

Volume 3, Number 1
Jishrei 5766

Olam Tikvateinu

A place to share Torah



Congregation Olam Tikvah

3800 Glenbrook Road

Fairfax, Virginia

Olam Tikvateinu

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***This edition is brought to you through
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on the occasion of the Yahrzeit of Rudy Stahl,
the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund and the Rabbi
Itzhaq M. Klirs Memorial Adult Education Fund.***

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Olam Tikvateinu

Conceived as a supplement to the existing experiences of Jewish study and reflection central to our community, the journal's statement of purpose is as follows:

Olam Tikvateinu, our Olam Tikvah, our world of hope, is a place for individuals of our congregation to share their Torah. It is to be a forum for original ideas and thoughts on Jewish themes—Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), Talmud, Jewish history, philosophy, ethics and actions/behavior.

Its motto is:

ה' חָפֵץ לְמַעַן צְדָקוֹ יִגְדֵּל תּוֹרָה וְיִאֲדָר

*For the sake of God's righteousness,
God desires that Torah grow and be glorified.—Isaiah 42:21*

My hope is that this journal will inspire you to develop your own ideas, and I encourage you to use this forum to share with all of us. Please contact me or Rabbi Ben-Gideon, so we may begin thinking and studying together toward your article.

Looking forward to enjoying your Torah,

Rabbi David Kalender

Submissions for Volume 3, Number 2

Please submit your article by Thursday, March 9, 2006 for Volume 3, Number 2, to be published Nissan 5766. Articles should be typed, double spaced, in MS Word and submitted by e-mail to Lisa Friedman, Lisafriedman@cox.net. Write "Olam Tikvateinu" in the subject line. The *upper* length limit is 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages).

If your subject is related to the Jewish calendar, please use this paradigm:

Tishrei for subjects including High Holidays through Purim (include Elul, Chanukah, Tu B'Shevat). Nissan for subjects including Pesach through Av (include Yom Hashoah, Lag B'Omer, the Omer, Yom Ha'atzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, Shavuot and Tisha B'Av).

From the Editor's Desk

By

Cary Schwartzbach

After a brief hiatus, we return to our readers, with the hope that this edition will help inspire you for the coming Days of Awe as well as the other coming holidays. This edition features contributions from congregants who are very involved in the shul's educational programs. It is our fervent hope that you will take the opportunity to explore a topic that interests you. *Olam Tikvateinu* and *Olam Tikvah* want to enjoy your Torah

In *Shabbat Afternoons*, Jerry Markowitz reminds us of the ineffable joy of the Shabbat respite. We have to learn to appreciate that quiet beauty.

For those of you who missed George Billinson's adroit discussion of *B'tzelem Elohim* at Tikkun Leil Shavuot, here is another opportunity to explore what it means to be created in God's image. Two meanings are offered, and in classic Jewish methodology, they are harmonized.

In *Rediscovering Our Jewish Ethical Voice*, Eric Rothberg wrestles with the issue of Jewish ethical distinction. In the Judeo-Christian ethical pastiche of modern American life, what unique demands does Judaism make of our behavior? And what unique contributions does Judaism make to contemporary ethical considerations?

In the post-Shoah era, it is even harder for the Jewish people to accept sin as justification for suffering. In *Unetaneh Tokef*, Rabbi Rebecca Ben-Gideon forces us to grapple with the challenge of harmonizing the awe of this central prayer with our modern sensibilities. No attempt is made to "retranslate" the text to make it more palatable to our modern taste. Instead, she meets the text head-on.

In *A Day Like Purim*, I explore a teaching from Yeshiva days and use the Talmudic *suggiya* template as my model. A quote is cited and then interrogated. The original intent is subverted by a pun, and any attempt at resolution is forced to harmonize the pun.

I hope you find these articles as stimulating as the editorial staff did. Best wishes for a happy and healthy 5766.

L'Shana Tovah Tikateivu V'Techateimu.

Shabbat Afternoons

By

Jerrold Markowitz

The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done.

(*Genesis* 2:1-3)

How do ducks spend their Shabbat afternoons? To find out, my wife and I frequently walk to a nearby duckpond. As we circle the pond with lighthearted steps, we watch.

Some ducks stand next to each other on rocks in the pond, while others glide peacefully in the water. The noisy ducks are “a bunch of yentas,” my wife suggests.

The male ducks have green heads and colorful bodies that attract the females. The female bodies are brown, with soft-looking brown stripes, so they can blend with the surroundings and protect their eggs.

Once there were ducks walking on slightly iced pond water. Where the water wasn't icy, a few male ducks were standing upside down, almost motionless, with their heads in the water. Showing off? Another time, ducks were flying from one end of the pond to the other.

One Shabbat afternoon, we were standing peacefully watching dozens of ducks and long-necked geese eating food sprinkled on someone's back lawn (maybe a few were sleeping and daydreaming). None ran away—they just ignored us.

A column of ducks walked up from the pond. We made a kissing sound. They looked around, as if saying, “What's that? What's that strange sound?” But they didn't run away.

Suddenly, a man walking a leashed dog approached. Instantly, all the ducks and geese flew away, shouting, flapping barely inches from our heads. We bent forward, hearts pounding, recollecting Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *The Birds*.

As we were leaving that afternoon, we approached a few geese. The one that blocked our path slowly moved away; the others seemed to ignore us. What was it that did not scare them away? This calm reminded us of the time we approached ducks in the water, hidden among leafless branches. After a while maybe they noticed us as they quietly swam away.

The next Shabbat afternoon, we were back watching the ducks and geese.

An earlier version appeared in *Washington Jewish Week*, April 6, 2000.

Jerrold Markowitz, a longtime Olam Tikvah member, is a regular participant in Shabbat services. As a Ritual Committee member, Jerry writes a column for the *Contemporary*. He works for the U. S. Coast Guard.

B'tzelem Elohim—What Does It Mean?

By

George D. Billinson

Introduction

We all know that we were created *B'tzelem Elohim*—in God's image. But what does that mean? This question has occupied philosophers throughout the ages. In fact, Maimonides felt it was such an important issue that he dealt with it in the very first chapter of his *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Throughout the Torah, God is generally referred to in human terms.¹ Nevertheless, we are all taught from a young age that being made in God's image does *not* mean that God has a human form.²

Defining *B'tzelem Elohim* in the negative (i.e., what it does not mean, as above) offers us little assistance in understanding what it does mean. However, it is not surprising that the default is usually to resort to a negative definition. The concept of God is complex, and defining what it means to be made in God's image is equally complex. Indeed, some of our greatest Jewish teachers and philosophers have differed on what it means to be made *B'tzelem Elohim*.

Let Us Make Man

We begin in the first chapter of the Book of *Genesis*:

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on the earth. And God created man in his image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”³

The text is fairly straightforward. Yet it presents a number of difficult questions, beginning with the first sentence: “Let us make man in our image (*Na'aseh adam b'tzalmainu kidmutainu*).” We may wonder, to whom is God talking? Why does God say, “Let us make” (*na'aseh*)? If God is omnipotent, why does God need anyone's help? And why does God say, let us make man “in *our* image [emphasis mine]” (*b'tzalmainu*)?

To be fair, the text can be read as suggesting a polytheistic view of God. Indeed, Christian theologians have seized upon this language as proof of the Holy Trinity—God the Father, God the Son

(Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. They contend that this passage shows that all three were present at, and had a hand in, creation. Jewish theologians, of course, have read these same words very differently. However, different Jewish theologians propose widely varying readings of the text.

Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman (Nachmanides), the fourteenth-century physician and philosopher, offers one view:

God created something from nothing only on the first day, and afterwards, He formed and made things from those created elements. Thus, when He gave the waters the power of bringing forth a living soul, the command concerning them was *Let the waters swarm*. The command concerning cattle was *Let the earth bring forth*. But in the case of man He said *Let us make*, that is, I and the aforementioned earth, let us make man, the earth to bring forth the body from its elements as it did with cattle and beasts...⁴

There is ample support in the text for the proposition that man was created from a combination of sorts between God and the earth. We are all familiar with God's admonition to Adam upon the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (*Genesis* 3:19): "For dust you are, And to dust you shall return." Similarly, in *Genesis* 2:7—upon which Nachmanides relies for his view—we read, "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. [God] blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being."

However, even if Nachmanides is correct that, after the first day, everything was created from what came before, this does not explain why God said to earth, "Let *us* create man [emphasis mine]." After all, when God made the creatures of the sea, God did not say to the waters, "Let us create fish." Nor did God say to the earth, "Let us create cattle." God simply commanded that they be created from the waters and the earth, respectively.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the nineteenth-century German rabbi who is generally regarded as the father of modern Orthodoxy, notes this textual inconsistency. All other creatures are "announced" at the time of their creation. Only here is the narrative interrupted to announce that man is *about to be* created.⁵ Rabbi Hirsch explains that God was preparing the world for man's impending entrance "as its God-appointed ruler and master."⁶ In

keeping with this view, Rabbi Hirsch suggests that the term *na'aseh* (“let us make”) is used as the “Royal We,” to inform the world that God is acting as sovereign—not from self-interest, but with the best interests of the world in mind.⁷

Rashi takes yet another approach. He explains that God was talking not to the earth, but to the angels. He further argues that by deeming it appropriate to confer with the angels, God demonstrates the importance of the quality of humility:

The meekness [humility] of the Holy One, blessed be He, they (the rabbis) learned from here: because the man is in the likeness of the angels and they might envy him, therefore He [God] took counsel with them [the angels].... He consulted His heavenly council and asked permission of them, saying to them: “There are in the heavens beings after My likeness [the angels]; if there will [now] be on earth also beings after My likeness, there will be envy among the beings that I have created.”⁸

Citing an earlier Midrash, Rashi argues that it was so important to demonstrate the quality of humility early in the Torah that God was willing to accept the risk that some would misunderstand the text in favor of a polytheistic view of God. In the Midrash, as Moses is writing the Torah, he asks why God provides a pretext for the heretics to argue that the words “Let us make man” support their polytheistic views, and God responds:

[“Write [and] Whoever wishes to err may err....Now if a great man comes to obtain permission [to do something] from one that is less than he, he may say, ‘Why should I ask permission from my inferior!’ Then they will answer him, ‘learn from thy Creator, who created all that is above and below, yet when he came to create man He took counsel with the ministering angels.”⁹

Maimonides supports Rashi’s view that God was talking to the angels. However, he offers a different perspective as to God’s purpose. He suggests that God does nothing without consulting the angels. However, God does so, not because God wants their opinion, but because God acts through the angels as intermediaries.¹⁰ Thus, Maimonides views this more as a command than a consultation.

B'tzelem Elohim

Just as there is no consensus among the Sages regarding to whom God was talking and why, there is substantial disagreement as to what it means to be created B'tzelem Elohim.

Rabbi Hirsch avoids the question altogether, through the vehicle of a different translation: “God said, Let us make an Adam (a deputy) *in a form worthy of us, in keeping with Our image....* And God created man in *an image worthy of Himself....*”¹¹ From this, he extrapolates that the human body is worthy of God and of man’s “[d]ivinely ordained calling” and thus the body must be kept holy.¹²

I do not find his translation, albeit creative, particularly accurate or helpful.

Nachmanides’s view relates to his explanation that man was created by a combination of God and the earth. He explains:

And He [God] said, *In our image and after our likeness*, as man will then be similar to both. In the capacity of his body, he will be similar to the earth from which he was taken, and in spirit he will be similar to the higher beings, because it [the spirit] is not a body and will not die.¹³

To Nachmanides, then, man (through his spirit or soul) shares the trait of immortality with God, and in that way, man was made in God’s image.

Maimonides again takes a different view. Always careful to avoid an anthropomorphic view of God, he draws a distinction between the word *tzelem* (image) and the word *demuth* (likeness). The former is used in the text; the latter is not:

People have thought that in the Hebrew language, *image* denotes the shape and configuration of a thing. ... [But] in the Hebrew language the proper term designating ... the shape and configuration of a thing, is *to'ar*. Thus, Scripture says: *beautiful in form [to'ar]* and *beautiful in appearance*. ... Those terms are never applied to the deity, may He be exalted, far and remote may this thought be from us.¹⁴

According to Maimonides, the term “image” (*tzelem*) is “the true reality of the thing.” In man, he continues, “that notion is that from which human apprehension [intellectual understanding] derives.” He concludes that, “because of the divine intellect conjoined with man, that it is said of the latter that he is in the image of God....”¹⁵

Thus, Maimonides reasons that man was created B'tzelem Elohim because, like God, man has the ability to reason and understand.

This view is not surprising. Maimonides was the ultimate rationalist. A physician and scientist by training, he was also a great philosopher, heavily influenced by Aristotle. To Maimonides, knowledge and understanding were most important.

Rashi offers a similar view. He says that the words “[i]n our image” mean “in our type” and the words “[a]s our likeness” mean “with the power to comprehend and discern.”¹⁶

Who Is Correct?

As is so often the case with Jewish theological questions, we have several different views. Some of these can be reconciled and some seemingly cannot. On the one hand is the view that B'tzelem Elohim means that we share immortality with God through our soul. On the other hand is the view that B'tzelem Elohim means that man, like God, has the capacity to reason and understand. So which interpretation is correct?

I would argue that both views are correct. Indeed, that is the opinion espoused by Rabbi Obadiah Ben Ya'akov Sforno, a sixteenth-century Italian rabbi and physician. He interprets the phrase “in our image” to entail something that is *both* endowed with reason and is everlasting; i.e., our immortal soul.

There is also support for this view in the text. In *Genesis* 3:22, we read that after Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God says, “Now...the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad...”

To know good and bad certainly implies the ability to reason and understand. On the other hand, knowing good and bad is the essence of the soul. It defines us as people and lingers long after our death. To me then, it is both of these—the intellect and the immortal soul—that differentiate us from all other creatures. And without both, we simply would not be B'tzelem Elohim.

Notes

¹ As one historian has put it:

Though always unvisualized, God is presented in the most emphatic terms as a person. The Book of Deuteronomy, for instance, is at pains to draw a distinction between the despised pagan people, who worship nature and nature gods, and the Jews, who worship God the person.

Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (Harper & Row, 1987), 8 (quoting *Deuteronomy* 4:19).

² Older Chumashim and Siddurim almost universally referred to God as “He.” Although more recent versions have eschewed pronouns altogether—opting instead to refer to God simply as “God”—this is probably more a result of the move to egalitarianism than a tacit admission of this inconsistency.

³ *Genesis* 1:26-27. All quotations from the Torah are from the *Etz Hayim* Chumash.

⁴ Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah* (Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1971), 52.

⁵ *T’Rumath Tzvi, The Pentateuch With a Translation by Samson Raphael Hirsch and Excerpts from The Hirsch Commentary* (The Judaica Press, Inc., 1990), 7, n.27.

⁶ Hirsch.

⁷ Hirsch.

⁸ *Pentateuch With Rashi’s Commentary* (Silberman ed., 1973) vol.1, 6 (hereafter, “Rashi”).

⁹ *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis VIII:8*. Rashi also points out the difference between the language in verse 26 (“Let *us* make man in *our* image”) and the language in the subsequent verse (“And God created man in *his* image”) to defeat the heretical argument of a polytheistic God.

¹⁰ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (University of Chicago Press, 1963) at II:6 [17a] (citing Sanhedrin 38b).

¹¹ Hirsch, 7-8 (emphasis added).

¹² Hirsch, 8 n.27. In fact, Rabbi Hirsch argues that this “forms the basis of all human morality.”

¹³ Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, 53.

¹⁴ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I-1 [12b-13a].

¹⁵ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I-1 [13b].

¹⁶ Rashi, 7.

George Billinson is Olam Tikvah’s Ritual Committee Co-Chair. He has taught both Religious School and Adult Education classes at OT. He is an attorney, practicing litigation and commercial law for the past 26 years.

Rediscovering Our Jewish Ethical Voice

By
Eric Rothberg

Early Exposure to Jewish Ethics

In the Reform synagogue where I grew up, Jewish ethics were defined by tikkun olam (repairing the world) and the pursuit of social justice, which meant helping the poor and the broader community. Community service was seen as the central Jewish ethical responsibility, and not a matter of choice. Little emphasis was put on rituals, which were seen as irrelevant to ethics. While I certainly agreed that community service was crucial, I remember wondering whether that was really all Judaism had to say about ethics, and then whether Judaism was substantively different from Christianity, other than not believing in Jesus and having different holidays.

Partly through Rabbi Daniel Gordis's thought-provoking book, *Does the World Need the Jews*,¹ however, I have come to see how the ideals of ethical monotheism can both define and unify us as Jews, notwithstanding our differences. As part of our goal of repairing this world, we bring a unique, desperately-needed viewpoint to those with whom we interact daily—our communities, our country and the world. “Judaism has a legitimate response and attitude relating to every moral issue, containing a depth far beyond the holidays and blessings most people associate with Judaism.”²

The Mission of Ethical Monotheism

Ethical monotheism—one of the greatest gifts Judaism has given the world—is the doctrine that there is one God, and God's primary demand on people is that they live ethical lives.³ Part of our unique covenant and partnership with God is to be a “light unto the nations,” with a special mission of bringing the world to ethical monotheism. For example, the Talmud tells us that the first question asked of us by the heavenly court is whether we conducted our business affairs fairly. Reflecting the importance Judaism attaches to business ethics, 25% of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish law, discusses proper Jewish behavior in the work place.⁴ According to the “Shopkeeper's Law,” if we are in a store

with no intention of buying, we are prohibited from engaging the seller without acknowledging that we are not ready to buy or are comparison shopping. From the Talmud's perspective, wasting a shopkeeper's time is akin to stealing his or her money.

Judaism also emphasizes cultivating a personal relationship with God, our partner in perfecting the world. Our Sages believed that God cares about us and how we act toward others. Moreover, for Jews, a relationship with God (like all healthy relationships) is not simply a state of blissful comfort, but includes challenge, and our questioning God within the context of our relationship.⁵

The Ritual Mitzvot as Recurrent Reminders

The “ritual mitzvot” both define our relationship with God and make up a critical component of our ethical approach. They create a framework for integrating Judaism into our daily lives. As they help us bring holiness to our seemingly mundane everyday tasks, they simultaneously help us internalize our ethical sensibility, by providing reminders throughout the day of the need to treat those around us with justice and compassion. In our morning prayers, for example, when we thank God for being made in His image, we are reminded of our potential to imitate His ethical qualities (B'tzelem Elohim). As we don our talit and t'filin, we describe our relationship with God as akin to a marriage and remember again our responsibility to do the mitzvot. Our prayers before and after meals require us to pause, appreciate what we have and remember that we are a holy people and should act that way. Kashrut reminds us that we are different and should strive to make a difference. Finally, at the end of the day, we have the opportunity to review our behavior and reflect on how we did.

Unlike other religions, Judaism puts a premium on action in this world rather than having the “correct faith.” We view any belief in God that doesn't simultaneously demand the ethical treatment of fellow humans as having the potential to lead to evil. Injustices and barbaric treatment done in the name of religion—whether the Crusades, the Inquisition, the former Taliban regime or Islamic terrorism—have invariably been committed by those who believe God's primary concern to be our having the “right” beliefs in Him.⁶

The Jewish People as Messengers

Unfortunately, as the twentieth-century rabbinic giant Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel lamented, “The Jewish people are a messenger who have forgotten the message.” Many modern Jews seem to have developed a negative view of their own religion and of God. While up to 90% of all Americans believe in God, a 2003 American Jewish Committee population study found that only about 50% of Jews hold this view. Just as religion without ethics can lead to evil, ethics without God has the potential for evil, because acceptable behavior then becomes a matter of subjective opinion, and reason can be used to rationalize anything (as was seen in the Nazi and Communist regimes).⁷

Rabbi Gordis urges us to recapture our countercultural heritage of challenging prevailing, unethical social mores and rejecting rampant unchecked individualism. Torah demands us to *be* different, so we can *make* a difference. The world needs us not to blend in, but to stand out, not to retreat from interaction with it, but to actively engage it to try to improve it.⁹

Judaism, for example, rejects the widely held perception that speech is harmless and there is nothing wrong with spreading negative information as long as it’s true. Judaism recognizes both the destructive and healing power of words. Sh’mirat halashon, rules of appropriate Jewish speech, give us the tools for elevating our daily interactions with those around us—spouse, family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and strangers—emphasizing the need to give others the benefit of the doubt, focus on their positive qualities rather than their negative ones, and rebuke them only if it serves a constructive purpose and as a last resort.

We are obligated in other ways to look out for the welfare of others. Among the many examples: we must pick up a lost object and try to return it to its rightful owner, even if we don’t know him or her. We are forbidden from standing aside while our “fellow’s blood is shed” (*Leviticus* 19:16), and we are obligated to do whatever is necessary to prevent someone from “suffering physical, emotional, or monetary damage.”¹⁰

Because of Judaism’s focus on ethical behavior versus proper faith, tolerance toward other religions is at its core. It has long been

a part of our tradition, for example, that you don't have to be Jewish to get into heaven, as long as you follow certain behaviors, as first laid out in the Torah's Noahide Laws. Consequently, we are open to other religions as potential partners in tikkun olam, despite their different faith traditions.

The Difficult Balance

We strive to emulate God by finding the difficult balance between justice and compassion in our treatment of others, rejecting both a rigid, fundamentalist approach, devoid of empathy, and a lax, live-and-let-live approach that forgives everyone. According to the Midrash, if God were to rule only by strict laws and justice, the world would be a miserable, unforgiving place. On the other extreme, if God were to rule governed only by compassion, the tolerance of any behavior without constraints would result in an evil world. For example, in following the Torah stipulation that one should, “[r]eprove your kinsman, but incur no guilt because of him” (*Leviticus* 19:17), we are told to speak up, lest we share responsibility for another’s unethical behavior. However, we should only do so privately, gently, and if there is at least some confidence that the recipient might heed us and change the undesired behavior.¹¹

Jewish ethics encourages us to enjoy life and God’s gifts, within limits. We reject both the denial of bodily pleasures and the practice of asceticism. Rather than asking people to suppress physical desires as inherently bad, Judaism teaches us to make the satisfaction of desires into holy acts, by tying their fulfillment to a higher purpose. Judaism also views wealth as a positive attribute, as long as it is used for proper purposes, such as performing acts of tzedakah.

The Ideal of Constant, Respectful Struggle

By increasing our Jewish engagement, each of us has the potential to improve him or herself as well as others.

Our Biblical heroes—even our greatest prophet, Moses—struggled to improve themselves and overcome their many flaws. We can relate to them as real, imperfect people dealing with often-difficult problems, and they can thereby serve us as practical guides. In its discomfort with extremes, our ethical approach stresses the

importance of moderation and humility. Gordis suggests that Halachah can be a force for moderation, by committing us to certain distinct behaviors while at the same time promoting a respect for others who may hold different, even objectionable, positions. Judaism worries that absolute certainty can generate contempt for others and produce unrestrained passions that may descend into tyrannical zealotry.¹²

Jewish tradition also provides a model of civilized discourse and questioning. We can respect the other side as bringing something positive to a debate without supporting its position. The Talmud, for example, consistently records Shammai's losing side in his debates with Hillel, thereby demonstrating the inherent value of discourse and the process of reaching conclusions rather than simply focusing on the end result. With the model of Israel as God-wrestlers, Judaism encourages questioning and debate, even of and with God. Certain Rabbinic court proceedings would require the youngest scholars to go first, so they wouldn't be intimidated by more experienced Rabbis and say nothing.¹³

Finally, our group history of adversity and of being strangers makes us more empathic to the needs of the socially marginalized, today's emigrants, and those persecuted around the world. Our view of tzedakah as a vital obligation contrasts with the Christian view of charity based on love. Regardless of one's political leanings, a Jew who takes his or her Judaism seriously cannot be indifferent to the plight of the poor or dismiss the issue as irrelevant, although we may differ on the most effective means for addressing the problem.

Notes

1. Daniel Gordis, *Does the World Need the Jews? Rethinking Chosenness and American Jewish Identity* (New York: Scribner, 1997).
2. Nachum Ansel, *The Jewish Encyclopedia of Moral and Ethical Issues* (Norvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 1.
3. Dennis Praeger, "Why I am a Jew: The Case for a Religious Life," *Ultimate Issues* (Spring-Summer 1986): 4.
4. Ansel, 29
5. David Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990), 7.
6. Praeger, 5-6.
7. Praeger, 4.
8. Rabbi Sidney Schwartz, "Rabbinic Voices: Nation Errs by Accepting Moral Mediocrity," *Washington Jewish Week* (October 29, 1998): 16.
9. Gordis, 177, 179.
10. Rabbi Shimon Finkelman and Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, *Chofetz Chayim, A Lesson a Day: The Concepts and Laws of Proper Speech Arranged for Daily Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995) 188
11. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1996) 96-98.
12. Gordis, 149
13. Ansel, 123.

Eric Rothberg just completed four years as Chair of Olam Tikvah's Adult Education Committee and is looking forward to devoting more time to Jewish studies. He grew up locally, in Alexandria, and founded Beth El's Young Professionals Keshet (YPK), a group for singles and couples. He continues to host and lead a biannual Shabbat dinner and Torah discussion with YPK.

Unetaneh Tokef: **How Can Liturgy Help Us Repent?**

By

Rabbi Rebecca Wand Ben-Gideon

Let us speak of this day's sanctity, for it is terrifying, fearsome...

Angels, panicking, seized by terror and shaking, say: "The Day of Judgment is here!"

On the New Year these things are written, and on the Day of Atonement sealed...

But repentance, prayer and charity cancel the harsh decree.

—*Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, High Holiday liturgy¹

Each year as a child, I used to spend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur seated next to my grandmother, Rose. "Look here," she would say, pointing to her *Machzor*, "This one is my favorite prayer." Years later, when she was in treatment for cancer, she once wondered aloud about which of her sins had caused her disease. Although I doubt she really believed her cancer was punishment from God and believe instead that she was merely trying to make sense of the pain she was experiencing, her question immediately reminded me of her favorite prayer, the *Unetaneh Tokef*.

Reading *Unetaneh Tokef*, one could easily conclude that illness is divine punishment. This piyyut (liturgical poem), chanted at the beginning of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Musaf* services, is considered by many, myself included, to be the emotional peak of the liturgy. It begins with the frightening image of God judging each and every person individually and issuing a decree regarding each life. The famous refrain, "On Rosh Hashanah these things are written, and on the Day of Atonement sealed," precedes a daunting list of ways people can die. Yet the piyyut goes on to say that God "does not want a man to die, but to turn back from sin and live." We learn that repentance, prayer and charity can either cancel or lessen the severity of the decree, depending on one's preferred translation of the poem.

Ironically, this prayer, with music and words that move us to the spiritual places we need to go on the High Holy Days, espouses a

highly problematic theology of reward and punishment for our deeds. This theology is certainly not exclusive to our poem, nor is our sense of vexation with it a modern phenomenon. The rabbis, for example, tried to resolve the dissonance between their belief in God's justice and the realities they witnessed—sometimes in our world, the good suffer and the wicked prosper. In an effort to preserve the concept of a just God in an unjust world, the Rabbis posited that God's justice will be manifest not necessarily in this world, but in Olam HaBa, the world to come. Post-Holocaust theologians have had even more problems with the reward-punishment paradigm and have suggested that not only does it not apply after the Shoah, but it has also become abhorrent.

What to do, then, with *Unetaneh Tokef*? How can we explain its continuing power to move us?

Resolving the Dissonance

If we focus on the narrative elements of the prayer—God judges us, God decrees life or death for each individual, we repent, God retracts the decree—we seem faced with a prayer that can only move us through nostalgia, beautiful poetry, or music. But if we instead break the prayer into two sections, we have a work the power of which we can understand another way. In this way, *Unetaneh Tokef* remains a compelling liturgical piece not because we believe literally in its narrative, but because each section of the prayer induces a distinct awareness and mood that is essential to our High Holy Day experience and to our process of *teshuvah*, repentance.

Section 1: Judgment and Accountability

The first section extends from the beginning until the refrain, “On the New Year these things are written...” The central theme here is Judgment: it invites us to imagine the experience of standing before God, who acts as “the judge, the accuser, the omniscient witness.” God remembers even what we forget, and what's more, has a book of records that each person has signed, acknowledging his or her deeds. We have signed our own metaphorical report card—and we are called before God individually as God considers our actions:

Just a shepherd examines his flock,
passing his sheep beneath his staff,
so you make pass, count and enumerate,
consider every living thing,
fix the fate of each creature,
write down his decree.

This individual treatment sends a message: God pays attention to what we do. Our actions matter to God. Standing alone before God, one might feel not only terror and awe, but also a gratifying awareness that God knows we exist and cares enough to note our moral progress

These conflicting moods—terror and trembling in the face of judgment versus the comfort of feeling God’s interest in our lives—are also reflected in the contrasting sounds of the Day of Judgment as the poet describes them: “The great shofar is sounded, a still small voice is heard.”²² The image of the “still small voice” is derived from Elijah, who receives a personal revelation from God that is preceded by wind, earthquake, and fire. Yet God was not to be found in any of these intense, overwhelming forces. But “[a]fter the fire, a still small voice. And when Elijah heard that, he wrapped his face in a mantle...and behold God’s voice came to him.” [I *Kings* 19: 11-13]

This section of *Unetaneh Tokef* invites us into the moment when we stand accountable before an all-knowing God and attunes us to hear God’s judgment of our behavior. We tremble, reflect, and try to imagine where in our life the still small voice can be heard.

Section 2: Mortality and Vulnerability

The second part of the prayer begins with the assertion that “On the New Year these things are written, and on the Day of Atonement sealed.” “These things” are the fates that could befall us—types of birth and death:

who will live and who will die;
who in his time and who too soon;
who by fire and who by flood,
who by sword and who by beast,
who by hunger and who by thirst,

who by earthquake and who by plague,
who by the rope and who by the stone

as well as types of existences for the living:

who will be still and who will go wandering,
who will be calm and who will be anxious,
who will be tranquil and who will suffer,
who will find poverty, who will have riches,
who will sink and who will rise.

This litany bombards us with our hopes and our worst fears about life and death. We are forced to confront the realities: that none of us knows when we will die or how; nor do we have any idea what awaits us in the coming year of life. Unlike God, a human being is impermanent:

A broken shard, a heap of dried out grass, a withered blossom;
a passing shadow, a wisp of cloud, a blowing breeze, a puff of dust, a
fleeting dream

Our vulnerability and mortality take center stage in our awareness as we hear the words of this second section of *Unetaneh Tokef*. We become conscious that we have a limited time to make our lives into all that we hope they will be. As David Wolpe has written, the message is unmistakable: “You do not have forever. Repent now.”³

Moving Us Toward Teshuvah

Fortunately, after the poet overwhelms us with a sense of our vulnerability by enumerating our possible fates, he reminds us that repentance, prayer and charity will help each of us toward change and toward making things right in our relationship with God. God, after all, “does not want a man to die, but to turn back from sin and live.” As humanity’s Creator, God knows our weaknesses all too well, but is also aware of human capacity for change, the poet affirms.

Change is admittedly hard. But *Unetaneh Tokef* helps to draw us into an emotional state in which true teshuvah might be possible, despite the less-than-satisfying theology of its narrative. First, it helps us imagine ourselves taking responsibility before God for our

actions. We reflect on what should be written in God's book about our past year, and what we hope will be there in the next year. We then turn in the second half of the piyyut to an acute awareness of our own mortality that increases our sense of the urgency of teshuvah. *Today* is the day to do teshuvah—it cannot wait for another moment that may never come.

Unetaneh Tokef's power to get us in the proper frame of mind to do teshuvah helps explain why it remains so relevant and central to the High Holy Day experience. If when reciting or listening to this piyyut we can connect with the imagery of each section, *Unetaneh Tokef* can continue to be a favorite and treasured prayer for generations to come.

Notes

¹ Translations unless otherwise noted are from Raymond P. Scheindlin, "The *Unetaneh Tokef*: A New Translation," *Conservative Judaism* (1998 Summer): 48-50.

² Translation from Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005) 87.

³ David Wolpe, "Unetaneh Tokef," *Conservative Judaism* (1997 Summer): 79-81.

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A Day Like Purim

By

Cary Schwartzbach

Holidays For the Next World

There is a Rabbinic dictum that declares that in the Messianic Era, only two holidays will continue to be celebrated. These are Purim and Yom Kippur.

This concept raises many questions. For example, why these particular holidays? What is it about these two festivals, to the exclusion of all others, that renders them appropriate for the next world?

The text is further puzzling. The term used for the Day of Atonement is Yom Kippurim (Day of Atonements). In Hebrew, this plays out as a clever pun: Yom K'Purim can also be translated as "A Day Like Purim" (in Hebrew, "K'" is short for "K'mo," translated as "like"). But how is Yom Kippur at all like Purim? This essay will attempt to defend the selection of these two holidays, as well as to demonstrate some similarities between them, especially as it relates to their selection.

At first glance, Yom Kippur, with its solemnity, appears an excellent choice. We dress in white, like angels, ignore our bodily needs and creature comforts, and spend the day in contemplation and prayer. But why Purim? It is a day dedicated to drunken revelry, to mockery, to masquerade, to silliness. It hardly seems a fitting day to take us into the next world.

On careful scrutiny, however, Yom Kippur's selection is not without problems. Its origins probably lie in a temple-cleaning festival, and it evolved to encompass a personal "cleansing," i.e., penitence. But in the World-To-Come, a world without sin or punishment, why would we need to repent, and why would we need to bring sacrifices? On closer inspection, other holidays might seem more appropriate.

More Fitting Choices

Thematically, several holidays seem better candidates for celebration in the Messianic Era. Rosh Hashanah, with its themes

of Creation and God's coronation, would be ideal. Pesach, commemorating God's involvement in Israel's history as well as the emergence of the people Israel, would also be an excellent choice. The selection of Pesach is further supported by the fact that the Exodus serves as the archetype for the Messianic redemption.

Shavuot (as the Rabbis envisioned it) celebrates God's Revelation and gift to us of Torah. Inasmuch as the next world is recompense for lives lived adhering to Torah, what better holiday to continue observing than the one memorializing our acceptance of the divine blueprint? Sukkot, in the Rabbinic construct, attests to our blind faith in God, in that we followed Him into the desert with only flimsy huts and the Clouds of Glory for protection. By continuing to celebrate Sukkot, we would demonstrate how that trust foreshadowed our trust in divine reward and punishment despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Even Shabbat, described as being a glimpse or a taste of the World-To-Come, is suitable, especially in that it simultaneously commemorates Creation and Exodus.

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade posits that, in classical religion, time is divided into three categories. There is a mythical pre-history, *in illo tempore* (in those days), and all creation myths and national-origin myths "occur" here. There is an eventual eschaton (Greek for end of days), in which all will return to way things were *in illo tempore*. Reality takes place in the present—but temporary—time frame, during which we celebrate rituals to actualize events that occurred in the mythical past. The ultimate goal of these rituals is often to bring an end to the present time—which is seen as "bridge time"—and return us to the idealized pre-history, i.e., to bring about the Messiah.

In all the alternative festivals enumerated above, we celebrate an event that occurred *in illo tempore* by actually reliving the event, e.g., blowing shofar, eating in a Sukkah or eating matzah. It should be understood that these rituals more than commemorate the events: they actually enable us to relive them. "In every generation, a person must see himself as if he personally was freed from Egypt" (Pesach *Haggadah*)." In the moments of performing each

ritual, we mythically re-create either the cosmos, a people or both. To select one of these alternative holidays for celebration during the mythical eschaton would allow for a symmetrical completion of the cycle of meta-history. A sentinel event in our mythical past is celebrated in real time by reliving it; the goal of that ritual is to return to *illo tempore*, i.e., to bring about the Messiah. When that day arrives, we commemorate that effort by continuing that rite.

Yom Kippur fails that test, however, since in no construct, Rabbinic or Biblical, does it venerate any event in our mythical past. Purim also fails (as does Chanukah), as it happened in real time. There is no mythic event to relive and none of the associated rituals relive the event; they only commemorate it. How, then, to explain their selection?

Yom Kippur and Purim as Poles on a Continuum

I believe that in choosing these two festivals, the Rabbis are employing a *merism*, a Biblical literary device that, according to Nahum Sarna, “us[es] contrasting items to express a totality.” A colloquial example is the term “night and day” to indicate “all the time”. Here the Sages use two festivals that are apparently polar opposites to symbolically represent the totality of the Jewish commemorative experience. Let us explore some of the axes on which Purim and Yom Kippur contrast.

Yom Kippur is a Biblical holiday *sui generis*. All the others, while commemorating an event *in illo tempore*, are also monotheistic reworkings of local cultic festivals. Although most cults probably had temple-cleaning rites, the concept of a holiday granting personal and national expiation is Biblically unique: simply stated, without the Torah, there is no Yom Kippur. Purim, on the other hand, is the first extra-Biblical holiday. God doesn’t command it: man demands it.

All the Biblical festivals assume they will be celebrated in Israel. Yom Kippur contracts the geographic focus further, in that it can only be celebrated in the Temple in Jerusalem. Prior to sacrificial worship becoming limited to that Temple during the days of Josiah, the other festivals were celebrated at local shrines; certainly they all included rituals performed outside the cultic center. Yom Kippur, however, always had to be celebrated at the Temple.

On the other extreme of the spectrum is Purim, which celebrates an event that took place outside of Israel. So does Pesach, but the eventual goal of the Exodus is entry into Israel. The Purim rescue, on the other hand, is no prelude for a return from exile. In fact, Jon Levenson postulates that the real message behind *Megillat Esther* is the validation of Jewish life in the Diaspora.^{2,3}

In mood and practices, the two holidays contrast totally. While Yom Kippur is serious, Purim mocks all that is serious. On Yom Kippur, we sever our connection to human needs and disconnect from the physical and the flesh. We fast, practice abstinence and wear a kittel, which makes us either angelic or corpse-like. On Purim, however, we feast and drink. We wear costumes and we make it impossible to hear the story of Purim with graggers. In Yeshiva, Purim Torah is composed—sarcastic, mocking, divrei Torah. On Yom Kippur, we look deep into our souls; on Purim, we escape ourselves by drinking and by masquerading as someone else.

So the Rabbis chose two polar-opposite festivals to take with them into the Next World, specifically for their contrast. In that way, they symbolically chose all the holidays. While this serves to explain the selection of these two holidays, it fails to explain how Yom Kippur is like Purim.

What Yom Kippur and Purim Have in Common.

With the catastrophic destruction of the Second Temple, the Rabbis were faced with the daunting task of creating a system of Jewish worship now that sacrifices could no longer be offered. The synagogue, the beit midrash and the home replaced the Temple as sacred space. Sacred time, previously marked by the sacrificial system, had to be redefined. Most of the festivals included observances and customs that existed outside of the Temple, and thus the loss of sacrifices was not insurmountable. Shabbat, Rosh Hodesh and Rosh Hashanah functioned as calendrical milestones and units. Shabbat had the concept of rest and cessation of creative work. Shofar was still blown on Rosh Hashanah. Jews still ate matzah and recounted the Exodus on Passover. On Sukkot, we could still sit and eat in a Sukkah and celebrate with the Lulav and Etrog. The counting of the Omer still culminated at Shavuot, when

we could relive the Revelation at Mt. Sinai by learning Torah all night.

The problematic holiday was Yom Kippur. Other than fasting, all its observances were Temple-based—the scapegoat, the Avoda, the high priest's entrance into the Holy of Holies, etc. How was Rabbinic Judaism to reinvent the Day of Atonement? This project is all the more challenging when one considers the centrality of God's presence in the celebration of the day's rites. In no Biblical holiday was God more immanent than on Yom Kippur—no festival distractions, no ritual meals, no agricultural component—just His Temple and its purification.

I would argue that Purim served as the model for the Rabbinic reinvention of Yom Kippur. In *Megillat Esther*, God's role in the narrative is never mentioned, yet the religious leaders of that time never doubted God's role in the plot. Their greatness and the enduring theme of Purim is the ability to detect the hand of God in seemingly mundane events, to see Providence in a world governed by science and history. This vision is the essential challenge of the modern religious person.

In such a context, the Rabbis transform Yom Kippur. Instead of scapegoats and Avoda, we have T'shuvah and introspection. We disconnect from the physical world, and thereby reconnect with the Almighty. While our actions have real-world consequences for which we are responsible, Yom Kippur allows us to discern God's role in our lives, our choices and our happenstances. No longer an immanent actor in the day's rituals, God becomes a transcendent, hidden figure that we must learn to discern. Through its radical transformation, Yom Kippur is indeed a Day Like Purim.

To the extent that the arrival of the Messiah is deemed a collaboration between God and man, we can now understand why these two holidays have been chosen. Both holidays represent man's manipulation of the sacred—Purim the invention of sacred time and Yom Kippur, the transformation of sacred time. In the eschaton, God pays tribute to our efforts in the real and physical world. By elevating these two festivals, our manipulation is validated.

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