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# שמע Sh'ma

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## Inside the High Holidays: Vulnerability & Embodied Practice

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The month of Elul is designed in the Jewish calendar to help prepare us for the transition from the old year to the new one. It's a period of in-betweenness, a liminal time that invites openness; indeed that urges us to open ourselves to vulnerability. This issue of *Sh'ma* explores just that vulnerability — a theme that seems especially pertinent now, faced as so many of us are with a financial vulnerability unlike any we've faced in this country since the 1930s. A line of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav serves as inspiration to four noted poets who collaborate on a poem — see page four. This issue also features a series of articles examining when rituals help — or, for that matter, fail to help — us in confronting vulnerability, specifically how fasting, such a prominent feature of the this festival season, sharpens or dulls the senses.

This month we introduce a new column — launched by Aryeh Cohen — devoted to addressing idols and the contemporary meaning of idolatry. "What," asks Cohen, "are the idols that you had to/still have to/should have smash(ed) to get to Canaan?"

Finally, we also now change, as we do every September, the theme of our regular column devoted to practical ethics. We spent the last year looking at homelessness. This year, we turn to kashrut — namely, the ethical implications of the food that we set before us on our tables: how we get it, how we prepare it, how we consume it, how we render it holy or profane. Morrris Allen launches the ten-month conversation on our back page.

*Shana tova u'metukah* — may it be a sweet and healthy, a full and fulfilling year. —SB

# Answering Prayers

SHIRA KOCH EPSTEIN

"*Avinu Malkeinu*, please grant me a job with benefits; a pension fund that actually earns rather than loses this year; and health insurance that covers our medications this year…"

How ironic that on this year when so many of us find ourselves in need, the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, a day on which we traditionally forgo petitionary prayers like *Avinu Malkeinu*. I imagine that for many of my congregants, this is a relief. For the many who do not believe in an interventionist God, is there a place in our worship for prayers of petition?

First, it is important to clarify that although our traditional *tefillot* include prayers of petition, according to the Mishnah (*Brachot* 9:3) prayers that ask God to intervene in matters that are already determined are uttered in vain. It is folly to ask God to change the gender of a fetus or to undo a disaster that has already occurred; instead we are to use prayer as a way to access the strength and power of the Divine to help us contend with our troubles. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will upon God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself." ("On Prayer," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity,* p. 259)

The essence of petition in our tradition is not to ask for gifts but to access attributes of the Divine in dealing with issues that we face in life. The *bakashot*, or prayers of request, of the weekday *Amidah*, follow a formula. For example, the prayer for wisdom praises God for being wise, and then embraces the God of wisdom. The underlying concept of all petition is the understanding that we recognize Divine attributes, and the request is that we, as beings made in the Divine image, can access these attributes in our own lives.

Sh'ma שמע

Emmanuel Levinas, the 20th-century French Jewish philosopher, proposed that we each bear ultimate responsibility for the other. He suggested that Jewish prayer is not an individual, selfish act of seeking help for ourselves, but rather an act that focuses our attention on the troubles of our people and our world, "the edification of the worlds or the repairing of the ruins of creation. To pray signifies, for a 'myself,' seeing to the salvation of others instead of — or before — saving oneself." (Levinas, "Judaism and Kenosis," *In the Time of Nations,* p. 129)

**Can we ignore our own power to be God's partners in visiting the sick, helping those in need, providing forgiveness and compassion?**

As part of a *minyan*, we see the needs on the faces of our neighbors sitting to our right and to our left. What need cries out from the hearts of the people sitting in the rows in front of us this Rosh Hashanah?

A rabbi I know asks each of his congregants on Yom Kippur to confess their mistakes on small scraps of paper and anonymously place them in a small basket. During the *viddui*, the communal confession of sin, these papers are read aloud after the formula, "*al cheyt shechatanu lifanecha*…" and everyone beats their chests. We recognize that our individual sins affect our whole community and as a community we take on responsibility for our collective behavior.

Perhaps this is a way to address petitionary prayer as well. What if each of us wrote our petitions on a scrap of paper, and then heard them read aloud during Rosh Hashanah services?

"*Avinu Malkeinu*, grant me more affection from my family."
"*Avinu Malkeinu*, bring healing to my beloved."
"*Avinu Malkeinu*, I don't want to be destitute in my retirement."
"*Avinu Malkeinu*, grant me a second chance with my spouse."
"*Avinu Malkeinu*, don't let me be so lonely this year."

If we hear these words pouring out from our own souls and the souls of those around us, can we ignore working toward the salvation of others? Can we ignore our own power to be God's partners in visiting the sick, helping those in need, providing forgiveness and compassion? If we come to prayer open to the needs and petitions of those among whom we live, our prayer can be a conduit to the Divine as we work to see to the salvation of others.

This Rosh Hashanah, many of us will take a break from petitions on the first day and focus on prayers of gratitude and blessing. When the time comes for petition, may we find it within ourselves to hear the swirl of petitions emanating from our fellow community members, and ask ourselves: what can I place on the communal altar that might help God answer some of these prayers?

Rabbi **Shira Koch Epstein** is director of youth and family education at Congregation Beth Elohim in Park Slope, Brooklyn, NY.

# Facing Our Vulnerability

LEONARD GORDON

*Many people return to the synagogue on the High Holidays, year after year, to replenish their sense of security. Here we all are in safe buildings, seeing familiar faces and hearing well-worn melodies; large numbers help render invisible the recently departed. While many people carry internal dread, much conspires to reinforce complacency. And yet, we, the rabbis, hope to motivate people toward change, even dramatic and transformational change.*

*In our secular world, the government has established a Department of Homeland Security to supplement the work of the Department of Defense, and people fly home for the holidays under the vigilant eye of the Transportation Safety Administration. Shoring us up in our vulnerable condition, doctors are asked to keep us healthy, police and firefighters to keep us safe, lawyers and politicians to guarantee our rights. Rabbis are expected to put the need for safety and security in a cosmic perspective that can overcome even the ravages of aging, the fear of death, and now, the anxieties that a weakened economy have imposed on many among us.*

*To support us in our efforts to shock our congregations into a different appraisal of and response to vulnerability is the liturgy. During the High Holidays, in particular, the prayer* Unitaneh Tokef *— with its famous paragraph describing the many ways people might die during the coming year — can be interpreted as insisting on our vulnerability and mortality. The way that I pres-*

**Leonard Gordon** serves as rabbi at the Germantown Jewish Centre in Philadelphia. For the past decade he has been working on the new Conservative movement *makhzor* (edited by Rabbi Ed Feld) that is scheduled for publication in the fall of 2010.

*ent its message here is an example of how I try to use the liturgy to move the congregation away from fear through acceptance of human limitations in order to lead us to humility, and from a place of humility, toward change.*

In the center of the Rosh Hashanah *musaf* service, we declare the extraordinary sanctity of the day, asserting our knowledge that God is the judge, the prosecutor, and the witness to our lives; we acknowledge our trembling because we know that today is "Judgment Day." Abruptly, the metaphor shifts and we picture God as a shepherd gathering the flock, reviewing each creature, one by one, and determining the destiny of each living being.

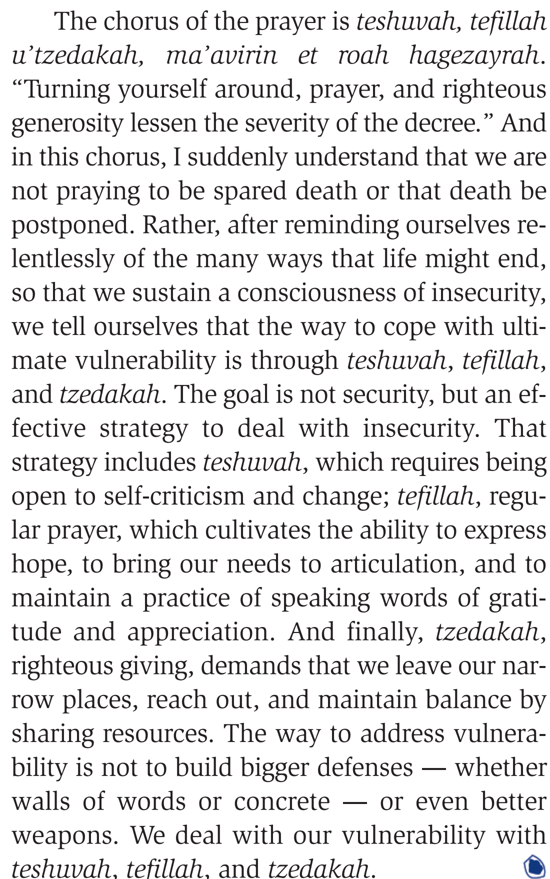
And then these familiar words: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall die and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die; who shall live to be old and who shall not; who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by earthquake and who by plague . . . who will be at peace and who shall be tormented; who will be poor and who rich, who humbled and who exalted."

Whatever our theological doubts and whether or not an individual believes in a "Judgment Day," the section of the *U'nitaneh Tokef* prayer that represents the mystery of human destiny as a catalogue of ways that people die, culminating in the alternative possibilities for life, that some people will become rich this year and others poor, some humbled and others wildly successful — and of course everything in between — about this part of the prayer we can harbor no doubts. It is simply true. We know that, of course, some people will die this coming year; some in old age, and some young; some of illness and others in accidents; some in war, and some in unpredictable natural disasters. We know that some of us will do well in the coming year, and some of us will not.

Most of us prefer to deny the unruliness of our fragility. But Rosh Hashanah makes the facts on this list inescapable: there will be deaths by hunger, accident, and illness, and in wars. The liturgy begs us to hear these plain facts. And we all know that if we haven't yet suffered an unbearable loss, one year such a grief will permanently scar our hearts, or we will suffer yet another death that we cannot bear. Experience suggests that we will live to see another Rosh Hashanah but we know that without a doubt, certainly, definitely, and absolutely, a year will come that will break the pattern. For most of us that destiny is mysterious in its details, but that death is our destiny — the fate of every person we know and love — is irrefutable. Everyone dies; somehow and some time.

This year, rereading the liturgy, I was feeling the vulnerability of the world, of America and of Israel, of people I care about who are living under threat, of congregants who are in failing health, and of my many friends who rise to say kaddish for a parent. In this frame of mind, I approach the *U'nitaneh Tokef* differently. For the first time, I hear the prayer not as a humbling prayer. Our tradition is not asking us to feel insecure and vulnerable in the face of the mysteries of human fate. Rather, our tradition is reminding us, demanding in fact, that we accept our vulnerability. Face it, someday, I will die, people I love will die.

**The goal is not security, but an effective strategy to deal with insecurity.**



We may be exalted this coming year, but one year all the honors that we've earned will not preclude our return to the earth. Surrender to vulnerability. Mystery and death are conditions of life. We mustn't live as if death were avoidable. And we should relax into the life we're meant to live.

The chorus of the prayer is *teshuvah, tefillah u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et roah hagezayrah*. "Turning yourself around, prayer, and righteous generosity lessen the severity of the decree." And in this chorus, I suddenly understand that we are not praying to be spared death or that death be postponed. Rather, after reminding ourselves relentlessly of the many ways that life might end, so that we sustain a consciousness of insecurity, we tell ourselves that the way to cope with ultimate vulnerability is through *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. The goal is not security, but an effective strategy to deal with insecurity. That strategy includes *teshuvah*, which requires being open to self-criticism and change; *tefillah*, regular prayer, which cultivates the ability to express hope, to bring our needs to articulation, and to maintain a practice of speaking words of gratitude and appreciation. And finally, *tzedakah*, righteous giving, demands that we leave our narrow places, reach out, and maintain balance by sharing resources. The way to address vulnerability is not to build bigger defenses — whether walls of words or concrete — or even better weapons. We deal with our vulnerability with *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*.

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# "There is nothing as whole as a heart that has been broken."

—Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav

PHILIP SCHULTZ
GRACE SCHULMAN
GAIL MAZUR
AGI MISHOL

The night is a broken prayer,
a complaint only God hears.
A shroud made out of dreams.
A sop for Cerberus.

A wreath of inchoate pearls.
An inchworm singing *hoshannas* with all its might.
A heart swaddled in tears.
The night owns the strength of a thousand mirrors.

At night we cried in Babylon, by day
dry-eyed before the roughs who ran us in.
My harp gleamed, bleached by starlight,
trembling on a poplar, warped in rain.
Ten strings sighed in wind, louder than song.
That harp is whole which has been cracked apart.
Exile is my stand on solid ground,
and (see them now), my eyes brighter for tears.

Don't speak of heartbreak to me I have an argument

*It was April, I brought him pale tulips from the garden*

with habits of metaphor — it's not the heart you speak of
but the ineffable — character, soul, courage,

*With my pen, he drew pages of ravishing failing tulips*

locus of feeling. Don't tell me a muscle's made whole
by breaking, made stronger ravaged and repaired.

*I brought the too-muchness of the Asiatic lily's perfume*

Who could salvage joy (as if the heart lives

*His hand transfigured the pure white paper*
*to a garden-room — edenic opulent various alive*

by breaking) from our grief?

Not the white paper, but the field is my prayer rug.
I wish I could shake words out of myself
Like I shake the pecan trees
Till the nuts hit the ground
So that the poem leads me home.
I've been going around too long with my lining on the outside
And my desk is not blooming.
Now I come back to the tasty green
Soft for munching
And my single-parent poems pulse
In the folder.
In the trees too the fruit
Breaks forth from the blossom —
And beauty makes room
For matters more practical.

**Philip Schultz**'s most recent book of poems, *Failure*, won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. He founded and directs The Writers Studio, a private school for creative writing in Manhattan.

**Grace Schulman**'s latest poetry collection is *The Broken String*. Her selected essays, *First Loves and Other Adventures*, is forthcoming. Among her honors are the Aiken Taylor Award for poetry, the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and New York University's Distinguished Alumni Award.

**Gail Mazur**'s most recent collection, *Zeppo's First Wife: New and Selected Poems*, was the winner of the 2005 Massachusetts Book Award and a finalist for the 2006 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. She was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study (2008–2009).

**Agi Mishol** was born in Romania (Transylvania) in 1946 to a Hungarian family and immigrated to Israel with her survivor parents at the age of four. She lives on a *moshav* where she works in agriculture. She has published fourteen books of poetry, among them *Look There* published in the U.S. by Graywolf Press. She has been awarded many prizes, including the Prime Minister's Prize and the first Yehuda Amichai Award.

# Threads

HANNA TIFERET SIEGEL

From our first breath to our last, life is a vulnerable experience. With great anticipation, we await the birth of a child although beneath the joy is uncertainty. No matter what we do to protect ourselves and our children, the lifespan of each person is finite and physical safety is often beyond our control. This is what makes our existence precious and moves many people toward faith. "Teach us to treasure each day that we may open our hearts to Your wisdom." (Psalm 90:12) It doesn't take long for us to learn what is dangerous, hot, off-limits, and painful. But the human spirit is adventuresome by nature, driven to explore, understand, touch, encounter, and learn what brings pleasure and meaning.

The world we live in is also vulnerable. The harmonious balance of earth, air, and water is being threatened with smog, radiation, pesticides, rainforest destruction, genetically modified organism (GMO) foods, terminator seeds, and the inhumane treatment of animals, resulting in climate change, super storms, and seismic eruptions. We are defying the covenant of stewardship that we accepted from the beginning of creation, "Let us make humans with the spark of the Divine and let them be the guardians over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, and over all the earth…." (Genesis 1:26)

Integrating and balancing our stewardship, despite the uncertainty and temptations of being human, is never easy. One dear friend, who managed gracefully to do so, recently left this world after a five-year encounter with cancer. Her name was Denise Guren, *Binah Yashara bat Ganit v'David*, and this essay is a tribute to her life with her husband, Doug. Their house in Bellingham speaks of their values — a solar hot water heater on the roof and a south-facing greenhouse attached to the front of their house; a fig tree, tomatoes, and other plants are growing happily in the sun's warmth. Inside are spinning wheels, dyed and natural wool, a violin and an accordion, photos of their two grown sons, a menorah, and Shabbat candlesticks. Doug grinds the flour for their bread, and in their yard are a vegetable garden, apple trees, another greenhouse, grazing sheep, and the bike she rode to work. They lived simply with minimal income.

**We asked Denise to spin the green threads that would remind us to live harmoniously with our vulnerable planet.**

Denise referred to herself as "a canary in the coal mine," knowing that we are all part of the same world through the air we breathe, the food we eat, the thoughts we hold. Her friends marveled at how she continued to live with enthusiasm rather than despair even as her body swelled with tumors. She immersed herself in everything she loved and was able to do. "I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have

Rabbi **Hanna Tiferet Siegel**, a poet and mystic through whom song and inspiration flow, has recorded seven albums of original liturgical music. She was the first woman to receive the title, "*Eshet Hazon*"/ Woman of Vision and Midwife of the Soul. A long-time community builder, she is currently part of the *mashpia* faculty for *Hashpa'ah* (Jewish Spiritual Direction).

## *Ya'aleh*, An Agent of Redemption

On Yom Kippur evening, in traditional services, the prayer "*ya'aleh*" is recited with an open ark — just at the beginning of marathon prayers and intense self-reflection. *Ya'aleh* rests on three verbs: to ascend, to come, and to appear. Our voices offer up a sacred progression as we match the rhythm with a hope that our voices will reach and alter the cosmos. And the melody achieves what the prayer does with words: "May our supplication ascend from the evening, and may our cry come from the morning, and may our song appear till evening." Our thoughts, deepest needs, and vulnerabilities follow a trajectory. We wail in the evening, watching the letters in our prayer books travel from their pages heavenward, propelled by our voices and our will to change the world, to change ourselves. We wait for the hopefulness of the morning and then the promises of the evening. This *piyyut*, this ancient poem, forces me to see myself as a verb, as an agent of redemption, partnering with God in the creation of a new self. *Ya'aleh*'s progression mirrors the way that we enter the cocoon of prayer and emerge transformed. —Erica Brown

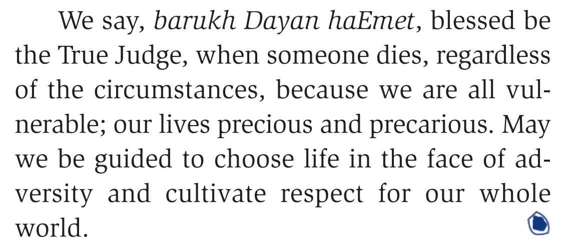
set life and death before you, blessing and curse: choose life that both you and your seed may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19)

During the last six months of her life, she took on a new *mitzvah*. It came about while designing a healing service for the planet. The planning committee was searching for a ritual that would unite the community and acknowledge the need to heal the world. Shonna Husbands-Hankin suggested a green thread, similar to the *techelet*, the blue thread described in the third paragraph of the *Sh'ma*. (Numbers 15:37-41) The *P'til Yarok-Ad*, the Ever Green Thread, would connect us to the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) that guides us to live in harmony with the planet we inhabit so that we, and our children, can experience Heaven on Earth. (Numbers 15:37-41)

We asked Denise to spin the green threads that would remind us to live harmoniously with our vulnerable planet. She enthusiastically agreed and offered this *kavana* (intention) as preparation: "For the sake of unifying YHVH and the *Shekhina*, I am now ready and prepared to fulfill the positive *mitzvah* of spinning *tzitzit* as it is written in the Torah: (Numbers 15:38) '...Tell the Children of Israel to make *tzitzit* on the corners of their garments throughout the generations...' I spin this green *tzitzit* to serve as a reminder of the intricate ecosystems of Mother Earth and our commitment to live in harmony with her."

Denise died at home at the age of 56 in the arms of her husband. She chose a "green" burial, wrapped in a white shroud, and was laid to rest directly in the earth she loved. She wanted a cedar — an evergreen — to grow out of her remains. Several weeks before her death, she wrote, "The best legacy I think anyone can give someone with cancer is not wearing ribbons of whatever color, but supporting environmental organizations and doing our part to lessen the toxic burden of this earth."

We say, *barukh Dayan haEmet*, blessed be the True Judge, when someone dies, regardless of the circumstances, because we are all vulnerable; our lives precious and precarious. May we be guided to choose life in the face of adversity and cultivate respect for our whole world.

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# Hanging by a Cell Phone

JOSH ROLNICK

**Josh Rolnick**, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, writes fiction and the political blog www.neuroticdemocrat.com. His short stories have won the Arts & Letters Fiction Prize, the Florida Review Editor's Choice Prize, and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He lives in Akron, Ohio, with his wife, Marcella, and two boys, Meyer Paz and Heshel Rom.

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The afternoon before my mother's heart surgery, her cell phone battery died. She had gone to the hospital with my father for pre-op screenings when it happened, and by the time my flight landed in Boston, her upset was palpable.

I'll get your phone fixed, I told her. But I was frustrated and concerned. Here she was, 16 hours from surgery to fix a faulty heart valve, all *verklempt* over nothing. She needed, above all else, to *relax*.

Fortunately, I found a store nearby and quickly returned the phone to her. "Mom," I said, as I was leaving that night, "you'll be fine. I'll see you when you wake up."

And at first, she was. The surgery went well, without complication. And then, two days later, a tiny piece of plaque — perhaps loosened when they clamped her aorta — lodged in an artery in her brain. She suffered a massive stroke. For several days, she was intubated, unresponsive — near death, her doctors told us.

She survived — I sometimes think — by the sheer force of her own will.

A few months after the stroke, I asked my local Chabad rabbi: How are we supposed to deal with our knowledge of human frailty? What is the religious response to the notion

that, at a moment's notice, we — or our children, our spouses, our loved ones — could simply be gone? How are we to cope with that vulnerability?

My rabbi told me that when Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson's wife was dying, he took to quoting Ecclesiastes 7:2: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for that is the end of all man, and the living should take it to heart."

It is part of God's plan, the rabbi explained, that we always be confronted with death. When we go to the house of mourning — even when we see stories of suffering and death in the media — it sensitizes us to the fact that any moment could be our last, which, in turn, compels us to live more fully. It's a tool, he said, to encourage us to seize the day.

That worked for a while. At some point, though, the steady reminders of other people's pain just left me feeling more exposed.

The other day, I was listening to NPR as Diane Rehm interviewed the author Colum McCann, whose latest novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, begins with the true story of Philippe Petit, a French high-wire artist who, on August 7, 1974, strung a wire between the Twin Towers and walked back and forth, eight times.

McCann's novel imagines what it was like for people on the ground looking up that day — transfixed by what appeared as a tiny man, a flyspeck, standing on a wire a quarter of a mile in the sky — "all of them reassured by the presence of one another."

Hearing McCann read that line, it hit me: it's the same way with Judaism.

We pray in a *minyan*, which demands a quorum of at least ten people, together. At the end of each week, we gather — as families and communities — to usher in Shabbat. On Yom Kippur, the benches are overflowing with neighbors, friends, family, and strangers, each hoping to be inscribed and sealed in God's Book of Life. We come together: for a *brit*, to welcome a baby into our people's covenant with God; for weddings; for Passover and Sukkot.

"While each life-cycle ritual … has its own symbolism and message, and each holiday … celebrates a different value or event," writes Daniel Gordis in *God Was Not In the Fire*, "what ultimately makes them powerful is the sense of community they provide."

**Community … is the ultimate tonic. We gain strength and courage from others, not because they have heroically faced what we are facing, but simply because they are *there*, caring that we endure.**

This is perhaps most trenchant at a Jewish funeral and in the rituals of sitting *shiva* and saying kaddish, when mourners are reassured that they are not alone.

Community, Judaism seems to insist, is the ultimate tonic. We gain strength and courage from others, not because they have heroically faced what we are facing, but simply because they are *there*, caring that we endure.

My mom, I believe, understood this all along. Hours before her surgery, when her phone battery died, she found herself suddenly cut off from all of those who had been helping her face that day: Her mother; her children; her sisters and brothers; Ellen, her best friend.

At her moment of greatest vulnerability, mom needed her *minyan*. Just like the rest of us.

## Hearing and Silence

*"The great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard."*

The world has never been louder — the 24-hour news cycle, the constant buzzing and beeping, and the tethering of humans to their communications systems.

We need to protect the quiet moments so we can experience the small and large silences in which God's truth can be apprehended.

Toward the end of our lives, when we have perhaps attained wisdom and garnered life experience, often our voices lose their power and people have to lean toward us to hear our words. We become closer to the silence. Our task, then as now, is to hear the still small voice after the glory of the loud shofar. And in the absence of vivid sound, we might feel and hear the pulse of the world. —Sara Paasche-Orlow

# Torah, Ritual, Body, Jew

BENJAMIN D. SOMMER

To be a singer, you use your throat; to be a surgeon, you use your hands and, ideally, your mind; to be a running back, you use arms to catch and legs to run. What do you use to be religious?

How one answers this question depends in part on where one lives. In Western countries, the default concept of "religion" is a Protestant one. Even Catholics, Jews, and (increasingly) Muslims in the West think about religion using models Protestantism provides. In much of Europe and North America, you "do religion" with your soul or spirit, and also perhaps with your mind. If something physical is involved, it is your mouth or ears: you preach, teach, and proclaim the Word, or you listen to it.

**A great deal of Jewish hesitation with ritual stems from Western embarrassment about the body...**

Now, the idea that religion is fundamentally a spiritual pursuit may seem obvious, but in fact it's a remarkably rare point of view. Around the world, religion is almost always something one does with one's body. For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Muslims, most Buddhists, and Jews, the main vehicle for carrying out the teachings of religion is our physical self. Regulations regarding what one may eat are the norm in most religions, whether they involve vegetarianism, abstaining — except on certain festival days — from the especially sacred foods that are "taboo" in many tribal religions, eating only *chalal* meat among Muslims, or (prior to the Protestantizing reforms of Vatican II) avoiding meat other than fish on Friday for Catholics. Elaborate regulations concerning how and when one bows during worship may seem arcane to modern Americans, but they are common in Catholicism and Islam. For many a devout Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Baha'i, one's fingers pray at least as much as one's mouth; believers connect with God by fingering through strings of prayer beads.

Similar practices are central in the daily life of a Jew. From waking until going to sleep, a Jew expresses a relationship with God through concrete actions, not just words or concepts. Jews envelop their bodies in a *tallit*; Jews put *tefillin* on their arms and heads; Jews attend with great care to what they do and don't put into their stomachs; every seventh day Jews recognize God as creator by preventing their bodies from creating or destroying most sorts of matter; by making their torsos lean a certain way while eating a special meal and dipping foods in particular fluids or mixtures, Jews recall how God took them out of slavery; by sitting in a ritual hut and waving around a fertility symbol, Jews recall how God led them through the wilderness and gave them sustenance. Of course, Jews also use their minds to connect with God. Prayer involves not only woolen threads and leather boxes but also specific words. Further, for rabbinic Judaism, Torah study is the highest path to God and equal to all the other commandments combined. But even when Jews use words to mediate their relationship to God, they don't do so silently, in their minds alone. A Jew is instructed to pray out loud: tongue, lips, and vocal cords must move so that one's ears can hear the words. A Jew doesn't merely think a prayer; she utters it. Similarly, Jews study sacred texts out loud, often while shuckling back and forth.

One can imagine a Platonic study circle populated by philosophers who have a mind but no body or a church full of certain kinds of Protestants who have only a soul. (If faith rather than ritual is the core of Christianity, as it is for many low-church Protestants, then one could be a disembodied spirit and still be a full-fledged Christian.) There could be no such *beit midrash* or *beit k'nesset*. It makes sense that the traditional Jewish belief in an afterlife involves not just immortality of the soul but resurrection of the body: if we only have souls in the future, then we will no longer have Torah, for one learns Torah with one's mouth and throat, and one lives Torah with one's forehead, arms, shoulders, and stomach.

Judaism is a religion of the body. Now, this would not be worth noting — after all, almost *all* religions are religions of the body — if Judaism hadn't become, for most of us, so very Western in the past 200 years. A great deal of Jewish hesitation with ritual stems from Western embarrassment about the body, or from a recent Western assumption: that the body may be good for some things, but religion isn't one of

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them. Protestants in the 17th century began to cut back on all that genuflecting; they downplayed eating the bread and wine in worship (it didn't have to happen every week, and anyway it was only a symbol). As Jews westernized, they aped their neighbors by minimizing physical aspects of religion. Head covering? Not really necessary. Prayer shawl? Okay, but let's make it a tasteful little scarf, not one of those big cloak things. Leather boxes and straps? Surely you jest. The rabbi at our children's preschool explained that in the synagogue he attended as a child, there was only one *lulav* on Sukkot. It was displayed on a table in the front of the sanctuary; you could view it, but no one ever touched it. (Years later, shortly after his ordination, he consulted *The Jewish Catalogue* to learn how to shake a *lulav*.)

One of the most important developments for Judaism in the last three decades has been the reversal of this trend. Large *tallitot*, often custom-woven, have become common. *Teffilin*, *sukkot*, and even *tohorat hamishpacha* (a whole-body ritual) are now observed. Many Jews are no longer embarrassed by ritual. The rabbi who told the story about his childhood synagogue did so to suggest that his audience might want to embrace the *lulav* ritual (and also, I suspect, to convey the idea that there's nothing wrong with an adult looking at a basic reference book to learn how). We've begun to understand that the body can be a vehicle for holiness and that words are only part of communicating with God. Jews in North America have begun to reclaim ritual — which is to say, to reclaim the body, which is to say, to reclaim Judaism itself.



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### *"Vi'avitah Tehillah"* "You Desire Praise"

*"Your awe is upon the angels, who are mighty and exalted, who dwell in beautiful heights. And You desire praise from those stained with sin, passing shadows who dwell below — and that is Your praise."*

The human is a combination of godly spirit and dirt (Genesis 2:7); the highest and the lowest. In infinite irony, what God-the-Highest truly desires is the praise of the lowest — humans; and not from our Divine image identity but from our sinful, fleeting, creaturely selves. Precisely on Yom Kippur, the day on which we are most prone to feeling like sullied failures, do we have the most potential, precisely from our lowness, to meaningfully praise the Highest. —Hyim Shafner

# Yom ha-Kippurim and Tisha b'Av:

## The Commonality of Opposites

SHAUL MAGID

Many Jews equate Yom Kippur with Tisha b'Av. The reasons are obvious enough. These are the only two days of the year when we fast from sunset to the following night (25 hours) and abide by the five Torah-derived types of affliction specific to Yom ha-Kippurim. Yet the days seem to represent two opposite states of mind. Atonement, the centerpiece of Yom ha-Kippurim is an act of grace (*chesed*) that should be experienced as a state of enjoyment or *oneg*; Tisha b'Av is a day focused on exile, suffering, and mourning.

The similarities ostensibly have textual as well as ritualistic support. In his *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Mourning" 5:7, Maimonides writes, "Tisha b'Av night is like the day [regarding fasting and the five afflictions]. One can eat when it is still day. Dusk [between sunset and darkness] one must refrain from eating *like Yom ha-Kippurim*. We do not eat meat or drink wine in the meal preceding the fast [of Tisha b'Av]." Curiously, while the similarity to Yom ha-Kippurim is clear, Maimonides undermines the similarity when he describes the meal that precedes the two fasts. In the meal before Yom ha-Kippurim we specifically eat meat and drink wine as this is a festive meal and not a meal of mourning like Tisha b'Av. The similarity between Yom ha-Kippurim and Tisha b'Av exemplified in the fast, suggests that there is a connection between these days through their opposition.

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Here is what I mean: Yom ha-Kippurim is described as "*shabbat shabbaton*" in the Torah. This textual oddity (it never appears again) inspired the sages to legislate that, while fasting on Shabbat is normally forbidden, if Yom ha-Kippurim falls on Shabbat, we fast; if Tisha b'Av falls on Shabbat, we postpone its ritual manifestations until Sunday.

The reasons for the prohibition of fasting on Shabbat have to do largely with the rabbinic injunction of "*oneg*" (enjoyment) required on Shabbat (which is why Jews traditionally saved delicacies for that day). But it may also have to do with mourning. The sages forbid mourning on Shabbat (in part because of the obligation of *oneg*), thus no *shiva* on Shabbat. While there is a disagreement about private mourning, the sages all agree that public mourning is forbidden. Since Tisha b'Av epitomizes public and collective mourning, even though it is similar to Yom ha-Kippurim in practice, it is prohibited on Shabbat.

**Without Tisha b'Av, Yom ha-Kippurim is not necessary; without Yom ha-Kippurim, Tisha b'Av is all there is.**

Let's take this one step further. While Tisha b'Av is about collective mourning, Yom ha-Kippurim has a *Gan Eden*-like quality to it; it is about atonement that is a reversal of the normal workings of the covenant built on the principle of reward and punishment. Atonement may even obviate the requirement of repentance (which is the centerpiece of Rosh Hashanah, not Yom ha-Kippurim). For example, there is a talmudic disagreement whether, in fact, Yom ha-Kippurim atones even without repentance (that is, *ezem ha-yom me-khaper* — the day itself atones). Atonement is a form of erasure or transcendence of the principle of the covenant while also serving as its foundation. It is the day, one day a year, when the admixture of grace (*chesed*) and judgment (*din*) is replaced by pure grace. If Shabbat is described as "*me-eyn olam ha-bah*" (a bit of the next world), how much more so Yom ha-Kippurim, the "sabbath of sabbaths." Tisha B'Av, on the other hand, is about tragic worldliness. It is about exile, covenantal failure, judgment overpowering grace; it elevates the anxiety of human suffering to a metaphysical plane — God withdrew his protection of Israel.

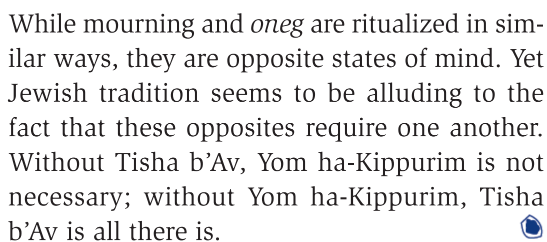
We can fast on Yom ha-Kippurim when it falls on Shabbat precisely because it epitomizes Shabbat. Fasting is a denial of *oneg* only when it is about deprivation for the sake of commemorating human loss. But fasting as a preparation for unmitigated grace transcends *oneg* which is essentially pleasure derived from this world. On Shabbat we eat delicacies to experience a bit of the next world in this world. On Yom ha-Kippurim, we are taken outside the warp and woof of this world — it should be an experience of the next world without the aid of this world. Atonement is a realm of unmitigated *oneg*.

The meal that precedes Tisha b'Av prepares us for the day to come. Thus we partake of foods of mourning (lentils, boiled eggs). The meal that precedes Yom ha-Kippurim is a celebration; we eat meat (or the vegetarian equivalent) and drink wine to reap pleasure from this world to prepare ourselves to enter the cloud of atonement where pleasure is defined otherwise. The sages say that Moses did not eat for 40 days while in heaven and returned to this world on

## Unanswered Questions

*"B'Rosh Hashanah yikateivun: kama yaavrun, v'kama yiboreyun; me yichye u'me yamut; me bikeetzo, u'me lo bikeetzo…*

Haunting in its pure simplicity, this poem touches us in ways that create both a sense of awe of God's power as well as a sense of discomfort over the uncertainty and mystery of the upcoming year. The poet asks a number of short and powerful rhetorical questions — possibly the most important questions we ask today. We do not know the answers, and the questions linger in our minds throughout the day. We often expect answers immediately. In an era of fast food, microwaves, the Internet, and frenzied busy lifestyles, we expect immediate results in every venue of life. It is hard for us to evoke any sense of value from a question that does not have an answer. Yet we live in turbulent insecure times. As we look toward the coming year we are humbled as we acknowledge we do not have all the answers, and we strive toward a patience to live with our own unanswered questions. —Daniel Alter



Yom ha-Kippurim. And the Israelites celebrated when he returned. We reverse the process. We celebrate with delicacies before and refrain from eating (like Moses) afterward.

While these two full fast days share certain rituals, they are, in fact, opposites, yet opposites that imply and even require one another. While mourning and *oneg* are ritualized in similar ways, they are opposite states of mind. Yet Jewish tradition seems to be alluding to the fact that these opposites require one another. Without Tisha b'Av, Yom ha-Kippurim is not necessary; without Yom ha-Kippurim, Tisha b'Av is all there is.

# Coming Closer

TOBA SPITZER

For most Jews, the central ritual practice of Yom Kippur is fasting. Whether or not we go to synagogue, whether or not we believe in God, many of us understand the fast as a key — perhaps the key — component of the experience of this day. Interestingly, the biblical commandment of *yom ha-kippurim* does not mention fasting directly, instead instructing the Israelites to "afflict" themselves on that day. By the early rabbinic period, that "affliction" came to include abstaining from food and drink, from bathing, from wearing shoes, and from sexual intercourse. Yet of all those restrictions, it is the fast that looms largest in our consciousness and our practice today.

Why fast? In his wonderful collection, *Days of Awe*, S.Y. Agnon brings this teaching from Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague: "[These afflictions] are intended to lessen the corporeality of the soul, until the soul separates from the body and becomes completely holy, as is fitting. Thus the whole purpose of Yom Kippur is to withdraw from and lessen the importance of the body… [W]hen the body is weakened and its strength lessened, the spiritual grows stronger." This notion that we fast in order to somehow lessen or ignore our physical being seems to fly in the face of actual experience. How much more aware of our bodies we are when we're fasting! From rumbling stomachs to lightheadedness to the throb of caffeine withdrawal, fasting is probably one of the best ways to remind ourselves that we in fact have bodies and need to feed them.

And while the biblical roots of the Yom Kippur fast imply that it should be a punitive, negative experience, the opposite now holds true: Yom Kippur is supposed to be a day on which we turn to our divine Source wholeheartedly and in joy. Unlike Tisha b'Av or other days of mourning, it is a joyous fast. So, if the Yom Kippur fast functions neither as punishment nor as a way to divorce ourselves from corporeal reality, what does it do?

Yom Kippur is usually translated as the "Day of Atonement." This English phrase was coined by William Tyndale in his 1530 translation of the Hebrew Bible, and he used the word "atonement" according to its original, quite literal meaning: at-one-ment. By choosing this particular word, instead of the more common "expiation," as a translation for the Hebrew word "*kippurim*," Tyndale implied that sin is essentially a matter of estrangement, of disconnection. Yom Kippur, the "Day of At-one-ment," is a means to respond to the defiling power of sin through the restorative power of connection.

Tyndale's insight is echoed in Jewish sources. As Maimonides writes in his *Hilchot Teshuvah*, "*Teshuvah* is great because it draws a person close to the *Shechina*…as the prophet Jeremiah states, 'If you will turn/return (*tashuv*), Israel' declares Adonai, 'to Me you will return.'" Maimonides concludes, "*Teshuvah* brings close those who are far off." Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his commentary on Maimonides' teaching, defines sin as that which creates distance between a person and God. The work of *teshuvah*, then, is the act of overcoming that distance, of once again "coming close" to the divine.

How does one do that, then? How to achieve this closeness? Much of the experience of Yom Kippur, and indeed of the 50 days leading up to it, beginning with the month of Elul, is dedicated to reconnecting to our Source, to realigning ourselves with the divine flow of the universe. Much of the High Holydays liturgy has the sense of a calling out to the One, of "returning" by means of acts of contrition and letting go of that which keeps us off of a Godly path. This process of *teshuvah* climaxes with the 25-hour fast of Yom Kippur.

To understand the role of fasting in this "coming close" process, it is helpful to remem-

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**Toba Spitzer** is the spiritual leader of Congregation Dorshei Tzedek in West Newton, Mass., and the immediate past president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. Yom Kippur is her favorite Jewish holiday.

ber the most basic claim of Jewish theology. This is stated most starkly in the *yotzer* blessing of the morning liturgy, which describes God as "*yotzer or u'vorey choshech, oseh shalom u'vorey et ha-kol*, the One that creates light and dark, who makes peace and creates everything."

### Everything, *Ha-kol*, All of it.

This claim is that there is one ultimate Source of every facet of our reality. Whatever that Source is, however we understand it, it is to be found in all aspects of our existence — in the pleasant and the unpleasant, in the joyful and the painful. I can't have the exquisite taste of dark chocolate without the ability to feel excruciating pain. I can't experience the transformative power of love without also knowing the depths of loss.

Rav Soloveitchik speaks of *teshuvah* as re-establishing intimacy with God. If God, or Godliness, is, indeed, within everything — without exception — then the challenge of *teshuvah* is to become intimate with everything — with *all* of our experience, without exception.

Fasting becomes an important component of "coming close" when it heightens our awareness of ourselves and brings our attention into the present moment of experience. By fasting, we "come close" to the sensations that accompany our altered physical state. We disrupt our routine, on the most fundamental level, and so cause a shift in our awareness. We become better able to notice what is happening right here, right now. And if we can not only notice but embrace this experience, in all its challenge and difficulty, then we are one step closer to being truly intimate with the Godliness that is in everything. If we are unable to do this, we will never be able to come as close as the season of *teshuvah* demands, because we will always be running away from the reality of our own experience. We will fail to be fully present in our own lives, and thus miss the opportunity to embrace the Godliness that dwells right here.

If we can experience our hunger pangs and odd sensations not as distractions from the holiness of the moment but as a component of that holiness, then our fast will indeed be joyous.

# To Fast or Not

PENINA V. ADELMAN

In my varied Jewish life, I have fasted and not fasted for different reasons on Yom Kippur. During my sparsely Jewish childhood, there were no fasting adults in view. I was not even aware that fasting was part of this solemn day. Some years we went to temple and prayed until lunchtime. Then we went home to eat. That was it.

**The senses are more vivid and vibrant. I am inside the birdsong, the flower's scent, the fallen leaf's changing colors.**

Living in Jerusalem at age 24 during the year of discovering the depth of my Jewish yearnings, I was too ashamed of my ignorance to attend the Orthodox synagogue next door. I spent the day in my room, praying by myself and fasting. It was meaningful because it was my first experience in Israel but I found that I was not meant for the ascetic life and was relieved to learn enough by the next year to spend Yom Kippur in a community. For many years I did just that and grew to appreciate the world that fasted around me.

When I was diagnosed with Type-1 (insulin-dependent) diabetes at age 33, I was determined not to let this new fact of my life deter me from the keen sense of my soul's existence that fasting on Yom Kippur lent me. On Yom Kippur, we experience what being an angel is like. We don't eat, or drink, or bathe, or have sex, or wear makeup or shoes made from an animal. But, the fact was, not eating or drinking made me feel sick in two hours. What kind of angel was I? I stuck it out through *Ne'ilah*, but I did not fast again on Yom Kippur for many years.

What is it like not to fast when all the Jews around me who were obligated to do so were fasting? Yom Kippur seemed too easy. After all, fasting is the essence of this holy day just as lighting candles is the essence of Hanukkah. If I could not participate in this simple 25-hour trial, could I really be part of the community?

Because I was able to do the thing that everyone else was trying to forget about, by ignoring their growling stomachs, their dry mouths, and their fantasies of their favorite foods, I felt guilty and apart. I was "privileged"

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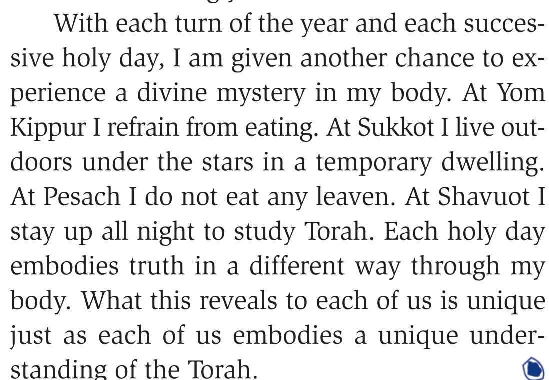
to eat and the rest of my group was not. One time, my blood sugar started plummeting during services and I had to run into the bathroom of the synagogue to eat a snack! Even though food had become for me something more akin to medicine than a sensual and healthy delight for its own sake, I reflected on how my relationship to food had changed since I began living with diabetes. Now food was what I always needed to have available yet rarely enjoyed. How un-Jewish!

Then, in 2005, after I'd been on an insulin pump for over ten years, my doctor said something casually about how easy it was to fast with the pump. All I had to do was turn down the hourly rate at which I was receiving insulin and test my blood sugar more often than usual. If my blood sugar started dropping during the fast, my rabbi told me it was permissible to have 1/4 cup of juice once an hour as needed. I decided to try it once again.

This time around I was acutely aware of how different it was to fast. The day became a journey with all the others in my community. We were all bound up in our human striving to be angelic for one day. People compared notes: Do you have a headache yet? Are you feeling faint? Could you sleep during the break? I could join my people once again as we all struggled together to survive this day.

Praying when fasting feels the way I imagine it to be when one who is facing death prays. Priorities become as clear as a finely tuned radio. Feelings are sharp and at times as overwhelming as a tidal wave. The senses are more vivid and vibrant. I am inside the birdsong, the flower's scent, the fallen leaf's changing colors. How ironic that on a day when we are denying our physicality, we may experience the physical world more strongly than ever.

With each turn of the year and each successive holy day, I am given another chance to experience a divine mystery in my body. At Yom Kippur I refrain from eating. At Sukkot I live outdoors under the stars in a temporary dwelling. At Pesach I do not eat any leaven. At Shavuot I stay up all night to study Torah. Each holy day embodies truth in a different way through my body. What this reveals to each of us is unique just as each of us embodies a unique understanding of the Torah.



## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides* Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. What helps you pray?

2. Does "fasting" help focus your attention on Yom Kippur? How?

3. In what ways does a sense of vulnerability coalesce a community?

# Dancing on the Holiest Day

LIZ LERMAN

On the afternoon of Yom Kippur, we dance. It wasn't always like that. Washington, DC's Temple Micah and I, as a congregation and a choreographer respectively, worked our way only slowly and incrementally toward the possibility that even on the holiest and busiest day of the year, we might use our bodies and minds in concert.

It was Rabbi Danny Zemel's idea. I was content to continue to make dance a part of several Friday night services during the year. Over a decade or so we tried different ways to incorporate praying and moving, storytelling and moving, studying and moving, and just plain moving. The members of the synagogue either love it or put up with it, but by now most are familiar with and accepting of our efforts. I think even the people who dislike movement are just a little bit proud that it happens at their congregation. I have always said that innovation can breed tolerance if we just take our time, and respect everyone's point of view.

What made it possible to dance on Yom Kippur is that I am not alone. In fact, I have never actually performed during a service; everything here is participatory. Participation,

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though, is not measured by how many people are dancing but rather how many of us feel a part of the moment because we are connected to its ideas, its beauty, its inquiry, its meaning. That is accomplished as much by watching with a pleasant countenance as it is by dancing with the full body.

So the rabbi, several synagogue professionals, including Cantor Meryl Weiner, and I begin to plan how to make the dancing and participating a portion of the afternoon *tefillah*.

> **No matter how many times we have done this, there is always a little gasp as the dance begins... The text is full of vulnerability, the dancing more so.**

Here is how it works:

Danny will talk for weeks in advance about the plan to dance on Yom Kippur. He'll ask the congregation a question pertinent to the theme of atonement, and will encourage people to write their answers and submit them online or in a little box left at the door. These anonymous notes become the script for whatever we will do.

The rabbi and the cantor will choose about eight congregants to join in creating and teaching the dance. This is beginning to be treated as an honor. Each year the dance and the dancers are different and the group's diversity lets people — especially those new to the synagogue on Yom Kippur — know that anyone can participate; one needn't be a dancer to participate.

This small group has one rehearsal where we put the written ideas into a gestural dance that will eventually be taught to the community. Musicians work on a sound score that will support the evolution of the dance — this helps build the event. On Yom Kippur, the small ensemble of congregants meets after the morning service to rehearse once again, and then it happens.

During the afternoon service, the rabbi and I both speak. We share something of what ties artistic rigor to the high holidays. I try to make people feel that they have an opportunity to go beyond themselves and to see the people, the synagogue, and the story in a new light. No matter how many times we have done this, there is always a little gasp as the dance begins. One of the eight congregants steps forward, and says something like, "For the sins which I have sinned by yelling at my children," and then performs a gesture. One by one the small group steps up. The text is full of vulnerability, the dancing more so. Next we teach a gestural dance, based on the responses to Danny's question, to the 500–700 people in attendance. We dance to music, and then to the words of a prayer. We do this sequence three times. Each time the dance gets easier and the commitment gets stronger. By the end, always some are crying, some are laughing; all are renewed.

We sit. We continue the service. Later we hear the shofar.

## *El Nora Alila*, A Source of Wonder

At Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, where I help lead the congregation in prayer, we invite the community to stand before the open ark and offer a personal prayer for *Ne'ilah,* the concluding service of Yom Kippur.

A line snakes around the room as individuals, couples, and families wait their turn to have a moment of reflection. The image is powerful as hundreds of people step closer to the Torah for what will be the final minutes of the holiest day of the year. We sing *El Norah Alila*, a Sephardic hymn attributed to Moses ibn Ezra.

*El nora alila*, God, source of wonder<br>
*Hamtzi lanu mechila*, Pardon your people's cry<br>
*Be'sha'at ha'ne'ila*, As the closing hour draws near.

We all feel the emotion. We all hear it, taste it. A young girl holds her grandmother's arm to steady her. A family huddles close together. A father wraps his son in his *tallit*.

So many people with busy lives are stopped, still, praying together. After days of preparation and prayer, we share this precious moment. Soon we will all scatter back to our own private lives but for this hour we share a sacred community; we are simply and awesomely present in the moment. —Craig Taubman

## *Al Cheyt* and Boredom

Amidst this “angst of uncertainty,” I cry out for answers. With each prayer, I try to unlock the secrets, ancient and modern. I read the commentaries and seek the wisdom. My heart is open. Yet on Yom Kippur, I must admit, I sometimes find myself fatigued from the marathon-long search. By seeking meaning in every prayer, I come up short, and more often hungry. It is *musaf*, and my mind wanders. I am bored.

*Al cheyt shechetanu lifanecha*, for the sin I have committed against You by finding myself bored in shul.

I used to fight the boredom. Then I realized that maybe this prayer was placed in front of me simply to bore me. In prayer, I reclaim boredom.

Boredom is not “tuned out”; it is “tuned in.” Stripped of outside stimuli, my mind opens. Recent research uncovers that a “numbed trance” allows the brain to see the world in new ways, productive and creative. I am told that the creator of the Post-it note came up with the idea in church. He was bored.

Now, I no longer search for the secret of every ancient prayer, continually pursuing the hidden key. Yes, I read the commentaries and *kavanot*. But most importantly, I listen. I am with my community in synagogue. I am in prayer. —Joel Sisenwine

***Ethics*** *continued from page 20*

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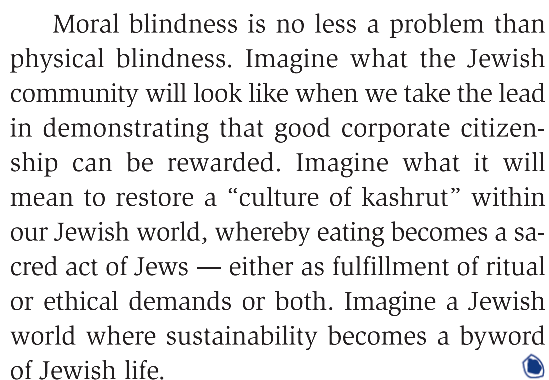
Creating such standards is a win-win for the kosher food industry. As a result of our work, more people will buy more kosher food products — some simply because the product is kosher, others because it has been produced in an ethically appropriate fashion, and many more because it is both ritually and ethically kosher.

In the Shulchan Arukh, the laws of kashrut are found in the section called *Yore Deah*. The laws detailing economic responsibility in the marketplace are found in *Choshen Mishpat*. For far too long these sections of the Code have lived in splendid isolation — one from the other — as if they were independent silos holding up our tradition.



Moral blindness is no less a problem than physical blindness. Imagine what the Jewish community will look like when we take the lead in demonstrating that good corporate citizenship can be rewarded. Imagine what it will mean to restore a “culture of kashrut” within our Jewish world, whereby eating becomes a sacred act of Jews — either as fulfillment of ritual or ethical demands or both. Imagine a Jewish world where sustainability becomes a byword of Jewish life.

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# Starting up with God

ARYEH COHEN

There is a belief that religion is a safe harbor in times of troubles. Religion is the place where people might go to escape the hardship of their daily lives, the brokenness of their relationships, the frustrations of their workplaces, the skepticism and doubt of their intellectual pursuits.

There is a belief that religion is a radical change — a revolutionary overturning of all that came before. Religion is the anvil upon which verities will be smashed, traditions broken, and sureties questioned. Religion provides the adept with a place from which to struggle. Religion is not for the faint of heart or the immature of spirit and intellect.

Both of these are, of course, true. Religions claim a revolutionary beginning in their mythical past and then spend their days figuring out how to domesticate the very revolution they have idealized. We're all still figuring it out.

According to the *midrash*, *Genesis Rabba*, a Palestinian *midrash* written sometime in the 5th or 6th century of the common era, Abraham's father, Terach, was an idolator and an idol maker. One day he left Abraham in charge of his idol store. As each person came to buy an idol, Abraham would make fun of them. When an old person came to buy an idol, Abraham looked at him incredulously and said: "Why would you worship an idol that was made just yesterday?"

Later that day, a woman came to the store with an offering of grain to give to the idols. Abraham took a mallet and smashed all the idols save the largest one. When Terach returned he was understandably furious.

"What happened here?"

Abraham calmly explained that there was a fight over the offering that was brought to the idols and the largest idol smashed all the other idols. Terach was beside himself.

"These idols can't move, let alone fight with each other!!"

"If that's the case," Abraham replied, "why would you worship something that cannot do anything?"

Terach dragged Abraham to the king, Nimrod. Nimrod and Abraham engaged in a type of religious disputation. Nimrod opened with: "I worship fire." Abraham countered with: "Why don't you worship the water which can douse the fire." Nimrod acquiesced. "Okay, I'll worship the water." "So then," Abraham went on, "you might as well worship the clouds, since they are obviously stronger than the water which they carry." Nimrod agreed with this and said: "Okay, let us worship the clouds." Abraham then suggested the wind which blows the clouds, and then, finally, a person who can withstand the wind.

Nimrod finally exploded at Abraham: "You are just playing with words. I worship the fire. When I throw you into the fire, we'll see whether your god is greater than the fire, or whether you succumb to my god."

Abraham was thrown into the fire and, like Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego in the time of Daniel, Abraham emerged unscathed.

This *midrash*, significantly, is a commentary to the last verse before God issues those famous marching orders: *lech lechah*, go forth! Read in this light, the *midrash* seems to be arguing that before Abraham could move on to the "land that I will show you," he had to smash his father's idols.

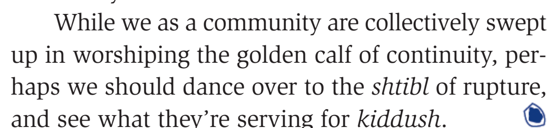
Rabbi Yakov Yosef of Polnoi, one of the two main students of the founder of Hassidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov, would often start his weekly discourse with the following question: How is this part of the Torah relevant in every time and every place? In other words, how does my life hang in the balance over whether Abraham smashes the idols or not? Or, from another perspective, what are the idols that I have to smash in order to move on to the Promised Land? (and, perhaps, then, what is that promised land?)

This year *Sh'ma* will be asking this question of contributors from many walks of Jewish life. What are the idols that you had to/still have to/should have smash(ed) to get to Canaan? Did you get there? What idols of yours do you expect your "children" to smash?

Coming out of the gratuitously tragic Lebanon War of 1982, I began chipping away at many of the icons I had grown up with. Acknowledging my many dead friends, being discharged from the army, leaving yeshivah, starting university, all helped maximize the amount of thinking with minimal interference from official gatekeepers and other ideologues.

There were many small moments over several years that culminated in an aggregate crash. It took leaving Israel to envision a serious Jewish community that was not Orthodox. In Israel then, it was the rare few who were able to see viability between the flags of so-called "*dati*" (i.e., Orthodox) and so-called "*chiloni*" (i.e., secular). It then took an iconoclastic group of ardently consensual, egalitarian, hard-edged, and extremely welcoming and serious Jews in Somerville, Mass., for me to be able to finally take the mallet to the idol that proclaimed that Orthodoxy was Judaism. Period.

While we as a community are collectively swept up in worshiping the golden calf of continuity, perhaps we should dance over to the *shtibl* of rupture, and see what they're serving for *kiddush*.



**Aryeh Cohen**, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, lives in Los Angeles with his partner Andrea and their children, Shachar and Oryah. He teaches Talmud at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, davens at the Shtibl Minyan, and writes about Talmud, justice, Shabbat, and gender, among other topics. He is currently writing a book, *Justice in the City: Thinking the Just City out of the Sources of Rabbinic Literature.*

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Surrender and vulnerability are important ingredients in any attempt to feel the presence of God. And yet too much surrender may leave us feeling that we cannot contribute to God's world; that we are unworthy to respond to God's call.

Abraham models the vulnerable human being approaching God. Though Abraham refers to himself as but "dust and ashes," he nonetheless continues to argue with God on behalf of the residents of Sodom.

What gives Abraham the right to act this way? Eliezer Berkovits is instructive: "It is from God that the patriarch derives the strength to face Him; it is He who granted this heap of 'dust and ashes' the dignity of a conscience, which must be asserted even when confronting God."

It was God who invites Abraham into this encounter. With all our imperfections and shortcomings, we are allowed to approach the Perfect One because that Perfect One invites us in. In the encounter with God, God is revealed as the almighty but, significantly, humanity is revealed as dignified — invited by God to play an active role in the unfolding of our world.

— Barry Gelman

**Where is God to be found? In all those places in which we allow God entry.**

*Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk*

If we can't find God in this perplexing and darkened world, it isn't because God is not present; it's because we haven't made room for God to enter the picture. Vulnerability is the corrective to this problem. It helps us become more open human beings, yet it can only happen when we empty ourselves of ego, of the narrowness of self-concern. And that is at the very core of the Kotzker's teaching.

We must cultivate the courage to surrender, to expose ourselves — through trust — to the unknown. We must be willing to take risks, especially the risks inherent in openness and vulnerability. Only then will hope triumph over despair.

Søren Kierkegaard argues that faith requires us to embrace absolute resignation about our ability to fathom the transcendent mystery of God. This active act of "surrender" — an expression of courage and strength — represents a bold receptivity to our fundamental, though finite, humanity.

Kabbalah means "that which is received." This means that spiritual experience — a relationship with God — is something that, paradoxically, comes to us; it's not something that we can go out and "get." We can get ready for it, pursue it through preparation. Spirituality is the result of giving over, not giving up, of creating the space for the Divine to enter our souls and empower our lives.

Relinquishing our preoccupation with self and accepting the constraints of our "mortal coil" are not easy tasks, but what we will ultimately receive in return is a renewed, deeper, and more meaningful existence.

— Niles Elliot Goldstein

I sit here in Darou Mouride with Fatu in her kitchen — a straw box, the ribbed metal roof held down by rock and tire. She hands me dried hot pepper, parsley, onion flecks, and garlic to mash in a mortar. She guts fish with her fingers. We fill the fish with flavor and fry them over fire. Light leaks in through roof holes; smoky dust illuminates slats of sun. Here in Darou Mouride, the children study the Koran with worms in their bellies and with flies clamoring for corners of their eyes. And they say everything is *di sant y'allah* (thanks to God). And everything is *jamm rek* (peace only).

There is a museum on Goree Island now, where cellars were once stuffed with bodies, shackled, to be shipped across the ocean while slave traders dined upstairs. Our guide tells us how 100 million people were taken out of the African continent as slaves. I cry because I don't want God to have any part of this, to have been here, witnessing the horror, despairing, silent.

I notice a version of the 23rd Psalm hanging on the wall. Somehow, a person stripped of humanity by others has allowed God entry in this place. Moved, I remember how much we need this God here. God, the One who loves and nurtures forever; God, whose house is always open; God, who walks with us in our darkest, dankest, most vulnerable places; God, who restores our souls.

— Ann R. Lewis

Reb Mendel's question is not a philosophical question but an existential one. It is a question about *avodat haShem*, spiritual practice. It asks what we do to let the Divine presence into our lives. This response moves the emphasis away from passively waiting on God and prods each individual to become a God seeker. This implies the cultivation of a spiritual practice that helps create openings to the Divine. What follows is a very personal report on such openings.

In the midst of my busy life, regular prayer is a challenge. Still there are moments when wrapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*, the sweet fragrance of the Divine envelops my being and life becomes richer.

One of the most powerful openings comes on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when we, as a *minyan*, "fall on our faces" (bowing completely to the ground) during the *Aleinu*. Suddenly the reality of being part of the *malchut shamaiyim* is palpable.

Perhaps the most lasting opening experience came with the birth of our fourth child. We deliberately read one of Rabbi Nachman's stories during the labor. The medical team knew we intended to bless the infant before cutting the cord. *Baruch Hashem* all went well with the delivery. The staff paused as we blessed our little boy. Many years later, I met one of the attending nurses who told me she remembered that as a moment "when God truly was present."

Where is God? God is wherever you let God in.

— Neal Rose


שמע Sh'ma

נשמע NiSh'ma LET US HEAR



**Niles Elliot Goldstein**, rabbi emeritus of The New Shul in Manhattan, is the author or editor of nine books, most recently of *The Challenge of the Soul: A Guide for the Spiritual Warrior* and *Gonzo Judaism: a Bold Path for Renewing Judaism*.

**Barry Gelman**, rabbi of United Orthodox Synagogues in Houston, Tx., is author of *Irresistible Judaism: A Collection of Inspirational Stories and Essays*.

**Anne R. Lewis**, a Wexner graduate fellow, is a third-year rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She recently participated in an American Jewish World Service rabbinical student delegation to Senegal, which inspired much of this response.

Rabbi **Neal Rose** is a retired professor of religious studies and family therapist who currently serves as Rabbi-in-Residence at Congregation B'nai Amoona, St. Louis, Mo.

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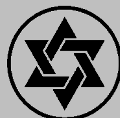

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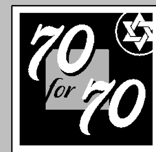


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*Yehudah Mirsky, Fellow at the The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute*

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**Ethics**
**Sigi Ziering**

This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat; the preparation of food; the people who prepare our food; the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

# A Culture of Kashrut

MORRIS J. ALLEN

*A person blinded in one eye is exempt from making the pilgrimage.* (*Hagiga* 2a)

While this talmudic text is speaking only of the three-times-a-year obligation to appear in Jerusalem in ancient times — on Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot — the ancient rabbinic dictum holds great importance for modern Jews. Indeed, Abraham Joshua Heschel gave it a metaphysical spin, using it to explain why those who are unable to see out of both eyes — meaning those who do not live with an ability to appreciate the "parallax effect" — are unable to succeed in the religious quest.

For contemporary Jews who have just lived through a year of continual ethical scandal, whether in the kosher meat industry or investment world, our need to restore healthy balance to our Jewish lives is obvious. The Magen Tzedek seal for kosher-certified food products, developed by the Hekhsher Tzedek commission, intends to serve as a corrective for a community that has become comfortable elevating ritual commandments over our equally important ethical demands and norms. Paraphrasing Heschel, a community that sees "*mitzvot bein adam l'Makom*" (commandments between humanity and God) as more important than "*mitzvot bein adam l'havero* or *l'olamo*" (commandments incumbent upon humanity toward humanity or the world we live in) is incapable of truly fulfilling God's dream for us as a people.

Several years ago, a minor scandal broke out in a butcher shop in Monsey, N.J. The butcher was selling *treif* chickens and labeling them kosher. It was a terrible act and the community responded with anger and with resolve. The small butcher was quickly put out of business and his product line disappeared from the town's streets.

However, when a major kosher food producer was discovered to have regularly abused his workers, to have garnered excessive fines from the U.S.E.P.A. due to the violation of the city's wastewater treatment permit, to have been accused of a Madoff-worthy money laundering scheme, not a single kashrut organization pulled their *hashgacha*.

On the contrary, one leading supporter of the kosher food industry played the anti-semitism card, publicly proclaiming that the owners of this company were being persecuted simply because they were "observant Jews."

The absence of moral outcry from some in the religious world in the wake of the multiple moral scandals of Agriprocessors in Postville, Iowa, was a stunning indication that we have become a people blinded in one eye, more concerned about the smoothness of a cow's lung than the safety of the worker processing the meat on the line, or the wellbeing of the environment, or the honesty of the business itself.

As Jews, we need to correct this moral disability. Appearing this year (God-willing) on ritually certified kosher food products, the Magen Tzedek will mark the first time that a religious community can actively demonstrate that ethical and ritual commandments go hand-in-hand.

Working tirelessly over the past year, the Hekhsher Tzedek commission has developed halakhically based standards to certify that the

*continued on page 15*

Rabbi **Morris J. Allen** has served as the first rabbi of Beth Jacob Congregation, Mendota Heights, Minn., since August 1986. A strong proponent of kashrut throughout his life, Allen developed the concept of an ethical seal for kosher food items during the fall of 2006. He also serves as the project director of the Hekhsher Tzedek commission, which will begin to affix its seal – the Magen Tzedek – this fall.