

HIGH HOLIDAYS: ROSH HA-SHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR

Rosh ha-Shanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) are known as the High Holidays, a time that centers more on the synagogue and the community than on the home. These days and the time surrounding them are a solemn period for reflection and repentance. Yom Kippur, in particular, is called a day of judgment. The notion that God tallies our virtues and sins from the past year is expressed in the image of a God who inscribes the fate of each person in a heavenly book during this period. One does not have to believe either literally or metaphorically that we are being inscribed in a book of life and death to see the High Holidays as both an opportunity and a challenge. This is a period when we are encouraged to engage in *teshuvah*, “repentance.” *Teshuvah* literally means “turn” or “return.” The process of *teshuvah* is one of turning toward God, that which represents the holy and the good. The High Holidays have a particular structure that encourages this process of change, of turning.

Recognizing that this is not easily accomplished, the rabbis extended the process back from Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to Rosh ha-Shanah to Elul—the month leading up to the High Holidays. During Elul, we blow the shofar at the end of every weekday morning service, thereby announcing that the High Holidays are coming. We also recite Psalm 27 at the end of morning and evening services. The Saturday before Rosh ha-Shanah, *selichot* services are held usually around midnight. *Selichot* are special penitential prayers that focus on the themes of repentance and forgiveness. (In some communities, *selichot* are recited every morning until Rosh ha-Shanah.) All of these preparatory

customs recognize that the process of change needs time and work and cannot be accomplished even in the intense format of the one day of Yom Kippur.

Preparing

One starting point is the rabbinic teaching about the name of the month, Elul. The four Hebrew letters that make up the name are understood as an abbreviation for the phrase from the Song of Songs (6:3), *ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” This phrase suggests an ideal image for our relationship with God. The rabbis understood the Song of Songs as the love song between God and Israel. After the estrangement represented by the Three Weeks, we long for each other as lovers do.

Our most basic desire is to feel not alone in the universe. We all want to feel wanted, loved, appreciated, and understood by those around us. We are often disappointed as those we care for most fail or seem to fail to love and support us. The High Holidays remind us that there is One who always cares, who responds to each of the beings in the world with *hesed*, “loving-kindness,” the Holy One. The work of Elul is to recapture a sense of being in relationship with God. It is also to recapture a sense of self-worth based on being cherished by the Holy One. If we can achieve a sense of that relationship, then we can examine our inner selves unafraid of what we will discover. Free from that concern, we can really look at what we have done this past year—where we have hurt others and ourselves, where we did not live up to our own expectations, or where we had too high an expectation. Having gained clarity, we may be able to move on to change, to struggle with that which can be improved, to repair the relationships that we had damaged in the past year.

Rosh ha-Shanah

Rosh ha-Shanah is the Jewish New Year. It conveys the hope for change and renewal, that things do not have to be as they were. We can begin again. This may be why Rosh ha-Shanah precedes Yom Kippur, though

you might expect that first we would ask for forgiveness for the past and only then begin the New Year. Instead, we first enter the New Year with its promise of change. Rosh ha-Shanah says the new is right here before us. This promise supports us as we struggle with the past and with the nagging feeling that nothing ever changes. Though these may be our thirtieth or fiftieth High Holidays, many of us are still dealing with the same issues that we struggled with last year or ten years ago. Rosh ha-Shanah says that change is possible. The Torah readings speak of pregnancy in old age and a slaughter knife halted in mid-descent. The possibilities of the future lie stretched out before us.

Rosh ha-Shanah is observed for two days (one day in many Reform congregations), mainly in a lengthy synagogue liturgy. During the liturgy, the shofar, or ram's horn, is blown. We are not specifically told why we sound the shofar during services. Some understand it as a clarion call to awake from living life as a slumberer and engage with all that life has to offer. For others, it is a sound beyond words, the cry of our souls seeking healing or seeking a response from heaven. For still others it evokes echoes of the Jewish people who have heard that call down through the centuries back to the moment of Sinai. Perhaps too it echoes forward to the sound of the shofar that will announce the messianic era.

The themes of Rosh ha-Shanah are set out in a unique *musaf* or "additional" service. The *amidah* for this *musaf* has three central blessings called *malkhuyot*, *zikhronot*, and *shofarot*. *Malkhuyot* focuses on God as king, *zikhronot* on God who remembers all deeds and rewards and punishes the righteous and the wicked, and *shofarot* on the shofar as a symbol of the Revelation at Sinai and the future messianic redemption. For Franz Rosenzweig, the German philosopher, these sections reflect the three major themes underlying Judaism: creation, revelation, and redemption. Thus, *malkhuyot* represents God as creator of the world, *zikhronot* describes the God who reveals the Torah and who expects us to live by its laws, and *shofarot* relates to the future redemption. The same three themes can also serve as challenges to us personally. Our humanity can be defined by our ability to act (*malkhuyot*), to remember and think (*zikhronot*), and to communicate (*shofarot*).

The dominant motif of Rosh ha-Shanah is God as *melekh*, "ruler," but usually translated as "king." The tendency to ascribe male qualities to God is, of course, unnecessary and undermines the place of women in Judaism. But this is just a matter of translation and adaptation. More troubling, a king is a hierarchical ruler with absolute power. Is that how we want to describe God? Do we believe in a sovereign who rewards and punishes his subjects? Yet the metaphor and the theology of God as absolute ruler is clearly central to Rosh ha-Shanah (and prevalent in all Jewish liturgy).

The value of such a conception of God as sovereign is to remind us that we are not. Modernity once fostered a notion that human beings can cure all diseases and solve all of our problems. That notion was shattered in the twentieth century by the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear war. Still, modernity stresses the primacy of the individual, while Rosh ha-Shanah reminds us that there is something larger—God. God, not human beings, created the world. We are but a small piece in this vast universe. The real truth, as we all know, is that destiny is not in our hands.

Rosh ha-Shanah also reminds us that we have considerable influence on the course of our lives. God created the universe, but we have the choice whether to become its destroyers or to become co-creators with God. We are created in the Divine image, which means we partake of an aspect of *melekh*, of ruler. Human free will is a miracle, given to the world; it is not part of the natural order. It is God's greatest gift to us and God's most terrifying demand of us.

We need to choose. God says: "I set before you life and death, choose life." This means that *choosing is life*. As long as we are engaged in choosing we are alive. The tradition teaches that everything is in the hands of God, except we have free choice. In this way we are like royalty. Rosh ha-Shanah's message is both humbling and empowering—we are not a *melekh* or a god but we do shape our destiny and the destiny of all with whom we interact.

A KAVANAH FOR A NEW YEAR

We stand once again on the brink of a New Year. The air is redolent of opportunity. Rosh ha-Shanah is a call to change, a crying out for hope even in the bleakest landscapes. In response, the people of Israel stir in their sleep, aroused by dreams carried by the music and memories of this season. But then they turn over, pulling the blankets of the familiar more tightly around themselves, hoping to once again fall back asleep. We blow the shofar, that eerie and ancient sound that called our ancestors to battle and to prayer. We blow it over and over again to stir our souls, or in the words of Maimonides about the shofar call: "Sleepers, awake from your sleep. Slumberers, rouse yourselves from your slumber. Search your deeds and return to and remember your Creator."

God still calls to us humans as in the garden: *Ayeka?*, "Where are you?"

The only unknown is which of us will respond: *Hineni!*, "Here am I!"

Rosh ha-Shanah customs It is customary to wish people a happy New Year by saying *le-shanah tovah u-metukah tikateivu*, "may you be inscribed for a good and sweet year." This expression echoes the image of God recording our fate in the book of life. Many people also send New Year cards with similar wishes. At Rosh ha-Shanah meals, we also dip apples and/or *hallah* in honey while saying: "May it be Your will to renew us for a year that is good and sweet."

The custom known as *tashlikh*, "sending," involves throwing bread into a flowing body of water (an ocean or a stream), thus symbolically casting our sins away. This ritual is performed on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh ha-Shanah (or on the second day, if the first day is a Sabbath). Many synagogues organize groups of members, making this a nice opportunity to socialize. There is no real liturgy for *tashlikh*.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement

Yom Kippur is a day of soul searching. We focus on ourselves, and yet Yom Kippur is incomplete if we do not also focus on our relationships and responsibilities to others. Yom Kippur is also known as Yom ha-Din, "Day of Judgment." The liturgy is replete with images of our being judged by the Chief Justice of the universe. According to tradition, sentence is passed on Yom Kippur: God determines who shall live and who shall die. Central to the Yom Kippur liturgy is the frequent recitation of the confessional in which we list a whole variety of sins for which we are asking forgiveness. It is striking that this list of sins does not contain ritual sins. We do not ask for forgiveness for not attending synagogue regularly or not keeping Shabbat. Instead, we confess for transgressions against the community and transgressions of our hearts. More striking still, the confessional is in the plural, yet it is clear that none of us has committed all these sins. Why should we confess even to transgressions of which we are innocent?

First, the plural form reminds us that we are part of a community—simultaneously our congregation and the people of Israel. We are responsible for one another, not just for ourselves alone. On Yom Kippur, we stand together as a community of sinners; not some righteous and some wicked. All of us recite the same list of sins; no one's list is shorter than anyone else's. Together we seek forgiveness and strive for change. Second, it is only as a community that we can effect the social changes necessary to better all our lives. Our concern on Yom Kippur is not just for the self. Toward the end of the day, after spending so much time looking inward, we read the Book of Jonah. Jonah, called by God to save the city of Nineveh, flees the responsibility of carrying out God's word. When at last this reluctant prophet reaches Nineveh and prophesizes the city's doom, people repent and God relents. Instead of being happy that he has succeeded, the only prophet in the Bible that anyone ever really listened to, Jonah is unhappy. For Jonah was never worried that he might fail, but rather that he might succeed. He just did not care about the people of Nineveh or their fate. In the end, sitting outside town, he swelters in the sun until God causes a sheltering plant to miraculously grow over

him. Jonah is briefly happy until the plant dies. God asks him if he is deeply grieved about this single plant and Jonah says, "Yes, so deeply that I want to die." God responds: "And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons . . . and many beasts as well?" (Jonah 4:9, IIT). God is disappointed in Jonah. For despite everything that has happened, Jonah *just doesn't get it*. His concern lies only with himself. We read his story to remind us that even as we spend hours looking inward, examining who we are, we cannot forget to look at the world around us. Yom Kippur does not focus entirely on how we act toward God.

The theology of Yom Kippur There is for me a larger problem in the traditional theology of Yom Kippur as set out in our liturgy. It was brought home to me when I visited a congregant in the hospital before the High Holidays. She had a serious illness, though it was not yet life-threatening. *Yet* is a big word in such a sentence. She asked me: How am I to deal with the High Holiday liturgy when the notion of life and death hanging in the balance is not an abstract concept but my very reality? How do I deal with a liturgy that seems to judge me, when anyone so judged would fail the test? How do I understand a liturgy that implies that my illness is my fault, a punishment for past misdeeds? Most of all, how do I recite a liturgy that suggests that if I am good right now, God will write me in the book of healing and life, but if not, then at this season my doom will be sealed? Is this all my fault?

This question of why we suffer and why people who are clearly innocent suffer has haunted all religions from the beginning of time. The classic rabbinic answer is that suffering is not random. There is a system of reward and punishment even if we cannot understand it (see "After the Words: God," pp. 487–504). One corollary is a belief in life after death in which true justice is meted out. The evil people, who seem to succeed in this world, would be punished then; and vice versa. The liturgy assumes, then, that God intervenes. What happens in life is not random; its operating principle is that of reward and punishment. The High Holiday liturgy, no matter how metaphorical (there doesn't have to be an actual book), is based on this notion of the justice of God's judgment.

There have always been strands within the tradition that questioned this certainty, beginning with Job, continuing with certain rabbis of the Talmud, and so on through the ages. The questioning or even rejection of this simple theology has only increased in modern times—most definitively perhaps in the thinking of Mordecai Kaplan.

The High Holiday liturgy reminds us that there exists something beyond us, larger than we are, over which we have no control, and that something is called God. We are asked to come to terms with something that is fundamentally true but which we most often deny, that we are human, with all the limitations that come from being human rather than divine. The situation of the person in the hospital makes this notion very real. A life-threatening illness strips us of our illusion that death is some far-off experience. We are not in control of our lives, or at least there are real limitations on our control. In this context Yom Kippur is not a Day of Judgment, Yom ha-Din, the way it is traditionally understood. In Kabbalah, *din* (or *gevurah*) is the aspect of God that exists opposite to *hesed*, "loving-kindness," limitless flow. *Din* is the vessel that contains the flow, the boundary set around love, giving the world structure. Yom ha-Din in this understanding is the day that reminds us of our limitations, that brings us face-to-face with our outer limit—with death. We are not all-powerful; we are not masters of our destiny. We are human beings filled with foibles, frailty, and finitude.

Yet even as we see our limitations ever more clearly, we are called to change. I used to think the rabbinic tradition was hopelessly naive about the possibility of change, of *teshuvah*. But I now understand what the rabbis had in mind. Their optimism was based on faith, a belief in the human spirit, a belief in fact in miracles—not miracles like the crossing of the Red Sea, but rather the miracle of reconciliation between two long-estranged relatives or friends, communities, or even nations.

If someone told you that you have only two days to live, you would see to it that each moment of those days you would be fully aware and alive. What if you could obtain such awareness without a decree of death, but rather by being fully aware of the miracle of this moment—of the sunrise, of speech, of movement, of hearing, of smell, of seeing, of relationships, of a friendly hello? The message of Yom Kippur is that

the world is re-created anew each day. It is up to you to be fully alive and fully aware.

Unfortunately, there is one truth we all must accept: the most important judgment has already been issued. We, all of us, live under a sentence of death. Everyone dies and, given enough time, even our memory eventually passes away. This decree has never yet been averted. It is expressed in the prayer called *unetaneh tokef*, which begins by reminding us how helpless we are in the face of fate and then lists all the ways we can die: “who by fire, who by water . . .” Yet this otherwise depressing reminder climaxes with the words *uteshuvah utefillah utzedakah ma’arvirin et roa ha-gezera*, “repentance, prayer, and *zedakah* can avert the severity of the decree.” We cannot change the decree, but we can alter its severity through repentance, prayer, and *zedakah*. To use my congregant in the hospital as an example one last time: she was buoyed by the knowledge that many people were praying for her. On one level, it made a difference to her to know that people cared; on yet another, it actually made a physical difference to her. She came to understand that no matter how many people prayed for her recovery, she could still die, but those prayers made a difference to how she lived.

Teshuvah, *tefillah*, and *zedakah* are the critical elements of Yom Kippur’s process of acceptance and change. *Teshuvah*, “returning,” “repentance,” and “turning,” connects us to the community and to God. *Tefillah*, “prayer,” connects us to God and to the possibilities within us. *Tzedakah*, “righteousness/charity,” connects us with every living thing in a web of caring and acting. The decree remains the same; it is the severity we can change.

Teshuvah: the path of change The theme of *teshuvah*, “change” or “repentance,” is central to Yom Kippur and the High Holidays. Earlier we discussed the three paths of Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hesed*. *Teshuvah* is actually the fourth path, the one we turn to when we have failed to fulfill the visions of the other three. The High Holidays encourage us to walk the path of *teshuvah*. The first step is to see what we have done wrong. The second step is to regret our mistakes, which is why *teshuvah* is often translated as “repentance.” Third, we resolve to change by not repeating our mistakes. Maimonides adds that we really

know whether we have truly done *teshuvah* when we are faced with the same situation and find that we can resist the temptation of the past and instead act in a holy manner. This is the traditional view of the path, but it sometimes leads to defeatism, as we seem to engage in an endless war with ourselves—or, at least, with those negative or flawed parts of ourselves.

Another approach to *teshuvah* emphasizes the meaning of “return.” Classical Hasidism taught that God is everywhere and in everything. Thus, on some level, whatever happens has an element of God in it. For example, distracting thoughts during prayer, and even lustful desires for inappropriate sex, have some element of Godliness. This, of course, does not imply that God wants you to act on these thoughts; nor are they God’s way of testing your saintliness. It does mean that there is no force underlying the universe other than God. You can never say the devil made me do it. There is no devil; there is only God. Thus for Hasidism everything comes from God: lustful thoughts, an overweight body, greediness, or fearfulness. Or, in other words, all of our thoughts, intentions, and deeds are part of who we are. Change does not come by denying or fighting them, but rather by accepting them as intrinsic to our identity.

Sin is not original; nor is it a powerful dark force of the universe. What we call sin, or better yet, what we see as the flaws of our personalities, is part of the structure of the universe. Sins are the fault lines where subterranean aspects of our souls, our personalities, bump up against each other and come into conflict. It is where the needs for dependence and for independence clash, where openness and closedness, generosity and limitations confront one another. All of our parts—those we proudly display and those that, like the dark side of the moon, remain forever hidden—all of these are who we are and all of them partake of the Divine.

Our flaws and faults, all the flotsam of human existence also offer opportunities to come closer to the Holy One. For if they come from God, they have the potential to lead back to God. The *Likutim Yekarim* (an eighteenth-century Hasidic work) asks, if there are sparks of holiness in all things as the mystics teach, then what are the sparks of holiness in sin? It answers that the sparks are *teshuvah*. In the moment

we realize that we have done wrong, we gain the opportunity to redeem ourselves by returning to the holy. The High Holidays, then, are an opportunity for self-examination, a chance to greet the worst aspects of ourselves as longtime, if not always welcome, acquaintances. Through this process of facing ourselves in the mirror of the moment, we can begin the process of *teshuvah*, of “turning” or “returning.” When we approach our true image as reflected in the mirror of High Holidays, we can see that our flaws are the distorted impulses of the desire that underlies this world for wholeness and holiness. We catch a glimpse of how much happier and whole we could be if we can leave behind that which has made us stuck.

With this attitude, what we ask of God in this season, *selihah*, “forgiveness,” is what we will be able to give ourselves. The hardest part is forgiving ourselves for our weaknesses. On the first day of Rosh ha-Shanah, we read the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Lost in the desert, Hagar despairs of finding water to save her son’s life. God responds to her cries and suddenly Hagar sees a well of water right in front of her that only a minute ago was completely invisible. The High Holidays urge us to see our lives clearly and to find the seemingly invisible wells that could not only sustain us but enable us to grow and change as we stumble through the deserts of experience.

May we be blessed in this New Year to be able to perceive and thus experience all the blessings that surround us and feel embraced by the love underlying the world.

A TEACHING ON *TESHUVAH*

You have to judge every person generously. Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked, it’s your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness, someplace in that person where he is not evil. When you find that bit of goodness and judge the person *that way*, you really may raise her up to goodness. Treating people this way allows them to be restored, to come to *teshuvah*.

This is why the Psalmist said: “Just a little bit more and there

will be no wicked one; you will look at his place and he will not be there” (Psalm 36). He tells us to judge one and all so generously, so much on the good side, even if we think they’re as sinful as can be. By looking for that “little bit,” the place however small within them where there is no sin (and everyone, after all, has such a place), and by telling them, showing them, that *that’s* who they are, we can help them change their lives.

Even the person you think (and he agrees!) is completely rotten—how is it possible that at some time in his life he has not done some good deed, some *mitzvah*? Your job is just to help him look for it, to seek it out, and then to judge him that way. Then indeed you will “look at his place” and find that the wicked one is no longer there—not because she has died or disappeared, but because, with your help, she will no longer be where you first saw her. By seeking out that bit of goodness you allowed *teshuvah* to take its course.

So now, my clever friend, now that you know how to treat the wicked and find some bit of good in them—now go do it for yourself as well! You know what I have taught you: “Take great care: be happy always! Stay far, far away from sadness and depression.” [Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, *Liqqutey MoHaRaN* 282, translated by Arthur Green]

Customs of Yom Kippur The rabbis said that Yom Kippur can only effect atonement for sins between God and human beings. All the prayers we recite in synagogue, however, cannot repair sins and hurts between people. Instead we must approach whomever we have wronged and ask forgiveness. Only the victim can truly forgive our sins. Therefore, some people follow the custom in the weeks leading up to Yom Kippur of asking all their acquaintances, their family, and their friends for forgiveness even if there was nothing specific that they remembered doing wrong.

The day before Yom Kippur, we recite the confessional during the afternoon service, eat a large meal (*seudah ha-mafseket*), then light *yahrzeit* and festival candles. It is also customary to give *tzedakah* be-

fore Yom Kippur. (The usual explanation for the confessional before Yom Kippur is that in case you choke to death during the meal, you will at least have asked for forgiveness before you died!) Some Jews visit the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, before Yom Kippur. A small minority of Jews continue a custom called *kapparot*, "atonements," by twirling a live rooster or hen over their heads, assigning their sins to the bird, in a form of a scapegoat ritual. The bird is then donated to *tzedakah*. Other Jews have substituted money wrapped in a handkerchief. After waving the handkerchief overhead, the money is then donated to *tzedakah*.

On Yom Kippur it is traditional to fast all day. There are other prohibitions, including anointing your body with oil, having sex, and wearing clothing made of leather. These three are seen as giving the body pleasure. Instead of leather, people wear sneakers or shoes of man-made material on Yom Kippur. These prohibitions are meant to help us focus on our striving for repentance on this day.

Nearly all the observance of Yom Kippur takes place in the synagogue. The evening services begin with Kol Nidrei, chanted to its powerful music, and conclude the following evening with Neilah, a service unique to Yom Kippur. It is traditional to wear a *tallit* at the Kol Nidrei service even though in general the *tallit* is not worn at night. Some people wear a *kitel* (a white robe) during services. The *kitel* has been explained in two ways. Its white color is a symbol of purity and thus of forgiveness; and it closely resembles the traditional shroud used for burial and is therefore an appropriate symbol to help us confront our mortality on this day.

The services of Yom Kippur are distinguished by special poetic insertions or *piyyutim* on the themes of the day. Unique to Yom Kippur is the confessional that is repeated throughout the day. There are six *aliyot* for the Torah reading (again unique to Yom Kippur). The *musaf*, the additional service, contains two special elements. The first is the *avodah* section that describes the Temple service of the High Priest, including the ritual of transferring the transgressions of the community to a goat sent to the place of Azazel, the origin of the scapegoat. During the recital of this section, it is traditional to prostrate our bodies at certain moments, as was done in the Temple. The second special element, the martyrology section, describes the deaths of talmudic sages

during the Roman persecution. It is most commonly understood that we recite this section to invoke the merit of these martyrs on this day when our fate hangs in the balance. Contemporary liberal prayer books have adapted and reformulated both these sections. Yizkor, the memorial service, is also said on Yom Kippur. The afternoon service is distinguished by the reading of the Book of Jonah. The concluding Neilah service takes its imagery from the closing gates of heaven. It has a sense of urgency (certain prayers are shortened) as well as a sense of accomplishment, as when we come to an end of a marathon or a difficult task. Yom Kippur concludes with the blowing of one long blast on the shofar.