be found, except in the character of Jonah. Indeed, the root of *emet* (א.מ.ת.) disappears from the story immediately after the first verse of the book. In the universe portrayed here, truth is discarded in favor of mercy, love, and return, resulting in the saving of thousands of human and animal lives. Jonah embodies a harsh truth whereas God embodies the attributes of love. In this tale, truth stands for destruction. It must be defeated.⁹

⁴ This is at least as bold as the Rabbinic move to cut off the list of Attributes in the middle. See Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 393.

⁵ Psalm 130:3: "If You keep account of sins, YHVH, God, who will survive?"

⁶ He echoes almost word for word Joel 2:13, which may point to a larger relationship between these books. See Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), p. xxxix and p. 37. Translation here adapted from NJPS.

⁷ Devora Steinmetz, "Jonah, Son of Truth," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, eds. Gail Reimer and Judith Kates (New York: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 308-324, esp. p. 319.

⁸ Also noted by Steinmetz; see previous note.

⁹ See Steinmetz, p. 312, for a different model of truth, embodied in the widow of I Kings 17: "The widow's definition of *emet* stands in contrast with the one that Jonah and the early Elijah seem to hold: *emet* characterizes the prophet who brings change; mercifully and boldly challenging fate is what a prophet does who has God's word of truth in his mouth."

2. TRUTH AS PRECURSOR TO ADMISSION

In Jonah, truth is the enemy of return; Jonah—speaking through the guise of *emet*—believes that people should be punished for their past sins. But what if truth re-emerged in another garb? How might truth actually help in the process of return?

Although the 13 Attributes are a centerpiece of the Selihot liturgy on Yom Kippur, another version of the Attributes appear as an introduction to the Vidui / the Confession, also a staple of Yom Kippur liturgy. We state the following:

אנו עזי פנים - ואתה רחום וחנון
אנו קשי ערף - ואתה ארך אפים

*We are brazen—
but You are **merciful and gracious***
*We are stubborn—
but You are **patient***

Again, this is not a full list of God's attributes; truth is nowhere to be found. Indeed, it seems a reprise of Jonah's list (or the first part of Moses'). We entreat God who has thrown truth to the ground.

But, again, truth re-emerges. Immediately after this section of the liturgy, we introduce the confession by saying: "But (*aval*) we have sinned." As I have noted elsewhere,¹⁰ *aval* only appears twice in the Torah, and both times it is not translated in the traditional Aramaic translations as "but/however," but rather as "*be-kushta* / in truth." This liturgical phrase is best rendered, then: "in truth, we have sinned."

In this re-emergence, truth is the precursor to confession. We can't survive in a world of only truth, but we also can't admit our sins unless we are confronted with truth. Although God may not hold us against the measure of strict truth, we might start to hold ourselves accountable in that way. Here, truth is not the

enemy of human existence, but a pathway to a deeper relationship with ourselves and our actions. Truth is the first step to taking stock of one's life, which, in turn, is the first step to living a different life.

3. CALLING TO GOD IN TRUTH

One of the reformulated list of attributes of God appears in the Psalm known in the liturgy as "Ashrei." There, we read:

תהלים קמה:ח
חנון ורחום יקונק ארך אפים וגדל חסד

Psalm 145:8
Gracious and merciful is God, patient and great in love.

Again, truth is missing from this description of God, mirroring almost word for word other versions of the attributes in the Bible (most notably Psalm 103:8). The praise for God in this Psalm overlooks God's attribute of truth. Who wouldn't want to praise such a God?

But truth re-emerges in "Ashrei" as well. In verse 18, we read:

תהלים קמה:יח
קרוב יקונק לכל קראיו
לכל אשר יקראהו באמת:

Psalm 145:18
*God is close to all those who call to Him
To all who (will) call him in truth.*

It is as if truth has been "cast to the ground" again from verse 8, but springs up in verse 18 as the mode in which we are meant to call out to God. In fact, these two verses of the Psalm are linked through a literary clue, noted by medieval authorities.¹¹ While every other stanza of the Psalm is broken into two sections with the conjunction "and" (the letter "*vav*" in Hebrew),

¹⁰ Elie Kaunfer, "Aval Chatanu (But/In Truth We Have Sinned): A Literary Investigation," in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2012), pp. 181-185.

¹¹ See Reuven Kimelman, "Psalm 145: Theme, Structure, and Impact," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 113/1 (1994), pp. 37-58, here p. 51, n. 69. See in addition to the sources listed there: *Piskei Ha-Ri" D Le-Rabbi Yeshaya DiTrani Ha-Zaken Le-Berakhot Ve-Shabbat*, eds. Avraham Yosef Wertheimer and Avraham Liss (Jerusalem: Makhon Ha-Talmud Ha-Yisraeli Ha-Shalem, 1964), p. 7-8.

these two verses are not. The medieval authorities read into this a clue that this Psalm should be recited daily.¹² But regardless of the practical import, the literary linking seems intentional: truth has migrated from verse 8 to verse 18.

What is the significance of calling God in truth? The phrase is actually quite rare; people don't call God "in truth" elsewhere in the bible (although they "*daber* / speak" in truth). Perhaps truth is a certain stance toward God: being honest with oneself, being true to one's emotions in prayer, being real in one's self-representation. Elsewhere, Rabbinic sources equate "truth" with "Torah."¹³ Perhaps, then, this verse is a charge to call out to God through the language and values of Torah. This stance of truth is critical: God only listens to those who speak in this language of truth.¹⁴

But there is one final transformation that happens to truth, imagined by one of the poets of the High Holiday liturgy. Although Psalm 145:18 is quoted faithfully in one of the famous poems, *Le-Eil Orekh Din*,¹⁵ we read in a different *piyyut* for Rosh Hashanah,¹⁶

קרוב לקוראיו באהב

[God is] close to those who call Him in love.

Here, the synonym for "truth" is "love." By calling in truth, might we access a deeper capacity to love? If we were honest with ourselves, with our emotions, with our connections, might we not love more? This substitution forces us to ask: what prevents us from a truthful evaluation of our deeper feelings toward one another and toward God? Perhaps truth, as cast down to the earth, is actually the tool that can help us return—to ourselves, to our God, and to our loved ones. We cannot bear to live a world in which God acts entirely in truth, with no love. But we cannot also

bear to live in a world in which we don't access truth. We need to be honest about who we are, and we need to be honest with our deeper emotions. A world protected from that kind of truth is a colder one. But a world in which the truth of our emotions is revealed could be the world of love we so deeply hope and pray for. ♦

12 Based on Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 4b.

13 See, for example, Jerusalem Talmud Rosh Hashanah 3:8. Contrast this with the mystical explanation of the Zohar II:57a.

14 See Vayikra Rabbah 17:1; Sifrei Bemidbar #42; and others.

15 Where we read: "*Karov Le-Korav Be-Emet*/God is close to those who call Him in truth." See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor Le-Yamim Nora'im* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), vol. 1, p. 79.

16 Goldschmidt, p. 168.



MAIMONIDES MOOT COURT COMPETITION

Beyond the Box

THE CASE

Framed around a crucial question of human rights and criminal justice, the 2021 case study explored “Ban the Box” campaigns, which aim to remove questions about criminal history from university application forms. This initiative encourages universities not to inquire about the criminal histories of applicants during the admissions process. Should universities require prospective students to disclose information about their criminal backgrounds on their applications?

PART 1: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A SENTENCE IS CARRIED OUT?

The presumption of innocence is a key foundation of our modern criminal justice systems. In the eyes of the court, we are each innocent until proven guilty. The following verses in Deuteronomy describe the process of a person being sentenced to lashes after being convicted of wrongdoing in court. As you read these verses and the following commentary of the *midrash*, pay particular attention to how the Torah refers to the two parties at various points of the judgement process. In doing so, you will see a concern not only with a litigant’s standing *during* a court proceeding, but after its conclusion as well.

SOURCE #1

דברים כה:א-ג

יְכִי-יִהְיֶה רִיב בֵּין אַנְשִׁים וְנִגְשׂוּ אֶל-
 הַמִּשְׁפָּט וּשְׁפָטוּם וְהִצְדִּיקוּ אֶת-הַצְדִּיק
 וְהִרְשִׁיעוּ אֶת-הַרְשָׁע: ²וְהָיָה אִם-בֶּן
 הַכּוֹת הַרְשָׁע וְהִפִּילוּ הַשֹּׁפֵט וְהַכּוֹהֵן
 לְפָנָיו כְּדֵי רִשְׁעוֹ בְּמִסְפָּר: ³אֲרַבְעִים
 יִכְּנוּ לֹא יִסִּיף פְּוִי-יִסִּיף לְהַכְתּוֹ עַל-
 אֵלֶּה מִכָּה רַבָּה וְנִקְלָה אַחִיד לְעֵינֶיךָ:

Deuteronomy 25:1-3

¹When there is a dispute between people, and they go to the tribunal, and they judge them, acquitting the innocent one and condemning the guilty one, ²if the guilty one is to be flogged, the judge shall have him lean over and be given lashes in his presence, as his guilt warrants, by number. ³He may be given up to forty lashes, but not more, lest he give him a more severe flogging than these, and your brother would be degraded before your eyes.

SOURCE #2

ספרי דברים רפו

ר' חנניה בן גמליאל אומר, כל היום קורא אותו הכתוב "רשע", שנאמר והיה אם בן הכות הרשע; אבל כשלקה, הכתוב קוראו "אחיד", שנאמר ונקלה אחיד.

Sifrei Devarim #286

Rabbi Hananyah ben Gamliel says: Throughout the day [in court], the verse refers to him as "guilty," as it says: "if the guilty one is to be flogged." But once he has been flogged, the verse refers to him as "your brother."

This *midrash* notes a significant shift in how the Torah describes the person convicted of wrongdoing. During the court proceedings (verse 2), he is called "guilty." However, once the sentence has been carried out (verse 3), the Torah now refers to this individual as "your brother."

Questions for Further Discussion

1. What is the significance of this shift in language? What does it mean to view the person as "your brother" after the sentence is carried out?
2. How might this model inform the way in which we relate to people who have been convicted of a crime?
3. What can be challenging about seeing a guilty individual in this manner? What can prevent us from doing so?

PART 2: RETURNING THE STOLEN BEAM

If one steals an item and later wants to make amends, then, according to biblical law (Leviticus 5:23), one must return the stolen item to the person from whom it was stolen. The following dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel discusses a situation where, due to a later action taken by the thief, the process of returning the stolen item would be very costly. What happens in such circumstances? Does the actual stolen item still need to be returned?

SOURCE #3

תלמוד בבלי גיטין נה.

תנו רבנן גזל מריש ובנאו בבירה
ב"ש אומרים מקעקע כל הבירה כולה
ומחזיר מריש לבעליו וב"ה אומרים
אין לו אלא דמי מריש בלבד משום
תקנת השבין.

Talmud Bavli Gittin 55a

The Sages taught: If one stole a beam and built it into a building, Beit Shammai say: He must destroy the entire building and return the beam to its owner. Beit Hillel say: The injured party receives only the value of the beam but not the beam itself, due to an ordinance instituted for those doing *teshuvah*.

In the above case, a person stole a beam and subsequently built it into a building—and now this person wants to repent. Beit Shammai says they are required to dismantle the building and return the beam, presumably based on the verse in Leviticus cited above which states that the stolen item must be returned. However, Beit Hillel is lenient on the individual who stole the beam, and rules that it is sufficient to return the *value* of the beam. Their explanation is that this decree is intended for the sake of those doing *teshuvah*.

The Mishnah (Gittin 5:5) rules in accordance with Beit Hillel, that it is sufficient to return the value of the beam. Even though, on some level, the stolen beam itself *should* be returned, doing so would make the *teshuvah* process more difficult and therefore less likely. Seemingly, underlying this position is a desire to make the *teshuvah* process less onerous. This sensibility towards lightening the potential burdens of *teshuvah* is applied to a wide range of cases, both in the Talmud and by halakhic authorities in later generations.

1. *What do you think underlies the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel? What values are they each prioritizing?*
2. *What does Beit Hillel mean by making this ruling for the sake of those doing teshuvah?*
3. *Are there situations other than theft where applying an ordinance for the sake of teshuvah could apply? How might this principle apply to the case at hand, regarding our approach to Ban the Box?*

WORLDLY AND OTHER-WORLDLY DIMENSIONS OF THE SUKKAH

Rabbi Aviva Richman

A *sukkah* does the impossible. It carves out a small space to meet God in our own backyard. After the intensity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, immersed in synagogue and prayer, for Sukkot we build a structure, and then all we need to do is be in it. Being ourselves is doing a *mitzvah*; being ourselves is being with God.

What allows for this meeting point between the divine and human realms? How do we imagine this encounter? The Talmud's discussion of the physical dimensions of the *sukkah* reveals deep theological dimensions, giving us access to richer understandings of what it means to be in a *sukkah* and appreciate its spirituality.

MAXIMUM HEIGHT: TAPPING INTO MESSIANIC TIMES

The Mishnah (Sukkah 1:1) states that a *sukkah* may not be higher than twenty cubits or lower than ten handbreadths. The Talmud offers a few perspectives on where these measurements come from. One explanation for the twenty cubit height limit emerges from an apocalyptic vision in Isaiah:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ב.

רבי זירא אמר: מהבא (ישעיהו ד) וסכה תהיה לצל יומם מחרב, עד עשרים אמה – אדם יושב בצל סוכה, למעלה מעשרים אמה – אין אדם יושב בצל סוכה, אלא בצל דפנות.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 2a

R. Zeira said: From here, "the sukkah will be shade during the day from destruction" (Isaiah 4:6). Up to twenty cubits, a person sits in the shade of the sukkah. Above twenty cubits, a person no longer sits in the shade of the sukkah but in the shade of the walls.

From a technical perspective, the verse in Isaiah proves that a *sukkah* shouldn't be too tall, because, if it is, the shade comes from the walls rather than the "*sukkah*" itself, that is, from the *s'khakh* on top. The shelter of the *sukkah* must be fragile, such that you can see that the sheltering effect comes from the delicate material above. The fragility of this structure becomes all the more pronounced when we notice the context of the verse, which describes destruction in the end of days. As storms and chaos swirl about, a tiny shelter creates some security:

ישעיה ד:ה-ו

וַבְּרֵא ה' עַל כָּל-מְכוּן הַר-צִיּוֹן וְעַל-מִזְבֵּחַהּ עָנָן יוֹמָם
וְעֶשֶׂן וְנִגְהָ אֵשׁ לְהַבֶּה לַיְלָה כִּי עַל-כֵּל כְּבוֹד הַזִּפְהָ: וְסִכָּה
תִּהְיֶה לְצִל-יוֹמָם מִחֶרֶב וּלְמַחֲסֵה וּלְמִסְתוֹר מִזָּרָם
וּמִמָּטָר:

Isaiah 4:5-6

God will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory shall hang a canopy, which shall serve as a pavilion for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain.

The Gemara, though, objects to R. Zeira's proof:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ב:

כרבי זירא נמי לא אמרי - ההוא לימות המשיח הוא דכתיב.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 2b

They don't follow R. Zeira; that is written about messianic times.

According to this refutation, the verse connecting shelter to the fragile *s'khakh* itself has no bearing in our own times. The utility of such a fragile shelter made out of God's manifest presence is meaningless in the world we live in; it can only offer protection in messianic times. But the Gemara deflects this objection, and, in so doing, draws a line between the messianic days and our own, real world:

ורבי זירא: אם כן לימא קרא וחפה תהיה לצל יומם, ומאי וסכה תהיה לצל יומם - שמעת מינה תרתי.

R. Zeira responds: if so, let the verse say, "the huppah will provide shade in the day." Why does it say "sukkah"? To teach two things [(1) about the messianic times, and (2) about the sukkah we build today].

R. Zeira points to a superfluous use of nouns in the passage from Isaiah. The previous verse refers to the sheltering structure as a *huppah*, and only subsequently as a *sukkah*. He concludes that the unnecessary usage of the word *sukkah* hints to the holiday of Sukkot. In fact, the *sukkah* of our own times is like the *sukkah* of messianic times. From a technical perspective, this means that it, too, must have shade from the *s'khakh* and not the walls. When we treat the verses from Isaiah as an intertext for understanding the function of the *sukkah* more broadly, though, the image of God's presence offering shelter from storms takes on new meanings. Even in the storms and chaos of the times we live in, we may find divine shelter, however fragile that may be. It isn't merely a messianic dream deferred.

MINIMUM HEIGHT: TRAVERSING THE DIVINE/HUMAN DIVIDE

When the Gemara later discusses the minimum height

of the *sukkah*, it catapults us into dramatic scenes of biblical narrative. The Gemara draws our attention to three moments that explicitly refer to times of close encounter between a person and God.

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ד:-ה.

מנלן? אתמר, רב ורבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו... ארון תשעה וכפורת טפח - הרי כאן עשרה

וכתיב ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי אתך מעל הכפרת

ותניא, רבי יוסי אומר: מעולם לא ירדה שכניה למטה, ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום, שנאמר השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 4b-5a

From where do we know [that a sukkah less than ten handbreadths is not kosher]?

It was said: Rav, R. Hanina, R. Yohanan and R. Haviva taught... 'The ark was nine and the cover one handbreadth'—this makes ten handbreadths.

And it is written, "I will meet with you there and speak to you from on top of the cover [between the two cherubim on the ark of testimony]" (Exodus 25:22).

And it was taught: R. Yose said: The divine presence never came down to the lower world, and Moses and Elijah never went up to the upper world. As it says, "the Heavens belong to God and the earth, God gave to human beings" (Psalm 115:16).

This *sugya*, or passage, offers a complex, three-part proof for ten handbreadths as a minimum height of the *sukkah*. First, the Gemara traces the number ten to the model of the ark in the *mishkan*—together, the ark and the cover made ten handbreadths. This is a solid case for ten handbreadths, but what does it have to do with a *sukkah*? Cryptically, the proof-text goes on to quote a verse from Exodus that states the function of the ark was for God to meet Moshe there and speak from above the ark's cover. Finally, the Gemara turns to the last part of the proof: a statement from an early sage, R. Yose, that God's presence never came down to earth, nor did Moshe or Eliyahu ever transcend into the divine sphere.

This discussion is all fascinating, but what does it have to do with a *sukkah*? With the aid of Rashi, we see that this three-part proof serves as the basis for a general principle, not specific to *sukkah*, that ten handbreadths constitute a distinctive zone or area, a *reshut*. God and humanity must have separate realms (“the heavens belong to God and the earth to human beings”); yet, God comes to speak to Moshe in a divine-human encounter. So it must be that the separate zones were maintained even in this encounter. Hence, the ten handbreadths of the *mishkan* were to create the barrier that would allow for meeting. The *sukkah*, then, is like the ten handbreadth barrier that allows for God’s presence to rest on top, remaining outside of a delineated and discrete human realm.

Through these theologically rich narrative prooftexts, the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* becomes an exercise in the possibility of nothing less than approaching God. At the same time, the Gemara weakens the power of these moments by introducing a level of distance between God and the human realm in each. We are left to wonder: does the *sukkah*, of at least ten handbreadths, propel us into close relationship with God, or does it actually erect a barrier?

The Talmud records a vehement backlash to the idea of a constant ten handbreadths of distance between the human and the divine realms. How could the fundamental theology of the Torah, including the central depiction of revelation, hold up to this concept of divine distance? The Gemara hurls multiple attacks against this notion that neither God nor humans penetrated each other’s realms:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ה.
ולא ירדה שכינה למטה?

והכתיב וירד ה' על הר סיני! למעלה מעשרה טפחים.

והכתיב ועמדו רגליו ביום ההוא על הר הזיתים! -
למעלה מעשרה טפחים.

ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום? והכתיב ומשה עלה אל
האלקים! - למטה מעשרה.

והכתיב ויעל אליהו בסערה השמים! - למטה מעשרה.

והכתיב מאחזו פני כסא פרשז עליו עננו, ואמר ר'
תנחום מלמד שפירש ש-די מזיו שכינתו ועננו עליו! -
למטה מעשרה.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 5a

The divine presence never came down?

But it is written, “God came down on Mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:20)! God remained ten handbreadths above.

But it is written, “God’s legs will stand that day on the Mount of Olives” (Zechariah 14:4)! Ten handbreadths above.

Moshe and Eliyahu never went up? But it is written, “Moses went up to God” (Exodus 19:3)! He remained ten handbreadths below.

But it is written “Eliyahu went up to the Heavens in a storm” (II Kings 2:11)! Ten handbreadths below.

But it is written, “grasping the throne, He spread his cloud over him” (Job 26:9), and R. Tanhum said: This teaches that God spread His divine glory and His cloud upon him. Below ten handbreadths.

Of course, it is possible to break through a barrier between the divine and human realms, says the Gemara: God on Mt. Sinai giving the Torah; God on the Mount of Olives in the end of days; Moshe and Eliyahu go up to God. To all of these, the Gemara offers the same response. In each of these moments of union, there was actually still a ten handbreadth buffer in between. In light of these narrative moments, we are left to perceive the *sukkah* as that buffer, creating the safe distance that allows for close connection with God.

REACHING TO THE OTHER

In the end, the Gemara cannot resolve one scene in exactly this way. The verse in Job (midrashically applied to Moshe) speaks of a human “grasping” the divine throne. Obviously, grasping is not something someone can do at a ten handbreadth distance!

כל מקום מאחזו פני כסא כתיב! - אישתרבובי
אישתרבב ליה עד עשרה, ונקט ביה

But still, it says, "grasping the throne" (Job 26:9)! God extended the throne ten handbreadths, and he grasped it.

Here, the Gemara explains that God stretched beyond the divine realm, extending the divine throne through to the end of the ten handbreadth barrier between Moshe and God. This cryptic, but rich, line leads us to picture the *sukkah* a bit differently. Rather than creating the ten handbreadth barrier that keeps God at a safe enough distance to allow for meeting God, the *sukkah* could be read instead as either our—or God's—mechanism for extending into the zone of the Other. By building the *sukkah*, perhaps we are extending ourselves into the ten handbreadth buffer between us and God. Or perhaps the *sukkah* reflects God's desire to extend into our lives.

HOUSING GOD'S PRESENCE

There is one final turn in the Gemara's discussion of worldly and transcendent dimensions of the *sukkah*. Catalyzed by a technical question about the minimum height of the *sukkah* (how do you know the ten handbreadths of empty space in the *sukkah* must exclude the *s'khakh?*), the Gemara leads us to a verse in the discussion of the ark in the *mishkan* that has more explicit resonance with the *sukkah* than the discussion that came before:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ה:
וכתיב והיו הכרובים פרשי כנפים למעלה סככים
בכנפיהם על הכפרת. קרייה רחמנא סככה למעלה
מעשרה.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 5b

And it is written, "The cherubim spread their wings above, covering the ark with their wings" (Exodus 25:20). The Torah calls it "covering (s'khakh)" above ten handbreadths.

From here, the Gemara derives that, just as the height of the cherubim's wings was ten handbreadths above the cover of the ark—i.e. just above their heads—so, too, the *s'khakh* must hover above ten handbreadths of empty space to the floor of the *sukkah*. This leaves us with clarity about the minimum height of the *sukkah*: it must be ten handbreadths, not including the height of the *s'khakh* itself. Yet, this image is actually

a total swerve from the previous derivation for ten handbreadths. Before, we thought the *sukkah* was akin to the ten handbreadths of the ark itself, creating a barrier between us and God. Now, the ten handbreadths constitute the space above the ark, where God's voice emerged between the cherubim.

So, how should we think of our *sukkah*? Is it a barrier between us and God, with the divine presence hovering above? Or is our *sukkah* the space that actually houses God's presence? This metaphysical paradox may mean nothing to our actual experience of dwelling in the *sukkah*. Yet, I find it helpful that our tradition offers a dynamic picture of how the *sukkah* brings us into relationship with God.

When we build the *sukkah* each year, or dwell in one somebody else built and shared, we can focus on different aspects of building close relationship, whether with God or with others in our lives. Sometimes, we need to figure out how to draw boundaries that create the space and distance to allow for encountering each other. Sometimes, we may be ready to temporarily extend ourselves into that boundary. And sometimes, we need to realize that we have the capacity to hold another's presence in our own space, no matter how counterintuitive that may seem. When we see the legal details of the *sukkah* through their theological and narrative underpinnings, we can start to do the work of bringing us closer to redeemed times, where our *sukkah* is like a *huppah* of shelter amidst the storms of life. ♦



אֲשֵׁפִיזִין ♦ Ushpizin

One of the most important and special experiences of Sukkot is sharing our meals in the *sukkah* with friends and guests. In addition to our real-life guests, the Zohar records an ancient custom—still practiced in many families today—of welcoming seven heavenly guests, called *ushpizin* in Aramaic, into the *sukkah*, one for each night of the holiday.

The traditional list of *ushpizin* is comprised of righteous men from the Tanakh, and, in recent years, people have also included righteous women, broadening the scope of which heavenly guests are invited into the *sukkah*. Below, you will find the traditional male guests, alongside seven biblical women, making for two guests each night.

As you invite the *ushpizin* into your *sukkah*, spend some time learning together with your family and friends, getting to know the *ushpizin* better through the stories and insights shared in the following *midrashim* about these spiritual giants.

TEXT OF USHPIZIN INVITATION

תיבּו אֲשֵׁפִיזִין עֵילָאִין, תיבּו תיבּו אֲשֵׁפִיזִין קִדִישִׁין, תיבּו תיבּו אֲשֵׁפִיזִין דְּמַהִימְנוּתָא, זְבָאָה חוּלְקִיהוּן
דְּיִשְׂרָאֵל דְּכִתִּיב בֵּי חֶלֶק ה' עֲמוּ יַעֲקֹב חֶבְל נְחֻלְתּוּ:
אַזְמִין לְסַעֲוֹדְתִי אֲשֵׁפִיזִין עֵילָאִין:
אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף מֹשֶׁה אַהֲרֹן וְדָוִד:
שָׂרָה רִבְקָה לֵאָה רָחֵל שֵׁנַח מְרִים וְרוּת:

Sit, sit, lofty guests; sit, sit, holy guests; sit, sit, guests of faith. Worthy is Israel's portion, as it is written, "For God's portion is God's people, Ya'akov is God's allotment" (Deuteronomy 32:9).

I am inviting to my feast the lofty guests:
Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'akov, Yosef, Moshe, Aharon, and David.
Sarah, Rivkah, Leah, Rahel, Serah, Miriam, and Rut.

1st Night: Avraham & Sarah

May it please you, Avraham and Sarah,
my lofty guests, that all of the exalted guests
sit together with me and you.

TONIGHT WE SAY

בְּמַשֵׁי מִינְכוֹן אַבְרָהָם וְסָרָה
אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאֵין דִּיתְבִי עִמִּי וְעִמְכוֹן
כֹּל אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָיא.

אבות דרבי נתן (נוסחא א) ז

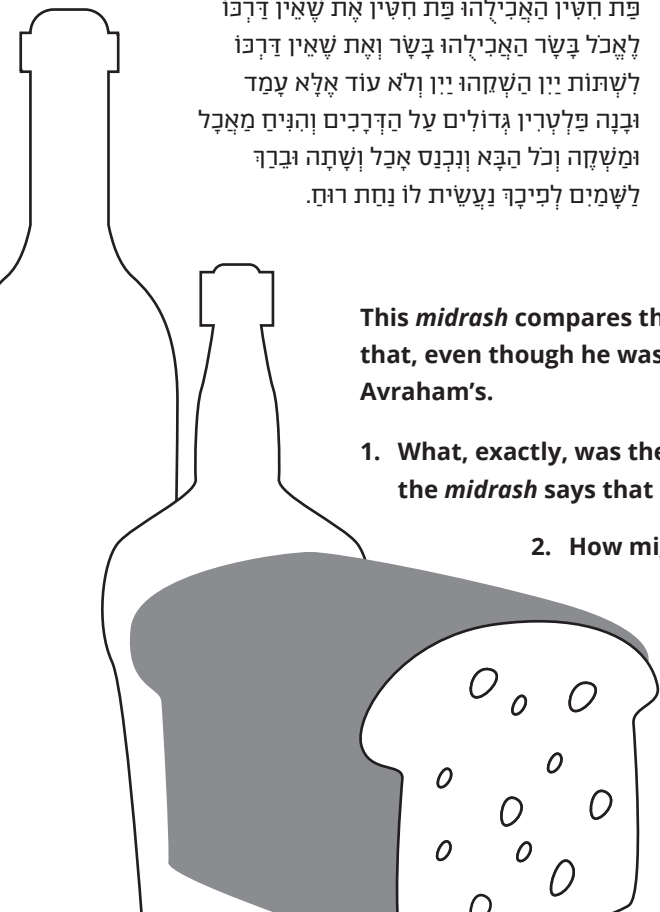
בְּשִׁבְעָא עָלְיוּ הוּוּא פְּרַעְנִיּוֹת גְּדוֹל אָמַר לְפָנֵי
הַקַּב"ה רַב־שׁ"ע לֹא הֵייתִי מְאָכִיל רְעֵבִים
וּמְשָׁקָה צְמֵאִים? שְׁנַאֲמַר (אִיּוֹב לֹא: יז) וְאָכַל
פְּתֵי לְבַדִּי וְלֹא אָכַל יְתוֹם מִמֶּנָּה... אַעֲפ"כּ א"ל
הַקַּב"ה לְאִיּוֹב אִיּוֹב עָדִין לֹא הִגַּעַת [לְחֻצֵי
שַׁעַר] שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲתָה יוֹשֵׁב וְשׁוֹקֵה בְּתוֹךְ
בֵּיתְךָ וְאוֹרְחֵיךָ וְנִכְנְסִים אֶצְלְךָ אֶת שְׂדֵרְכוֹ
לְאָכוֹל פֶּת חֲסִים הֵאָכִילְתוּ פֶת חֲסִים אֶת
שְׂדֵרְכוֹ לְאָכוֹל בְּשֵׁר הֵאָכִילְתוּ בְּשֵׁר אֶת שְׂדֵרְכוֹ
לְשִׁתוֹת יַיִן הִשְׁקִיתוּ יַיִן. אָכַל אַבְרָהָם לֹא עָשָׂה
כֵּן אֶלָּא יוֹשֵׁב וּמַהֲדֵר בְּעוֹלָם וּבְשִׁימְצָא אוֹרְחֵיךָ
מִכְנִיסוֹן בְּתוֹךְ בֵּיתוֹ אֶת שְׂאִין דְּרַבְּכוֹ לְאָכוֹל
פֶּת חֲסִין הֵאָכִילְהוּ פֶת חֲסִין אֶת שְׂאִין דְּרַבְּכוֹ
לְאָכַל בְּשֵׁר הֵאָכִילְהוּ בְּשֵׁר וְאֵת שְׂאִין דְּרַבְּכוֹ
לְשִׁתוֹת יַיִן הִשְׁקָהוּ יַיִן וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא עֲמַד
וּבְנָה פִּלְטָרִין גְּדוֹלִים עַל הַדְּרָכִים וְהַנִּיחַ מֵאָכַל
וּמְשָׁקָה וְכָל הַבָּא וְנִכְנַס אָכַל וְשָׁתָה וּבִרְךָ
לְשָׁמַיִם לְכִיבְךָ נַעֲשִׂית לּוֹ נַחַת רַחוּם.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan (Version A) 7

When all the great tragedies came upon him, Iyyov said before the Holy Blessed One: "Did I not feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty?" As it says, "Did I ever eat my food alone, and not let orphan eat from it?" (Iyyov 31:17). The Holy Blessed One said to Iyyov: "Iyyov, you still have not gotten to [even half] the level of Avraham. You sit and wait in your house, and guests come into you. And if it is someone's custom to eat wheat bread, you feed them wheat bread. And if someone's custom is to eat meat, you feed them meat. And if someone's custom is to drink wine, you pour them wine. But Avraham did not do this. Rather, he sat and looked out at the world, and when he would see potential guests, he would go bring them into his house. And if someone was not accustomed to eating wheat bread, he would feed them wheat bread. And if someone was not accustomed to eating meat, he would feed them meat. And if someone was not accustomed to drinking wine, he would pour them wine. Not only that, but he built large booths out on the roads where he would leave food and drink, and anyone who came by and entered would eat and drink and bless the heavens, and they would feel content."

This *midrash* compares the ways in which Iyyov and Avraham welcomed guests. God tells Iyyov that, even though he was diligent about this *mitzvah*, his approach pales in comparison to Avraham's.

1. What, exactly, was the difference between Avraham and Iyyov, and why do you think the *midrash* says that one is better than the other?
2. How might the model of Avraham be applied in real life?



בראשית רבה ט:טז

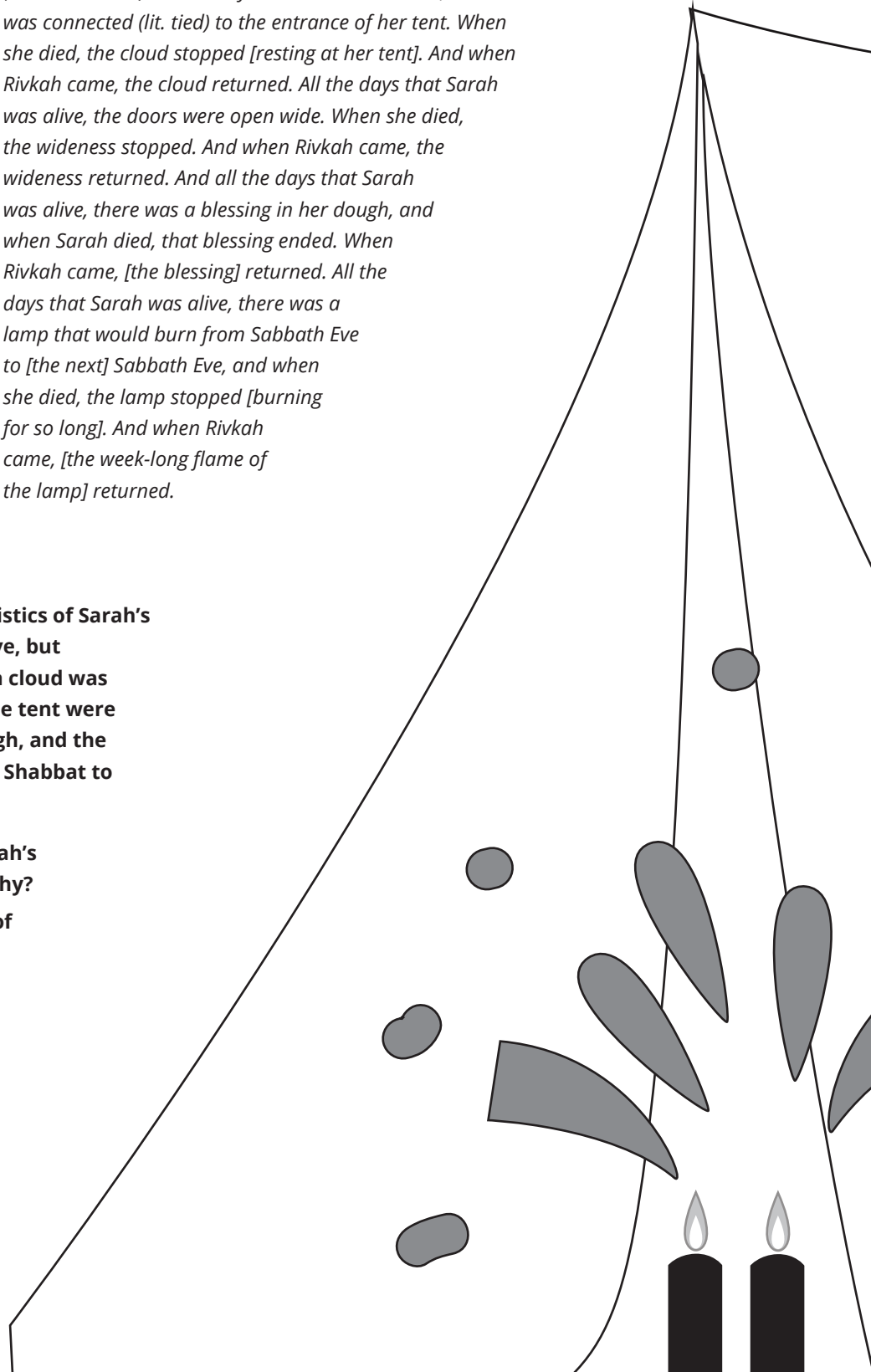
ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו
(בראשית כד, טז), כל ימים
שהיתה שרה קיימת היה ענן
קשור על פתח אהלה, כיון
שמתה פסק אותו ענן, וכיון
שבאת רבקה חזר אותו ענן.
כל ימים שהיתה שרה קיימת
היו דלתות פתוחות לרוחה,
וכיון שמתה שרה פסקה אותה
הרוחה, וכיון שבאת רבקה חזרה
אותה הרוחה. וכל ימים שהיתה
שרה קיימת היה ברכה משלחת
בעסה, וכיון שמתה שרה פסקה
אותה הברכה, כיון שבאת רבקה
חזרה. כל ימים שהיתה שרה
קיימת היה נר דולק מליילי שבת
ועד ליילי שבת, וכיון שמתה פסק
אותו הנר, וכיון שבאת רבקה חזר.

Bereishit Rabbah 60:16

"And Yitzhak brought [Rivkah] into the tent of Sarah, his mother" (Bereishit 24:67). All the days that Sarah was alive, a cloud was connected (lit. tied) to the entrance of her tent. When she died, the cloud stopped [resting at her tent]. And when Rivkah came, the cloud returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, the doors were open wide. When she died, the wideness stopped. And when Rivkah came, the wideness returned. And all the days that Sarah was alive, there was a blessing in her dough, and when Sarah died, that blessing ended. When Rivkah came, [the blessing] returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a lamp that would burn from Sabbath Eve to [the next] Sabbath Eve, and when she died, the lamp stopped [burning for so long]. And when Rivkah came, [the week-long flame of the lamp] returned.

This *midrash* describes four characteristics of Sarah's home that endured while she was alive, but disappeared when she passed away: a cloud was connected to her tent, the doors to the tent were open, there was a blessing in the dough, and the Shabbat lamp would stay lit from one Shabbat to the next.

1. Which of the characteristics of Sarah's home resonates with you most? Why?
2. What are the best characteristics of your home?
3. What do these things tell us about the kind of person Sarah was?



2nd Night: Rivkah & Yitzhak

May it please you, Rivkah and Yitzhak,
my lofty guests, that all of the exalted guests
sit together with me and you.

בְּמַשֵּׁי מִינְכוֹן רִבְקָה וַיִּצְחָק אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאִין
דְּיִתְבֵּי עִמִּי וְעַמְכוֹן כָּל אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאִיא.

TONIGHT WE SAY

בראשית רבה ט:ה

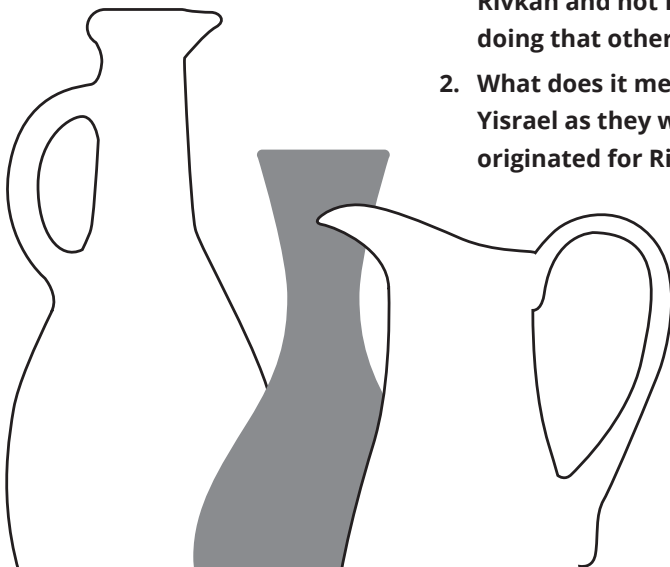
בראשית כד, טו) "וַיִּתְכַד הָעַיִנָּה וַתִּמְלֵא כִדָּה וַתַּעַל", כָּל הַנָּשִׁים יוֹרְדוֹת וַתִּמְלְאוּ מִן הָעַיִן, וְזוֹ בִּיּוֹן שָׁרְאוּ אוֹתָהּ הַמַּיִם מִיָּד עָלָה, אָמַר לָהּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶתְּ סִימָן לְבִנְיָהּ, מָה אֶתְּ בִּיּוֹן שָׁרְאוּ אוֹתָהּ הַמַּיִם מִיָּד עָלָה, אִף בְּנֵיךְ בִּיּוֹן שֶׁהִבְאֵר רוּאָה אוֹתָן מִיָּד תִּהְיֶה עוֹלָה, הִדָּא הוּא דְכַתִּיב (בְּמִדְבָר כ"א, יז): אֲזַ וַיִּשֶׁר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁיבָה הַזֹּאת עָלָי בְּאֵר.

Bereishit Rabbah 60:5

"She went down to the fountain, and filled her pitcher and went up" (Bereishit 24:16). All women went down and drew water from the well, whereas for [Rivkah], the water went up as soon as it saw her. Said the Holy Blessed One to her: "You have provided a token for your descendants: just as the water came up immediately when it saw you, so will it be for your descendants: as soon as the well sees them, it will immediately rise"; thus it is written, "Then Israel sang this song: spring up, O well—sing to it" (Bemidbar 21:17).

When Avraham's servant went searching for a wife for Yitzhak, he asked God for a sign so he would know which woman he was looking for: if a woman were to offer him water to drink for himself *and* for his camels, he would know she was the one. When Rivkah arrived, she did just that—she gave water to him and to his camels as well. This *midrash* tells us that the waters rose up to meet Rivkah as she came to fill her jug, unlike other women, who had to go down to the water if they wanted any.

1. Why do you think the waters performed this miracle for Rivkah and not for other people at the well? What was she doing that others were not doing?
2. What does it mean that the miracle which sustained Benei Yisrael as they wandered in the desert is the same one which originated for Rivkah at the well?



בראשית רבה סח:ט

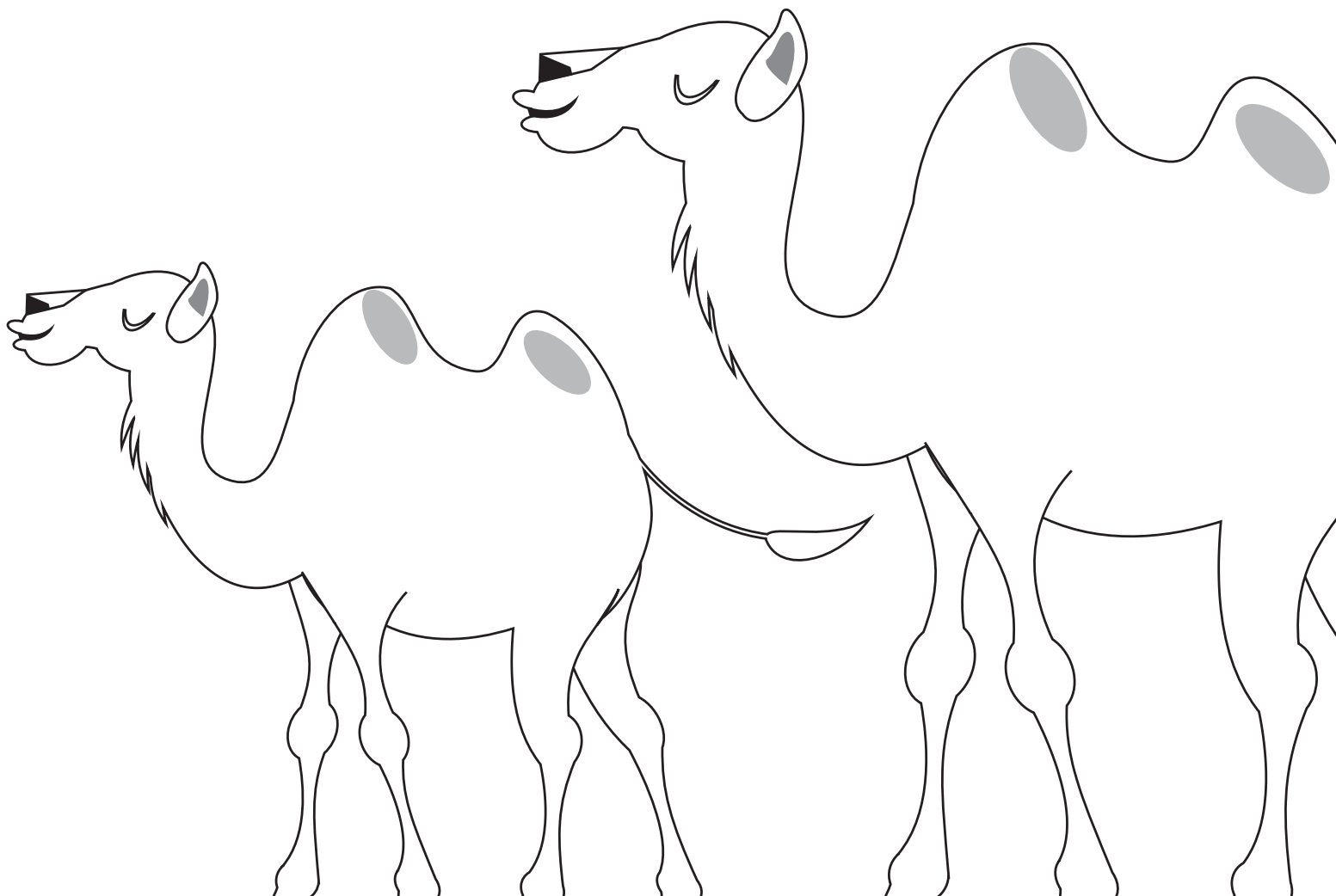
אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי אבות הראשונים התקינו שלש תפילות, אברהם תקון תפילת שחרית, שנאמר (בראשית יט:כז): "וישכם אברהם בבקר אל המקום אשר עמד שם" וגו', ואין עמידה אלא תפילה, שנאמר (תהלים קו:ל): "ויעמד פינקס ויפלל". יצחק תקון תפילת מנחה, שנאמר (בראשית כד:סג): "ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה", ואין שוחה אלא תפילה, שנאמר (תהלים קמב:ג): "אשפך לפניו שיחי". יעקב תקון תפילת ערבית, שנאמר (בראשית כח:יא): "ויפגע במקום", ואין פגיעה אלא תפילה, שנאמר (ירמיה ז:טז): "ואל תשא בעדם וגו' ואל תפגע בי".

Bereishit Rabbah 68:9

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The Avot instituted the concept of three daily prayers: Avraham instituted the morning prayer, as it states, "Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood" (Bereishit 19:27), and "standing" can mean prayer, as it states, "and Pinhas stood up and prayed" (Tehillim 106:30). Yitzhak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated, "Yitzhak went out to speak/converse in the field" (Bereishit 24:63) and "speaking/conversing" can mean prayer, as it is stated, "I pour out my speech/conversation before God" (Psalm 142:3). Ya'akov instituted the evening prayer, as it is stated, "he had an encounter" (Bereshit 28:11) and "having an encounter" can mean prayer, as it is stated that God said to Yirmiyahu, "do not pray for this people and do not speak up for them... and do not encounter Me" (Yirmiyahu 7:16).

This *midrash* teaches that Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov each instituted one of the three daily prayers—Shaharit, Minhah, and Ma'ariv, respectively. Just before Yitzhak met Rivkah for the first time, the Torah states that he had gone out "to speak/converse (לשוח) in the field." The *midrash* explains that the word, "to speak/converse (לשוח)," is a reference to prayer, indicating that prayer, for Yitzhak, was like having a conversation with God.

1. In what ways is praying like having a conversation, and in what ways is it not? How do you experience prayer?
2. What does it say about Yitzhak's relationship with God that his prayer could be described as a conversation?



3rd Night: Ya'akov and Leah

May it please you, Ya'akov and Leah, my lofty guests, that all of the exalted guests sit together with me and you.

בְּמַשֵּׁי מִיָּנֹכַח יַעֲקֹב וְלֵאָה
אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאִין דִּיתְבִּי עִמִּי
וְעִמְכֹּון כָּל אוֹשְׁפִיזָא עֲלֵיא.

TONIGHT WE SAY

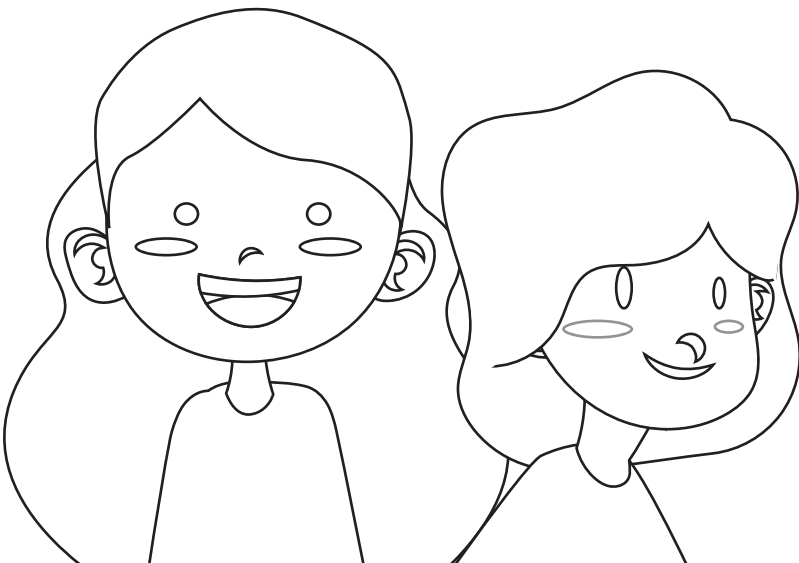
מדרש תנחומא וישלח ד
בראשית לב:ז) "וַיָּשָׁבוּ
הַמַּלְאָכִים אֶל יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר..."
מִיד (שם ח) "וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד
וַיֵּצֵר" לְמָה שְׁנֵי פְעָמִים. וַיִּירָא,
שְׁלֵא יִהְרֵג. וַיֵּצֵר, שְׁלֵא יִהְרֵג.

Midrash Tanhuma Va-Yishlah 4

"And the messengers returned to Ya'akov, saying, [He is coming to meet you with four hundred men]" (Bereishit 32:7). Immediately after this, it says that "Ya'akov was greatly afraid and was distressed" (32:8). Why twice? He "was greatly afraid" that he might be killed and "distressed" lest he should be forced to kill.

Ya'akov had to run away from home to escape from his brother, Esav, who had threatened to kill him. Many years later, he had a very large family of his own, and he decided to return home, but he heard that Esav—together with 400 men—was coming to meet him along the way. This *midrash* picks up on the fact that, twice in the same verse, the Torah says that Ya'akov was afraid to meet Esav. This repetition is interpreted as meaning two different things: yes, Ya'akov is afraid of being killed by Esav, but, more than that, he is also afraid of having to kill Esav in self-defense.

1. Which is worse: getting hurt by someone, or being the person who hurts someone else?
2. If Ya'akov had to kill Esav in order to save his own life, why would he be afraid to do that?
3. What else might Ya'akov have been afraid of as he thought about meeting Esav?



בראשית

רבה ע:טו

וְשֵׁם הַגְּדוֹלָה לְאֵהָ, גְּדוֹלָה בְּמַתְנוּתֶיהָ, כְּהֹנָה
לְעוֹלָם וּמַלְכוּת לְעוֹלָם, דְּכַתִּיב (יואל ד, ב):
וַיְהוּדָה לְעוֹלָם תִּשָּׁב וּגו', וְכַתִּיב (תהלים
קלב, יד): זֹאת מְנוּחָתִי עַד־עַד.

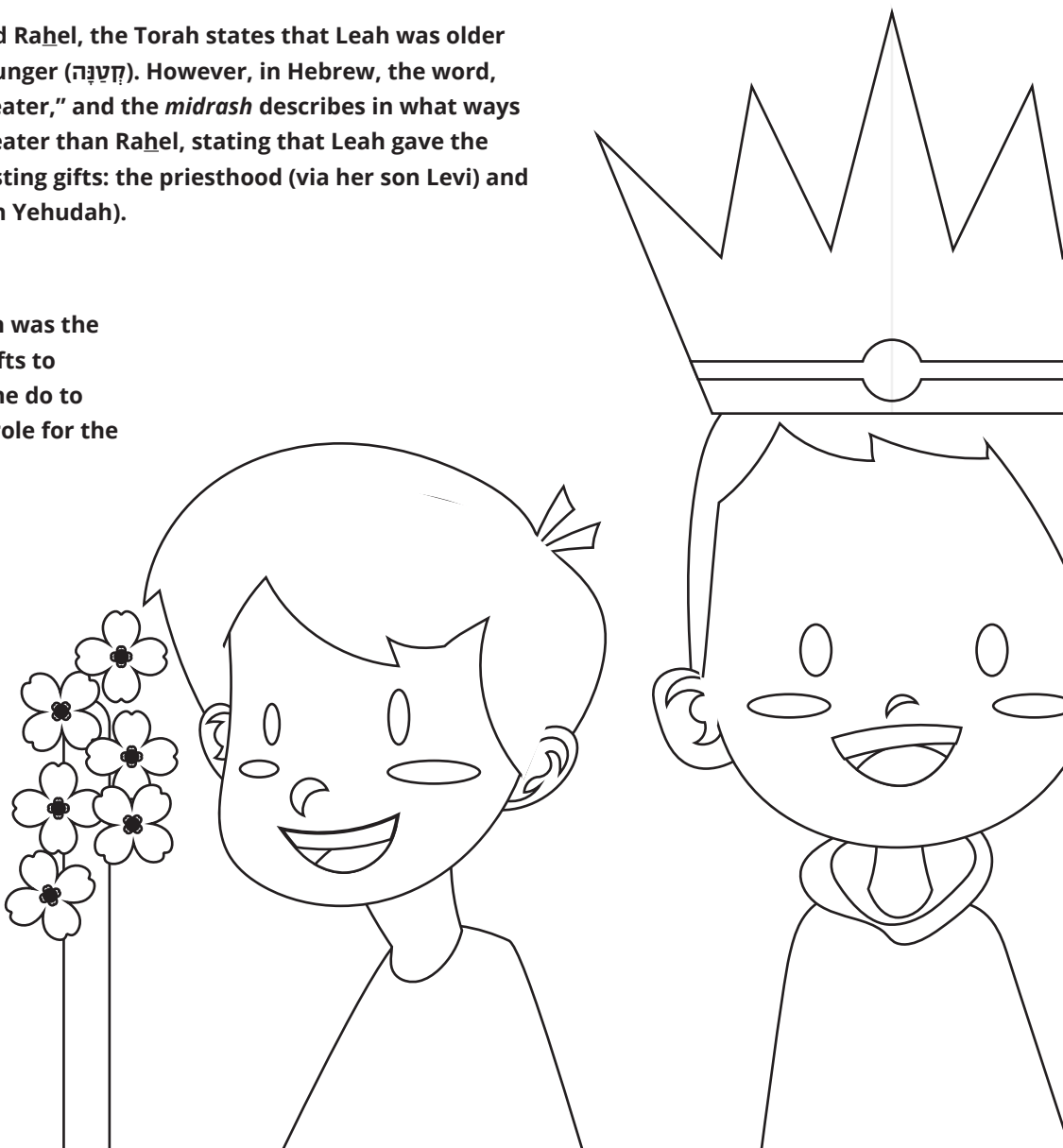
Bereishit Rabbah 70:15

"The name of the elder (lit. great) one was Leah" (Bereishit 29:16). She was great in her gifts, receiving the priesthood for all time and royalty for all time. As it is written, "Yehudah shall dwell forever" (Yoel 4:20), and it is written, "This is My rest forever" (Tehillim 132:14).



When describing Leah and Ra^hel, the Torah states that Leah was older (גְּדוֹלָה), and Ra^hel was younger (קְטַנָּה). However, in Hebrew, the word, גְּדוֹלָה, can also mean, "greater," and the *midrash* describes in what ways Leah might have been greater than Ra^hel, stating that Leah gave the Jewish people two everlasting gifts: the priesthood (via her son Levi) and the monarchy (via her son Yehudah).

1. Why do you think Leah was the one who gave those gifts to the world? What did she do to merit that important role for the Jewish people?
2. What does it say about "greatness" that it is defined by a person's gifts to the world?



4th Night: Rahel and Yosef

May it please you, Rahel and Yosef, my lofty guests, that all of the exalted guests sit together with me and you.

בְּמַעַי מִנְכוֹן רַחֵל וְיוֹסֵף אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאִין
דִּיתְבֵּי עִמִּי וְעִמְכוֹן כָּל אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאִין.

TONIGHT WE SAY

איכה רבה פתיחתא כד

בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה קִפְצָה רַחֵל אֲמַנּוּ לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמְרָה רַבּוֹנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם,
גְּלוֹי לִפְנֵיךְ שִׁיעָקוֹב עֲבָדְךָ אֲהַבְנִי אֲהַבָה יִתְרָה וְעַבְדְּךָ
בְּשִׁבְלֵי לְאַבָּא שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים, וּכְשֶׁהִשְׁלִימוּ אוֹתוֹן

שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים וְהִגִּיעַ זְמַן נִשׁוּאֵי לְבַעֲלִי,

יַעַץ אָבִי לְהַחֲלִיפְנִי לְבַעֲלִי בְּשִׁבְלִי

אֲחוֹתִי... וְרַחֲמֵתִי עַל אֲחוֹתִי שֶׁלֹּא

תִּצָּא לְחִרְפָּה, וְלַעֲרֹב חֲלִפּוֹ אֲחוֹתִי

לְבַעֲלִי בְּשִׁבְלִי, וּמִסְרָתִי לְאֲחוֹתִי

כָּל הַסִּימָנִין שֶׁמִּסְרָתִי לְבַעֲלִי, כְּדִי

שֶׁיִּהְיֶה סָבוּר שֶׁהִיא רַחֵל. וְגַמְלָתִי

קִסֵּד עִמָּה, וְלֹא קִנְאֵתִי בָּהּ וְלֹא

הוֹצֵאתִיהָ לְחִרְפָּה. וְמָה אֲנִי שָׂאָנִי

בְּשָׂר וָדָם עֹכֵר וְאֹפֵר לֹא קִנְאֵתִי

לְצַרְהָ שְׁלִי... מִיָּד נִתְגַּלְגְּלוּ

רַחֲמָיו שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ

הוּא וְאָמַר, בְּשִׁבְלֵךְ רַחֵל אֲנִי

מִחְזִיר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִקְוָמוֹ,

הֵדָא הוּא דְכִתְיִב (ירמיה לא,

טו): כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע

נְהִי בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים רַחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל בְּנֵיהָ

מֵאַנָּה לְהִנָּחַם עַל בְּנֵיהָ כִּי אֵינָנּוּ.

וּכְתִיב (ירמיה לא, טו): כֹּה אָמַר

ה' מִנְעִי קוֹלֹךְ מִבְּכִי וְעֵינַיִךְ

מִדְמָעָה כִּי יֵשׁ שָׂכָר לְפַעֲלֶתְךָ

וְגו', וּכְתִיב (ירמיה לא, יז):

וְיֵשׁ תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ נְאֻם

ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם."

Eikhah Rabbah Petihta 24

At that moment, our Mother Rahel jumped forward before the Holy One and said, "Master of the world! It is known before You that Your servant Ya'akov's love for me knew no bounds, and he worked for my father for seven years for me. When those seven years were completed and the time came for my marriage to my husband, my father advised exchanging me with my sister... I had compassion for my sister that she not suffer disgrace, and I gave her all the signs that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rahel... I acted kindly with her, I was not jealous of her, and I did not cause her to be shamed and disgraced. What am I, flesh and blood, dust and ashes, that I was not jealous of my rival wife..." God's mercy was immediately revealed, and God said: "For your sake, Rahel, I shall return Israel to their place." That's what is written, "So said God: A voice is heard in the heights, wailing bitter weeping, Rahel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted about her children, for they are no more. So said God: Withhold your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your labor... And there is hope for your end—declares God—children will return to their borders" (Yirmiyahu 31:15-17).



The *midrash* says that, after the destruction of the Temple, when God was exiling Benei Yisrael, God told Yirmiyahu to call on Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'akov, and Moshe to cry out on behalf of Benei Yisrael. Raḥel is described as jumping in to beg God to have mercy, claiming all of Benei Yisrael as her own children, and God promised to save them one day on her behalf.

1. Why do you think Raḥel is successful in awakening God's mercy, where those who tried before her were not?
2. Even though Raḥel was not originally asked to pray on behalf of Benei Yisrael, she decided to try anyway, and, in the end, her prayers were the most effective. What can we learn from this? When might you need courage in order to stand up and make things better for others?

מדרש תנחומא ויחי יז

(בראשית נ:טו) "וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָי יוֹסֵף כִּי מֵת אֲבִיהֶם. וַיִּמָּה רָאוּ עֵתָהּ שֶׁפִּתְּחוּ. אֲלֵא בָּעֵת שֶׁחָזְרוּ מִקְּבוּרַת אֲבִיהֶם רָאוּ שֶׁהֵלֵךְ יוֹסֵף לְבָרֵךְ עַל אוֹתוֹ הַבּוֹר שֶׁהִשְׁלִיכוּהוּ אֶחָיו בְּתוֹכוֹ, וּבָרֵךְ עָלָיו, כְּמוֹ שֶׁחָיַב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל מְקוֹם שֶׁנֶּעֱשְׂהָ לוֹ נֶס, בְּרוּךְ הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁעָשָׂה לִי נֶס בְּמְקוֹם הַזֶּה. וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁרָאוּ בְּךָ, אֲמָרוּ, עֲכָשָׁו מֵת אֲבִינוּ, לוֹ יִשְׁטַמְנוּ יוֹסֵף וְהַשֵּׁב יָשִׁיב לָנוּ אֶת כָּל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר גָּמְלָנוּ אוֹתוֹ. וַיִּצְווּ אֵל יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר (שם טו-טז) "אֲבִיךָ צִוָּה וְגו', כִּהֵן תֹּאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנֵן וְגו'". חִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא מָצָאנוּ שְׂצִוָּה יַעֲקֹב דָּבָר זֶה. אֲלֵא בּוֹא וּרְאֵה כְּמָה גְדוֹל כֹּחַ הַשְּׁלוֹם, שֶׁכָּתַב הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּתוֹרָתוֹ עַל כֹּחַ הַשְּׁלוֹם אֵלּוּ הַדְּבָרִים.

Midrash Tanḥuma Va-Yehi 17

"And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead" (Bereishit 50:15). What did they see that frightened them? As they were returning from the burial of their father, they saw their brother go to the pit into which they had thrown him in order to bless it. He blessed the pit with the blessing: "Blessed be the place where God performed a miracle for me," just as anyone is required to say a blessing at the place where a miracle had been performed on their behalf. When they saw this, they cried out: "Now that our father is dead, Yosef will hate us and will punish us for all the bad things we did to him." And they sent a message to Yosef, saying: "Your father commanded... So shall you say to Yosef: Forgive" (50:15-16). We have searched the entire Tanakh and are unable to find any place where Ya'akov said this! This statement is introduced to teach us the importance of peace. The Holy Blessed One wrote these words in the Torah for the sake of peace alone.

When Yosef was just 17 years old, he and his family lived together in the Land of Israel. But he had dreams that his brothers would all bow down to him, and they resented him, so they took away the special shirt his father had given him, threw him into a pit in the desert, and then sold him into slavery in Egypt. Many years later, after Yosef had been reunited with his brothers, and they were living together in Egypt, Ya'akov died, and all the brothers went together to bury Ya'akov in Israel. This *midrash* describes a scene in which Yosef stands at the edge of the very pit his brothers had thrown him into. There, he thanks God for the miracle that happened to him at that place. The brothers, however, see Yosef standing and looking at the pit, and they assume that he must be remembering all the pain and suffering he had endured, and assume that he was going to get angry and take revenge against them. So they tell Yosef that, before his death, Ya'akov had commanded that Yosef must forgive them, even though the *midrash* seems to wonder whether Ya'akov actually said that or not.

1. In the *midrash*, does Yosef see the pit as being something good in his life, or something bad? Why is he thanking God there, when it was a place that gave him so much pain and sadness?
2. Why do you think the brothers assumed that Yosef was getting angry? Why didn't he get angry?

5th Night: Moshe and Serah

May it please you, Moshe and Serah, my lofty guests, that all of the exalted guests sit together with me and you.

בְּמַעֲטֵי מַנְכוֹן מֹשֶׁה וְסֵרַח
אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עַלְאִין דִּיתְבִּי עַמֵּי
וְעַמְכוֹן כָּל אוֹשְׁפִיזֵיָא עַלְיָא.

TONIGHT WE SAY

שמות רבה א:כז

"וַיִּרְא בְּסִבְלָתָם" (שמות ב:יא). מהו וַיִּרְא... רבי אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ שָׁל רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגְּלִילִי אָמַר כִּי רָאָה מֹשֶׁה גָדוֹל עַל קָטָן וּמֹשֶׁה קָטָן עַל גָּדוֹל, וּמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ עַל אִשָּׁה וּמֹשֶׁה אִשָּׁה עַל אִישׁ, וּמֹשֶׁה זָקֵן עַל בָּחוּר וּמֹשֶׁה בָּחוּר עַל זָקֵן. וְהָיָה מִנִּיחַ דְּכָגוֹן שָׁלוֹ וְהוֹלֵךְ וּמִיִּשְׁבֵּב לָהֶם סִבְלוֹתֵיהֶם, וְעוֹשֶׂה בְּאֵלוֹ מִסִּיעַ לְפִרְעָה. אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֲתָה הַנִּחַת עֲסָקוּיָךְ וְהִלַּכְתָּ לְרֵאוֹת בְּצַעְרָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְנִהְיֶינָה בְּהוֹ מְנַהֵג אַחִים, אֲנִי מִנִּיחַ אֶת הָעֲלִיוֹנִים וְאֶת הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים, וְאֲדַבֵּר עִמָּךְ. הֲדָא הוּא דְכַתִּיב (שמות ג:ד): "וַיִּרְא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת, כִּי רָאָה הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ

הוּא בְּמַשָּׁה שְׂסָר מִעֲסָקוּיָךְ לְרֵאוֹת בְּסִבְלוֹתָם, לְפִיכָךְ (שם): "וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּבָּה."

Shemot Rabbah 1:27

"And [Moshe] looked at their burdens" (Shemot 2:11). What is, "And he looked?"... Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yose Ha-Gelili said: [If] he saw a large burden on a small person and a small burden on a large person, or a man's burden on a woman and a woman's burden on a man, or an elderly man's burden on a young man and a young man's burden on an elderly man, he would leave aside his rank and go and right their burdens, and act as though he were assisting Pharaoh. The Holy Blessed One said, "You left aside your business and went to see the sorrow of Israel, and acted toward them as brothers act. I will ignore the distinction between Heaven and Earth and talk to you." Such it is written [at the burning bush], "And when God saw that [Moshe] turned aside to see" (Exodus 3:4). God saw Moshe, who left aside his business to see their burdens. Therefore, "God called to him out of the midst of the bush" (3:4).

Moshe was adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh and was raised in the palace, while the rest of the Jewish people were slaves. One day, he left the palace to see how the Jewish people were being treated. The Torah says that, "When Moshe grew up, he went out to his brothers, and looked at their burdens" (Shemot 2:11). This *midrash* interprets Moshe's *looking* as more than just seeing the slave labor of Benei Yisrael, but taking action on their behalf to try to lighten their suffering.

1. According to this *midrash*, what does Moshe do that leads God to set aside the Heavens and the Earth to speak with him?
2. What burdens do you see in your community and in the world? What can we do when we see people who are suffering?

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל

מסכתא דויהי פתיחתא

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת עַצְמוֹת
יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ – מֵהֵיכַן הָיָה
יֹדֵעַ הֵיכַן הָיָה קִבּוּר
יוֹסֵף? – אָמְרוּ: טָנַח בֵּית
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁתַּיְתָה מֵאוֹתוֹ
הַדּוֹר, וְהִיא הָרְאֲתָה
לְמֹשֶׁה קִבְר יוֹסֵף. אָמְרָה
לוֹ: בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה עָמוּהוּ!

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael

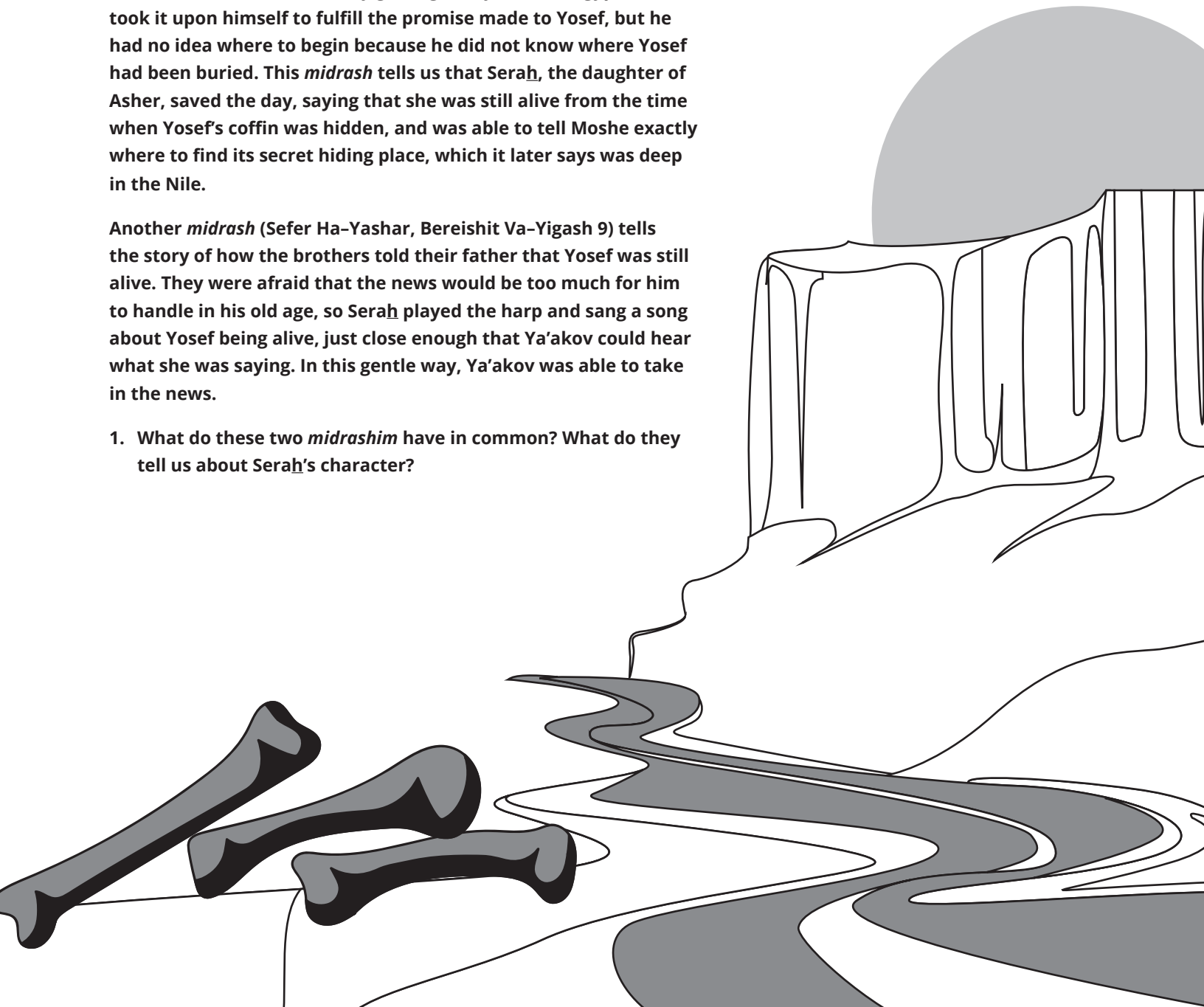
Va-Yehi Introduction

“And Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him” (Exodus 13:19)—how did he know where Yosef was buried? It was said: Serah the daughter of Asher was left of that generation, and she showed Moshe the grave of Yosef, saying to him: In that spot did they place him.

Before Yosef died, he made his brothers promise that when their descendants left Egypt, they would take his body with them to be buried in the Land of Israel (Bereishit 50:24-26). Years later, while Benei Yisrael were busy getting ready to leave Egypt, Moshe took it upon himself to fulfill the promise made to Yosef, but he had no idea where to begin because he did not know where Yosef had been buried. This *midrash* tells us that Serah, the daughter of Asher, saved the day, saying that she was still alive from the time when Yosef's coffin was hidden, and was able to tell Moshe exactly where to find its secret hiding place, which it later says was deep in the Nile.

Another *midrash* (Sefer Ha-Yashar, Bereishit Va-Yigash 9) tells the story of how the brothers told their father that Yosef was still alive. They were afraid that the news would be too much for him to handle in his old age, so Serah played the harp and sang a song about Yosef being alive, just close enough that Ya'akov could hear what she was saying. In this gentle way, Ya'akov was able to take in the news.

1. What do these two *midrashim* have in common? What do they tell us about Serah's character?



6th Night: Miriam & Aharon

בְּמַעַי מִנְכוֹן מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן
אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלָאֵין דִּיתְבִּי עִמִּי
וְעִמְכוֹן כָּל אוֹשְׁפִיזָאֵי עֲלִיא.

May it please you, Miriam and Aharon, my lofty guests, that all of the exalted guests sit together with me and you.

TONIGHT WE SAY

מדרש תנחומא בשלח ב

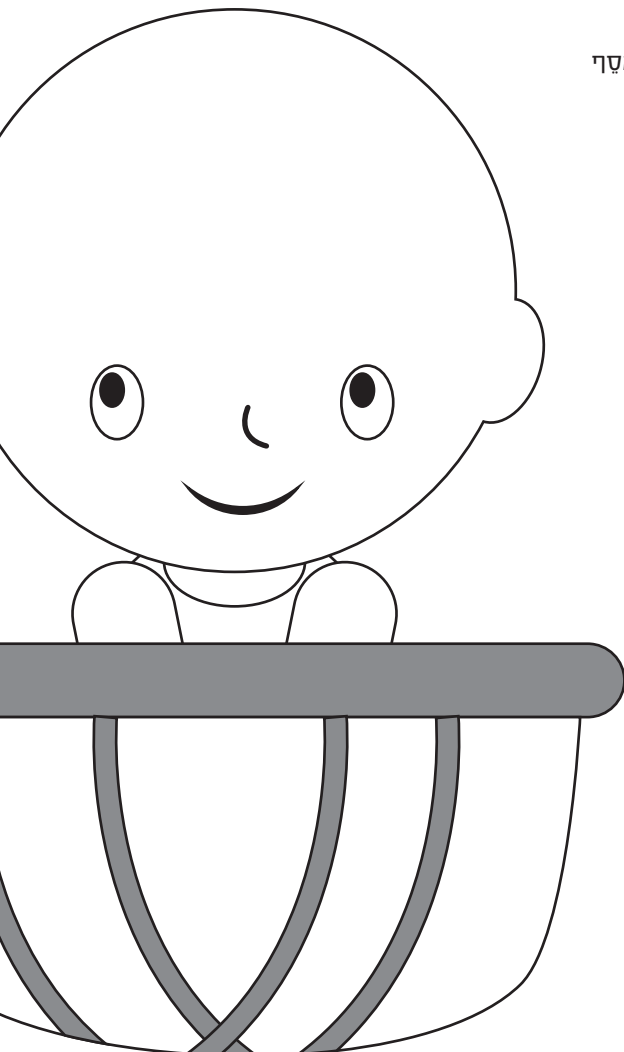
מִרְיָם הִמְתִּינָה לְשָׁעָה אַחַת לְמֹשֶׁה,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְהִתְצַב אַחֲתוֹ מִרְחוֹק
(שְׁמוֹת ב, ד). לְפִיכֹךְ עִבְבַּת הַקְּדוֹשׁ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּמִדְבָּר וְעִנְיֵי הַכְּבוֹד
וְהַכְּהֹנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם שֶׁבָּעֵת יָמִים,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְהָעָם לֹא נָסַע עַד הָאֶסְדִּי
מִרְיָם (במדבר יב, טו).

Midrash Tanhuma Be-Shallah 2

Because Miriam waited an hour for Moses, as it is said, "And his sister stood far off" (Shemot 2:4), the Holy Blessed One waited for her in the desert, with the clouds of glory, the Levites, and the priests, for seven days, as it is said, "And the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again" (Bemidbar 12:15).

When Moshe was put in the basket and placed in the Nile River, Miriam stood by to watch over him and see what would happen. This *midrash* says that, because of this, the entire Benei Yisrael—along with God—waited for her in the desert before continuing their journeys while she recovered from *tzara'at* (a skin disease).

1. What was so significant about Miriam waiting for baby Moshe that, in the future, the entire Benei Yisrael waited for her? What would have happened had she not watched over Moshe?
2. How can you care for someone who is younger than you (and might need help taking care of themselves)?



אבות דרבי נתן (נוסחא א) יב

מלמד שיהא אדם אוהב שלום בישראל בין כל אחד ואחד בדרך שהיה אהרן אוהב שלום בין כל אחד ואחד שנא' (מלאכי ב:ו) "תורת אמת היתה בפייה ועולה לא נמצא בשפתיו בשלום ובמישור הלא אתי ורבים השיב מעון..."

שני בני אדם שעשו מריבה זה עם זה הלא אהרן יושב אצל אחד מהם אמר לו בני ראה חברך מהו אומר מטריך את לבו וקורע את בגדיו ואומר אוי לי היאך אשא את עיני ואראה את חברי בשתי הימנו שאני הוא שסרחתי עליו הוא יושב אצלו עד שמסיר קנאה מלב. והולך אהרן ויושב אצל האחר וא"ל בני ראה חברך מהו אומר מטריך את לבו וקורע את בגדיו ואומר אוי לי היאך אשא את עיני ואראה את חברי בשתי הימנו שאני הוא שסרחתי עליו הוא יושב אצלו עד שמסיר קנאה מלב. וכשנפגשו זה בזה גפפו ונשקו זה לזה לכך נאמר (במדבר כ:כב) "ויבכו את אהרן שלשים יום כל בית ישראל:"

Avot de-Rabbi Natan (Version A) 12

This is to teach you to be a person who loves peace among all the people of Israel, just as Aharon loved peace between everyone, as it says, "A Torah of Truth was on his [the priest's] mouth, and no crooked thing was on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and righteousness, and he pulled back many from sin" (Malakhi 2:6)...

When two people were fighting with one another, Aharon would go and sit next to one of them and say: "My son, look at the anguish your friend is going through! His heart is ripped apart, and he is tearing at his clothes. He is saying, 'How can I face my old friend? I am so ashamed, I betrayed his trust.'" Aharon would sit with him until his rage subsided. Then Aharon would go to the other person in the fight and say: "My son, look at the anguish your friend is going through! His heart is ripped apart, and he is tearing at his clothes. He is saying, 'How can I face my old friend? I am so ashamed, I betrayed his trust.'" Aharon would sit with him until his rage subsided. When the two people saw each other, they would embrace and kiss one another. And that is why it says, "And the entire House of Israel wept for Aharon for thirty days" [after his death] (Bemidbar 20:20).

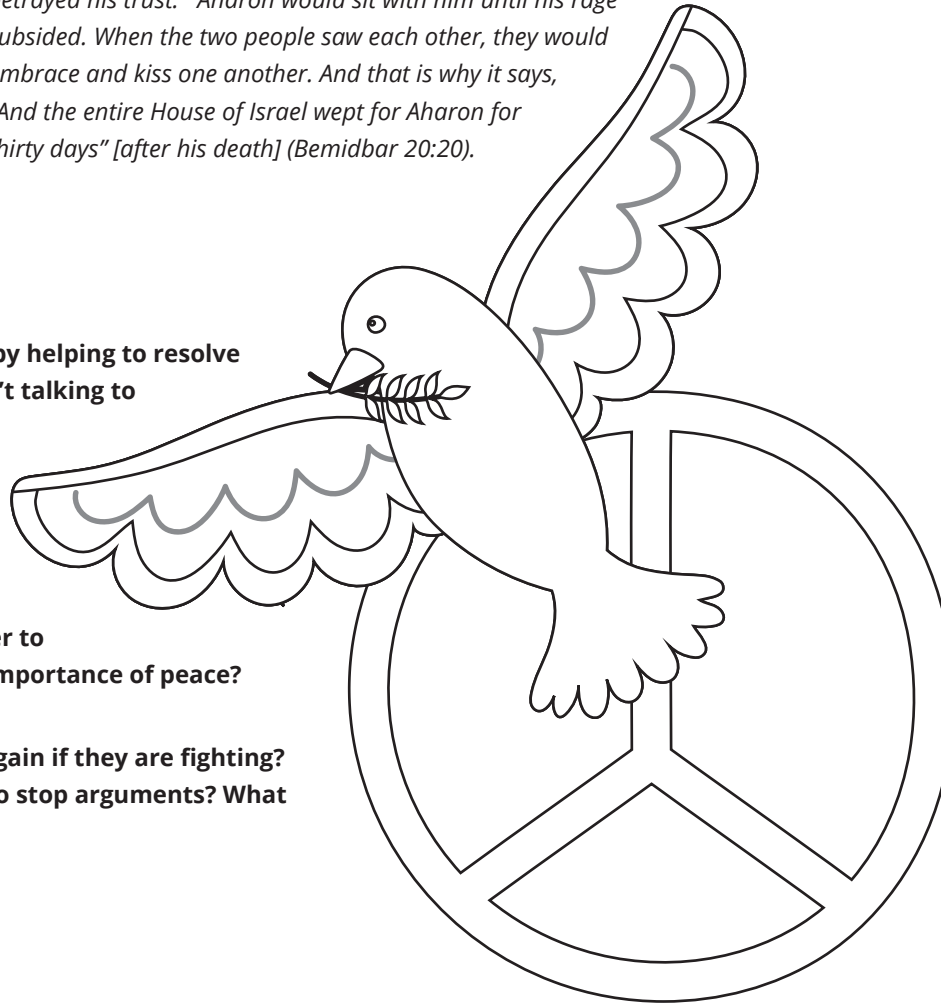
This *midrash* describes Aharon's pursuit of peace by helping to resolve fights and arguments between people who weren't talking to each other.

1. Was Aharon being completely truthful?

We know that telling the truth is very important in Judaism, but peace is also very important. And yet, the Talmud states that one is allowed to bend the truth a little in order to achieve peace. What does that say about the importance of peace?

2. How can two people make up and be friends again if they are fighting?

What are some of the best ways you know of to stop arguments? What are the best ways to improve friendships?



7th Night: David and Rut

בְּמַשֵׁי מִנְכוֹן דָּוִד וְרוּת
אוֹשְׁפִיזָאִי עַל־אִין דִּיתְבִּי עַמִּי
וְעַמְכוֹן כָּל אוֹשְׁפִיזָאִי עַל־יָא.

May it please you, David and Rut, my lofty
guests, that all of the exalted guests
sit together with me and you.

TONIGHT WE SAY

The Alphabet of ben Sira (alternative version), a text quoted in rabbinic sources a number of times.

אָמַר דָּוִד לְפָנֵי הַקּוֹב"ה: רַב־שׁ"ע מָה הַנְּאֻה בְּאַלֹוֹ
שְׂבָרְאַתָּ בְּעוֹלָמְךָ? ... עַבְבִּישׁ יֵאָרֵג כָּל הַשָּׁנָה וְלֹא
יִלְבָּשֶׁנּוּ... אָמַר לוֹ הַקּוֹב"ה: דָּוִד! מִלְעִיג אַתָּה עַל
הַבְּרִיּוֹת? תָּבֵא שְׂעָה וְתִצְטָרֵךְ לָהֶם וְתִדְעַ לְמָה
נִבְרָאוּ.

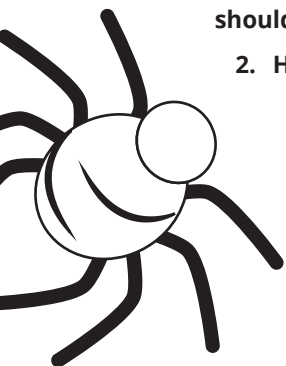
Said David before the Holy Blessed One: "Master of the World—what benefit is there in these that You created in Your world?... a spider weaves [silk] all year and doesn't wear it..." The Holy Blessed One said to him: "David, do you mock the creations!? The time will come when you will need them, and you will know why they were created."

וְכִשְׁנֹחַבָּא בְּמַעְרָה מִפְּנֵי שְׂאוּל הַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁלַח הַקּוֹב"ה
עַבְבִּישׁ וְאַרְגָּה עַל פִּי הַמַּעְרָה וְסָגְרָה אוֹתוֹ, בָּא
שְׂאוּל וְרָאָה אֲרוּג אָמַר בְּיָדָאִי לֹא נִכְנַס אָדָם הִנֵּה
שָׂאָם נִכְנַס הִנֵּה קוֹרֵעַ הָאֲרוּג לְקוֹרְעִים וְהֵלֶךְ וְלֹא
נִכְנַס לָשָׁם, וְכִשִּׁיצָא דָּוִד וְרָאָה הָעַבְבִּישׁ וְנִשְׁקָה
וְאָמַר לָהּ בְּרוּךְ בּוֹרְאֵיהָ וְבְרוּכָה אַתָּה, רַב־שׁ"ע מִי
יַעֲשֶׂה כְּמַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְכַגְבוּרוֹתֶיךָ שֶׁכָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ נְאִים...
וְלֹא כְּאִי לָבוֹ אָדָם לְהִלְעִיג בְּמַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹוֹת.

When [David] was hiding in the cave from King Sha'ul, the Holy Blessed One sent a spider that wove [a web] over the cave entrance and closed it. Sha'ul came and saw a web and said: "Certainly a person did not enter here! If a person had entered, they would have torn the web into pieces," and he left without entering. And when David went and saw the spider, he kissed it and said to it: "Blessed is your creator and blessed are you! Master of the World—who could do anything like Your deeds or like Your strength, for all Your deeds are wonderful!... and it is not appropriate for a person to mock God's work."

In this *midrash*, King David wonders about the purpose of seemingly small and unimportant creations, such as a spider, and he asks God whether they really have value in the world. His life is then saved by a tiny spider, and he realizes that every creature has importance and value.

1. The world is very large and complex, and there is a lot about nature—and about individual species of plants and animals—that we still do not understand. What is this *midrash* teaching us about how we should view the natural world?
2. Have you ever wondered whether something in nature has a purpose, or asked why God created something?
3. CHALLENGE! Do some research to learn more about a small creature to understand its larger role in nature.



רות רבה ב:יד
אָמַר רַבִּי זְעִירָא, מַגְלָה
זוֹ אֵין בָּהּ לֹא טְמֵאָה,
וְלֹא טְהוֹרָה, וְלֹא אָסוּר,
וְלֹא הֵתֵר, וְלָמָּה נִכְתְּבָה
לְלַמְּדוֹדָא בְּמַה עֲכָר טוֹב
לְגוֹמְלֵי חֲסָדִים.

Rut Rabbah 2:14
Rabbi Zeira said: This book [of Rut] does not have anything in it concerned with impurity or purity nor what is forbidden and what is permitted. So why is it written? To teach us the greatness of the reward for acts of lovingkindness.

During the time of the Judges, Avimelekh, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons left the Land of Israel when there was a famine and settled in Moav. After Avimelekh and her two sons died, Naomi planned to return home and urged Orpah and Rut, her Moabite daughters-in-law, to stay and go back to their families. Orpah agrees, but Rut refuses to leave Naomi, stating (Rut 1:16-17):

אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלַי וּבְאֲשֶׁר תֵּלִינִי אֵלָיו עִמָּד עִמִּי וְאֶל־כִּי אֵלֶּכֶי:
בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְשָׁם אֶחָבֵר כִּי יַעֲשֶׂה ה' לִי
יָבֵה יוֹסִיף כִּי הַמּוֹת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ:

*Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.
This and more may God do to me if anything but death parts me from you.*

When they return to Beit Lehem, Rut cares for Naomi and ends up marrying Boaz, a relative of Naomi's husband. King David is her great-grandson.

This *midrash* grapples with the question of why the Book of Rut is part of the Tanakh and what can be learned from it. Rabbi Zeira asserts that, while it may not be about laws of purity or what is permitted and forbidden—which help us lead our lives as Jews—its purpose is to teach the reward for showing kindness (*hesed*) to others.

1. What does this *midrash* want us to know about the value of *hesed*?
2. What acts of *hesed* does Rut display? Why are these acts so important?
3. What acts of *hesed* do you and your family do for others?



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