

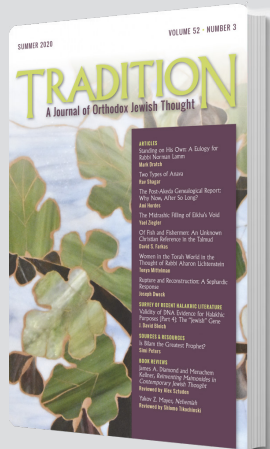


High Holiday Reader

2020 • 5781

FEATURING EXCERPTS FROM

TRADITION
A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought



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INTRODUCED AND SHARED WITH YOUR COMMUNITY BY RABBI CHAIM STRAUCHLER
OF SHAAREI SHOMAYIM CONGREGATION IN TORONTO, ON.

PLEASE SEND COMMENTS TO RABBISTRAUCHLER@SHOMAYIM.ORG.
WISHING YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY A SHANA TOVA.



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In most years, we prepare a High Holiday Reader with thought-provoking articles for our Toronto community - Shaarei Shomayim. This year, to assist those around the world who will not have a “regular” High Holiday experience, we are sharing the Reader more broadly. A synagogue community enriches our lives with prayer, thought, and conversation – both when we are physically together and when we are not. May this Reader facilitate meaningful conversations for you, your family and your friends.

This year's reader includes High Holiday related articles from the archives of Tradition Journal. Maimonides explains that the shofar serves as a wake up call:

Notwithstanding that the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a Scriptural statute, its blast is symbolic, as if saying: "Ye that sleep, bestir yourselves from your sleep, and ye slumbering, emerge from your slumber, examine your conduct, turn in repentance, and remember your Creator! They that forget the truth because of the vanities of the times, who err all of their years by pursuing vanity and idleness, which are of neither benefit nor of salvation, care for your souls, improve your ways and your tendencies, let each one of you abandon his evil path and his thought which is not pure! (Teshuva 3:4)

In most years, we might proceed through life on autopilot. The shofar stirs us. In the midst of a pandemic, we are pre-stirred. We are awake to the opportunities that disturbance creates to reevaluate our priorities and to reset the course of our life's journeys. Teshuva is the loadstar of the intentional life. May these articles on Teshuva help us more fully engage in the conscious project of ongoing self-creation.

This Reader also includes content relating to freedom of thought and some of the challenges within modern culture. It concludes with a series of articles that speak to how we find meaning in the face of crisis.

In addition to reviewing the Reader yourself, please bring its themes up at your Shabbat and Chag / Yom Tov table. I would love to hear about the conversations that ensue.

I send out a daily / weekly e-mail with words of Torah and articles of interest (much like those included in the Reader). If you would like to receive these e-mails, please forward me your e-mail address (rabbistrauchler@shomayim.org) after Yom Tov.

With wishes for a happy and healthy sweet new year – Shana Tova.

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler

This past summer, Vancouver Jewish comedian Seth Rogan stirred a controversy with comments regarding Israel's founding. On a podcast with Marc Maron, he said "You don't keep something you're trying to preserve all in one place especially when that place has proven to be pretty volatile." Interestingly, an essay written by Rabbi A. H. Rabinowitz two years after the Yom Kippur war addresses much of what is behind Rogan's question. Why fight for the state of Israel? His answer is just as relevant now as it was then. Rabbi Rabinowitz served as the chief chaplain of the Israeli Air Force beginning in 1968.

AN EXCERPT FROM WHY YOM KIPPUR

Rabbi A. H. Rabinowitz

TRADITION 15:3 | FALL 1975

They came from all walks of life, from all stations in society. They came in all sizes, in a bewildering variety of garb and hair-style. In carriage, gait and outward appearance the ultimate in diversity, but they came as one man. All of a sudden, poverty and riches, slum and villa, religious and irreligious, labor and conservative, all the labels rife in the divisive society which is Israel's social scene, were no longer to be found. As long lost brothers they greeted one another, wisecracked and readied themselves for the front. Quickly all of these worlds apart coalesced into the unified worlds and brotherhoods of fighting units. Since last serving together the majority had neither seen their comrades nor given them much thought, but with the smoothness of a well-oiled machine, they integrated without friction as if it had only been yesterday.

Well, wasn't it indeed only yesterday. The war of attrition, the six-day bout, '56 - the years in between were only intervals. They had known, all of them, that they would meet again faced with the same struggle, the same tragedy. They hated war. They loathed the idea of the military and bore no personal animosity towards their enemies. The army runs no publicity campaign directed towards heightening feelings, stirring passions or festering hatreds. On the contrary, most of its publicity for consumption by the men in the field is so highbrow as to be almost unintelligible to a large number of those to whom it is addressed. The Israeli fighting man is so totally devoid of animosity and hatred that it is unbelievable. He fights because he is compelled to fight to live. But at heart he is a gentle father or brother or son who thinks only of his loved

ones and not of the enemy. His problem is how to win, not how to destroy. His intellectual and spiritual energy is spent in torturing himself for having so soundly drubbed the other side, and he plagues himself with doubt and self-searching. He is not prepared to kill for the sake of killing, and, in spite of all that he has been taught and trained for, he is never really a soldier at heart. In many ways, especially after his first war, he is like an overgrown boy. Other than the fact that he is fighting for survival he does not really understand why he is fighting at all.

What forces of history are at work? What lies behind it all? Why me and mine? To what is it leading? He entertains vague hopes that after the war all will be well and a new day will dawn - better leave the understanding of it all till later. He knows instinctively that the politicians have again made a mess of everything, but he discovers no pattern, no direction, in the momentous events in which he is engulfed.

Though the recurring cycle disturbs him deeply, and he suddenly becomes receptive to the thousand-and-one straws, which are grandly proffered on all sides, and he is prepared to discuss them through the night, he somehow fails to find the link in Jewish history and in Jewish being. Everything ought to have been different after the generations of historical tragedy and suffering. We are back in our own country. Why have we had nothing but trouble, anguish, hostility and strife - within and without? Is this the ultimate goal of the Jewish people? Profoundly disturbed, he gropes. Perceiving some kind of vague inevitability in what is happening, his spirit rebels - gloriously, and he decides to do nothing.

The dichotomy between Israeli and Jewish, so real for the non-religious and so non-existent other than in paradox for the religious, is a source of serious contemplative thought. For in fact a pattern, historical or supra-natural, can only exist where the two are fused. If they are distinct, there can be no pattern in twenty five years of history. So that the problem becomes one of resolving the dichotomy; a serious, awesome step which few are either mentally or spiritually prepared to take.

The result is tragic. It gives rise to a series of problems, which the outsider views as disintegration. Who am I? What am I doing here? What is patriotism? What nationalism? What honest justification is there for the havoc resulting from my being here? In truth it is the very opposite of disintegration. It is the quest for the soul of a people. A soul disturbed and disfigured by aeons of happenance and circumstance, but which is in process of coming into its own. The real problem lies not in the surface links but in the essential oneness of the Jewish people. For if one accepts the dichotomy between Jewish and Israeli one is indeed hard put to know where one stands, and the result is massive ambivalence in attitude. The demonstrable oneness of the Jewish people strikes at the core of the dichotomy, of the severance of the links with the past, of the momentous tide of Jewish history, and, as such, at the heart of the secular nature of the Jewish State. This perhaps, more than any other factor lies at the heart of the uneasiness and ambivalence evident in the Sabra soul. This hammers continually at the roots of his intellectual and spiritual being. Is he living a lie, even a part lie? Is he in fact closing the door, or at least refusing to open one, upon the soul of his people? If so, and this is not clear to him, he is indeed guilty of turning upon himself, of attempting to refashion himself as a stranger to his people.

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"Rabbi," the young pilot had said on that Sukkot night, "only now do I begin to know what it means to be Jewish!"

The Sabra recoils from anything with the appearance of tzviut - two facedness. His ideas on the subject of tzviut are far fetched and unreal, nonetheless they are sincerely and even violently upheld. For the thinking Sabra, doctrine is terribly important, yet he fails to perceive the blind alley into which he is led by virulent adherence to doctrine. The doctrines which he upholds and clings to are not unreasonable in themselves but they pit him against the Jewish people as a people with a unique history and destiny of its own. The more he clings to these doctrines the more estranged he becomes, the more incapable of understanding himself or the problem of Israel and the Diaspora.

A child of extreme enlightenment he remains virtually in the dark about Jews and Judaism. He does grasp instinctively that his particular brand of Socialism has succeeded in divorcing him from the mainstream of Jewish

history, but though this bothers him he has been brought up to consider this inevitable. Only time and events are making this gap problematic for him. Both the Jews and what is happening to them illustrate unequivocally that in his one-sided divorce suit his soul is no longer in it and the answers must lie somewhere else. His doctrinal outlook has failed to do more than paper over the cracks in the burgeoning, dynamic society of Israel, and he is very much aware of it. Statehood was to bring normalcy, national pride, acceptance by the family of nations and security. No one knows any more what normalcy is. National pride is at a low ebb. Never has the Jew been so insecure or isolated internationally as after twenty-five years of Statehood, so what really happened and towards what must we strive? Far from being vigorous, the spirit is flagging and instead of challenge we are offered platitudes. It would be false to assume that only the Israeli has a problem. For Jewry the problem is worldwide and it manifests itself in different ways in different countries. There are, however, certain common denominators. Foremost amongst these is the emptiness borne of ignorance.

Neither in power politics nor within the human spirit is a vacuum tolerated and so, empty of Jewish content, the Jewish soul is fulfilling itself in a tremendous variety of ways. The ways of the spirit are indeed unknown to us but human ignorance does not blank-it out. Be it immersion in the challenge of multiracial, problem-ridden America, or the depression of communist Russia, the Jewish spirit finds its outlets. Youngsters in America are willing to accept the challenge posed by society in upheaval. Jews in Russia yearn for a Judaism they do not understand and for a people which to them is hardly distinguishable from myth. And yet, in both spheres, heights of selflessness and heroism are evident. Their Israeli cousin lays down his life for Jewry despite all. The common bond of devotion to a cause is evident on all sides.

Russian Jewry apart, how Jewish is the selflessness? The Israeli understands full well that his struggle is for his people. He is simply unaware of the identity of his people or of its historic purpose. The American Jew faces the brave challenge of America with the result that the Jewish nurture of generations is poured out, as it ought to be, but into non-Jewish channels. Both see no challenge in being Jewish because Judaism is seemingly beyond their ken. Both give unlimited and unbounded expression to the creative, protestant Jewish spirit, but not within the frame work of Jewry, and not in a manner calculated to bring them closer to its soul. With the founding of the State, the most momentous event in thousands of years of Jewish and world history took place, and it has failed to hold the Jewish people. In spite of enormous challenge and the potential to rebuild itself and its homeland, world Jewry is content to pay others to be active in every aspect affecting the State, but not to shoulder its burdens in person. And it is becoming

doubtful whether the young generation and those to follow will go so far as its seniors in spending sentiment and treasure. While American Jewry becomes more American, Israeli youth cannot yet bring itself to cross the Rubicon.

Though no Jew had ever doubted his identity before, nor had any non-Jew, the Israeli born and educated began to ask "who am I?" From there to "what am I?" and "what am I doing here?" is not a large step. United only in adversity, faction became strife, extremism rife. War has shaken complacency, tragedy imitation, power politics chauvinism, questioning the diverse shades of bigotry. Though direction is lacking, movement is evident. To quote a famous aphorism: "the winds of change are in the air."

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The most important reorientation that is needed at present is a return to the axioms and perspectives of Jewish history. Jews have traditionally been historians, not in the school-book sense but in a very special sense. They excel in endowing the meanderings of history with meaning, pattern and soul. The grand drama of the canvas of history is seen and appraised against an equally grand background of spiritual direction and purpose. Specifically exemplified in and by Jewish history this view is projected on to the screen of world history. Seen in this "cosmic" sense, long-term history is invested with a reality the effects of which become evident as nation after nation, epoch after epoch strum the chords in harmony or discord.

Diverse backgrounds, traditions, social mores, spiritual framework and climate cannot disappear overnight. Generations must pass before the leavening effect becomes meaningful. The Israeli cannot have it both ways. Either he decides that now is all and the Jewish people will fail as a people in its homeland, or he sees himself as a pioneer willing to forego a large part of "now" so that his people will thrive and generations yet unborn will reap. As a people we have faced harsher problems in the past. We overcame them because of devotion to the long-term view of history, because we dreamed and toiled for utopia. Judaism does not look back to a golden age, it looks forwards to the Messiah its efforts must bring.

It was Maimonides who declared that no system of law or social order can ever solve every problem for everyone. The point of law and social order is that they maintain norms and bearing for the majority and that they enable a people to progress and adapt without losing its way or its identity without losing its distinctive soul. In standing firm, in refusing to bend before every idle wind or 'ism, its adherents retain character, distinctive-ness, originality and a degree of channeled creativity. This is Halakhah.

Without the training and guidance, restriction and regimen, framework

and direction of the Halakhah, the Jewish people is in danger of losing itself as a people - witness the mass assimilation rampant in those areas where Jews have ousted Halakhah from their lives. It is generally realized that without Judaism the Golah is steering a dangerous course of brinksmanship and losing. What is not so generally appreciated is that exactly the same dangers face an Israel divorced from Judaism. If the spiritual essence is lacking there is nothing to prevent assimilation in Israel. No reason for Jews who do not wish to do so, to remain there. No distinctive challenge in building up the homeland. No particular need to strive to regenerate a people on those bases which are much more easily attainable elsewhere in the world. Further, there is no valid reason for others to come there. It is only the particular challenge of Judaism which can demand of the Jew to be in Israel, to strive for Israel and to give up all else in order to participate in founding and building its people.

Israel cannot have it both ways. It cannot continue to live on sentiment, nor can it continue to demand the loyalty of world Jewry to a spirit which it itself rejects. Charity, sympathy, identification in times of stress or of war are excellent virtues but they are not the positive virtues required to build a nation in its re-stored homeland. Only the dynamism engendered by spiritual dream and challenge, both of which Judaism disburses with largesse to those who have the heart and mind to receive, can do that. The Jew has an appointment with destiny. He can do one of two things; the choice is his. He can cop out- and assimilate or he can strive to keep the appointment. There is no in-between and those who sit on the fence delude themselves, fail themselves and fail their people. We know how history deals with complacency. It is time to face reality - as men and as Jews.

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It had to be Yom Kippur. It could only have happened on Yom Kippur. Because Yom Kippur is that moment in Jewish life when a man faces himself. When a people comes face to face with its being, with its past and with its future. Providence has on occasion, to deal drastically with man for man's good. Rather than allow him to fail himself by indifference or default Providence brings him up sharply, restores him to basic truths and thereby enables him to surge ahead with renewed vigor, strength and vitality. It has been a tenet of Zionist ideology that the Jewish people must return to its homeland, rebuild itself there and thus attain normalcy. This aim sufficed to move mountains. In the political sense it has been achieved. An aim once achieved loses potency, hence the bankruptcy of the Zionist movement today. The aim of the Jewish people in its homeland is not to achieve "normalcy," it is to be a Jewish people in the historic, futuristic framework which forms its destiny. This has not been achieved. Herein lies the challenge to Jewry both in Israel and throughout the world.

Preoccupation with archeology will not suffice to produce the tangible roots that are being sought in Israel. Nor is there any logic other than that of Jewish history and Divine promise for Jews being there at all. The socialist doctrines which form the mental milieu of Israel's hierarchy lead only to confusion and self doubt and to rent souls and to warped views of social and international justice. Israel cannot be resurrected on doctrines such as these, for too much is left unanswered, too much in turmoil. It is the Jewish consciousness that is to be appeased, not Marxism nor Gordonism. Once this is grasped the problems acquire different perspectives and the logic of historic and Divine destiny may begin to salve the shattered heart.

Renouncing socialism for "get thee unto the land which I shall show thee, for to thee and thy descendants have I given it forever," is awesome indeed. But it is the only way to heal the rift in conscience and to unite Jewry in common striving. Without this tremendous volte-face we shall not succeed, because without it we have no title to being here. We know in our hearts that here-in lies the need of solution, but we know also the enormous demand upon each one of us if we adopt it - and we balk. We continue to delude ourselves as if, enmeshed in the trammels of our delusion, the Jewish spirit will fail to exert itself.

We need only look to Russian Jewry to become aware of the true state of things. After sixty years of intense harassment and silence, suddenly the Jewish spirit, far from being crushed or demolished or obliterated, emerges in splendor. Heroically it asserts itself and what to socialists was impossible, and written off, be-comes suddenly very real and very material. Should we fail to nourish the Jewish spirit that has thus shatteringly emerged, it will show itself in other ways until we are finally forced, despite ourselves, to acknowledge it. Let us be certain of at least one fact. Russian Jewry is not in ferment over socialist Israel. It is in ferment because it believes in Jewish Israel and that is what it is seeking. That is why it is risking all in attempting to come to Israel. It does not for one moment entertain the idea that Israel is just another socialist state.

What does it mean to live as a righteous person in a deceitful world? What does it mean to believe oneself righteous – and that it is everyone else who is corrupt? Rabbi Hayyim Angel performs a very close reading of the text of the book of Yonah to discover a self-righteous and inert prophet. Rabbi Angel draws lessons for the eternal threat of self-righteous deception and passivity, especially in the context of Yom Kippur.

AN EXCERPT FROM

THE BOOK OF JONAH: A CALL TO PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

TRADITION 30:1 | FALL 1995

In studying the book of Jonah, the basic story line is a gateway to the universal truths and deeper meanings found in the text. Even on the simplest level, Jonah is an appropriate reading for Yom Kippur. Repentance, God's forgiveness, the impossibility of fleeing from God, and other major religious themes permeate this succinct tale. On fast days, leaders of communities followed the simple reading of Jonah, citing God's forgiveness for Nineveh as the classic example of His clemency towards penitents. Similarly, Radak draws lessons from the simple reading of Jonah: If non-Jews repent, certainly Jews should; and God accepts the penance of people from any background. Yet, the usual lessons derived from a superficial reading of Jonah leave the careful reader with a host of unanswered questions, as they do not provide (nor do they attempt to provide) a comprehensive picture of the details of the story.

Just as human awareness is multilayered, including the fully conscious and the subconscious, so too biblical texts present readers with multifaceted accounts which can be understood in several dimensions simultaneously. Here, we will consider the text of Jonah in light of several Midrashim and commentaries sensitive to the prophet's inner life and reflective of a comprehensive picture of Jonah. Jonah is willing to present even a prophet as having passive characteristics, an attribute of all people in varying degrees. The subtle details in the laconic text help the reader delineate some aspects of passivity, most significantly, the ability often to ignore realities about oneself in order to maintain a satisfactory self-image. The study of Jonah's biblical career encourages the reader to

lead an active and profoundly honest religious life, a message fitting for Yom Kippur.

God orders Jonah to go on a prophetic mission to Nineveh. Jonah flees, finding a ship heading for Tarshish. After the boat leaves the port of Jaffa, God sends a great storm which prompts every sailor to pray to his respective deity, but Jonah has fallen fast asleep. After the captain asks Jonah to pray, the sailors draw lots; Jonah is picked out and confesses that he is fleeing from God. He tells the terrified mariners that the tempest will subside if they cast him overboard. After valiant efforts to save themselves without resorting to this measure, the sailors throw Jonah overboard. The storm ceases. The sailors pray to God, making vows and offering sacrifices. Let us now take a closer look at the chapter, focusing on Jonah's puzzling behavior.

When God assigns Jonah to his mission, the prophet flees to Tarshish. The general explanation of this ostensibly absurd reaction is that Jonah is fleeing Israel since God does not give prophecy outside of Israel. This explanation appears difficult, however, since Jonah does receive prophecy near Nineveh in chapter four! Additionally, Moses and Jeremiah, midrashically associated with Jonah in their initial reluctance to prophesy, forthrightly protest to God (not to mention that both subsequently accept their missions). Jonah, on the other hand, tries to evade his mission without so much as a response.

Many commentators justify Jonah's actions by explaining that Nineveh

is the capital of Assyria, a rising power which ultimately will exile the Northern Kingdom of Israel (see II Kings 17:1-6). Jonah, because of his love for his people, prefers to forfeit his own life by failing to transmit his message (the penalty for stifling prophecy is death through divine agency) so that the Assyrians will not repent. God will then destroy them, and they no longer will be able to conquer Israel. Alternatively, one could say that Jonah, as a prophet of Israel, sees the idolatrous ways of his people. If gentiles repent, then the Israelites will look worse by contrast.

Elyakm Ben-Menahem (Da'at Mikra) suggests that Jonah opposes the concept of repentance altogether. The prophet thinks that if wicked people suffer immediate retribution for their wrongdoings, they will not sin as much. Alternatively, Jonah wants to understand God's ways, and repentance makes matters too subjective for even the greatest of prophets to comprehend (see J. T. Makkot 2:6). In a similar vein, R. Yehoshua Bachrach suggests that Jonah wants to understand God's judgment, but is unable to fathom why bad things do not happen to bad people. Although these explanations are deeply rooted in the text, one must wonder why Jonah is the only prophet ever to flee his mission. Clearly, there must be something unique to Jonah beyond opposition to repentance or a lack of understanding of God's judgments which causes such an extreme reaction to God's command. Jonah then boards the ship in Jaffa. A curious Midrash (PirkeI de-Rabbi Eliezer 10) expands the plot:

He (Jonah) went down to Jaffa and did not find a ship to board, but there was a ship which was at a two-day distance from Jaffa. What did God do? He brought a great gale on the ship and returned it to Jaffa. When Jonah saw this, he greatly rejoiced. He said: Now I know that my ways are justified to myself.

This Midrash highlights an intriguing, even unexpected trait of Jonah: he felt the need to defend his actions. This Midrash appears to pinpoint a deeper layer of Jonah's psyche. The prophet acts as he does despite a deeper, almost subconscious awareness that his flight from prophecy is wrong. Alternatively, the Midrash suggests that Jonah wants a sign of God's approval despite his rebellion against God's command. Thus, according to the Midrash, complex motivations and conflicting feelings underline the prophet's behavior.

Once on the ship, Jonah continues his idiosyncratic behavior. While the sailors and captain pray and work to save the ship, rowing furiously and throwing cargo overboard, Jonah escapes the crisis passively, by sleeping. Even more enigmatic, however, is Jonah's "dialogue" with the captain and the sailors in the text itself:

So the shipmaster came to him and said to him, why are you sleeping? Arise, call upon your God; perhaps God will think upon us that we perish not. And they said everyone to his fellow, come,

and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil (ra'a) is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him, please tell us for whose cause this evil is upon us; what is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you (vv. 6-8)?

Trembling with fear, the captain directly addresses Jonah, asking that he pray, yet the prophet does not respond! As the sailors draw lots to identify the source of their woes, Jonah watches passively, without saying a word about his own wrongdoing. Even after Jonah loses the lottery, he still remains silent. Only when confronted by the sailors does he respond, but his response is not to the point:

And he said to them: "I am a Hebrew (ivri); and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (v. 9).

To say the least, it is difficult to imagine that the panic-stricken sailors were interested in their peculiar guest's religious commitment. Adding to the mystery of Jonah's response, we find in v. 10 that the prophet has told the mariners about his fleeing God:

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and they said to him, why have you done this? For the men knew that he had fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them (v. 10).

Why does the text not mention this critical information in verse 9 with the rest of the response? R. Yehoshua Bachrach suggests that the text omits Jonah's embarrassing response for the sake of the prophet's honor. This interpretation treats Jonah as worthy of respect, despite his disobedience. But it also highlights the self-deceptive element in Jonah's behavior: not only does the prophet cloud his own self-image, but the text does the same for him.

Let us further develop this interpretation. The Midrash in Gen. Rabba 42:13 explains that the term ivri (pertaining to Abraham) means that all the world stood on one side while Abraham courageously opposed them. Here, Jonah contrasts himself with everyone else on the ship: you worship your idols, but I fear the true God. The prophet's response also reveals that he believes his apprehension to be more complete than that of the sailors. While the sailors nervously refer to the storm as a ra'a (evil) in v. 8, Jonah calmly calls it a se'ara (storm - i.e., an objective term) in v. 12. He confidently states that he is the cause of this great tempest and displays remarkable poise as he suggests that they throw him overboard. Thus, it would appear that Jonah is belittling the sailors for their religious beliefs and their ignorance of the total picture. The text omits Jonah's mention of his flight from prophecy because this information is irrelevant to the prophet himself. Jonah does not fear as do the sailors; he sees himself on a higher plane of knowledge. And the text reflects this disdain in its

omission of the most important element (from the sailors' point of view) of Jonah's response.

How ironic it is that Jonah contrasts himself with the sailors: he is righteous and aware of God's plan; they are idolatrous and ignorant of God's ways. The careful reader also sees a contrast, but it is the antithesis of Jonah's own perception. The reader sees that the sailors act admirably, praying and acting to save themselves. They repent, becoming sincerely God-fearing people. Jonah, by contrast, does nothing, but actively avoids doing God's will.

Why doesn't Jonah repent at this point? Or, why doesn't he jump into the water himself? Although the Torah injunction against actively taking one's own life must weigh into this discussion, it would appear that other factors are involved. Throughout the first chapter, Jonah acts passively. He hardly responds to those addressing him, watching in silence as everyone else acts. Fleeing from God, Jonah avoids confrontation. Even as he wants to die, he cannot actively take his own life.

As Jonah is cast overboard to a seemingly imminent demise, the careful reader watches an extraordinarily passive person sink beneath the waves....

[At the conclusion of the book upon hearing God's lesson from the kikayon] Jonah, staring at the realization that he has been diverting attention from his own shortcomings by focusing on other people's flaws, reacts in character: he fails to respond. The story is left open, indicating that the struggle against passivity and self-deception is ongoing, without total resolution.

As we have seen, Jonah is a parable demonstrating that even the best people can have a powerful sense of self-deception. In addition to its more obvious messages, Jonah teaches that each person must take an active role in his or her life, trying to uncover the truth regarding one's motivation and promoting justice even where doing so is destructive to oneself or one's nation. A consequence of not doing so is that one will inevitably judge others uncharitably. One will neither achieve self-awareness nor obey God as faithfully as one should. Ultimately, to flee the very essence of one's being approaches spiritual suicide.

What better story could the Jewish people read at Minha of Yom Kippur than one which encourages them to live an active, honest religious life, with the courage to confront the greatest impediment to repentance: blindness to one's own flaws and secret injustices. Through-out the Yom Kippur liturgy, we bravely and honestly confess to God:

*For we are not so brazen nor stubborn to say to You, Lord our God
and God of our ancestors, we are righteous and have not sinned;*

but we have sinned, ourselves and our ancestors.

On Yom Kippur, we attempt to demonstrate to God that we are capable of being Benei Amittai, people of truth who are capable of repenting on the deepest human levels. Jonah contains the clear message that human beings can take an active role so as to become closer to others, to themselves, and ultimately, to God.

Death is a prominent part of our prayers on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We speak about the books of life and death being open before God, now. What does it mean that Yonah asks God to die? What does it mean in a world where death progressively becomes more of a "life" choice? Dr. Wohlgelernter explains God's challenge to Yonah regarding the gourd.

AN EXCERPT FROM DEATH WISH IN THE BIBLE

Dr. Devora K. Wohlgelernter

TRADITION 19:2 | SUMMER 1981

The book of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur because of its remarkable illustration of the power of repentance. Jonah is sent by God to Nineveh to warn its inhabitants of His anger. He does not wish to go and the text does not say why. However, one may conjecture that his refusal was partly because he knew that he would be effective, the people of Nineveh would indeed repent, and he would then look like a fool. He, therefore, tries to run away from his responsibilities and is swallowed by a large fish.

That he is swallowed by a fish, a creature of the sea, whose habitat is far away from human beings, is noteworthy. It is symbolic of Jonah's feeling of alienation from his fellow man and of the isolation from the real world that the depressed person generally seeks. Jonah finally realizes that he cannot run from his destiny and, after being freed from the belly of the fish, goes to Nineveh. The people there repent and the city is saved.

In the last chapter, we find the prophet miserable and very angry. He is angry that the repentance was effective and that his power as a prophet was not illustrated in a more dramatic fashion, that is, by Nineveh's destruction. It is in this context that he expresses his desire to die (Jonah 4:3).

The ostensible motive for his suicidal wish is ideological, namely, his disappointment at the saving of sinners. However, God does not take his professed desire for death seriously and asks: "Are you really that angry?" God then provides a gourd to shield Jonah from the sun. When Jonah notices the gourd, he becomes exceedingly joyful - hardly an emotion characteristic of a man truly desirous of death. Then God takes the gourd away and Jonah sinks into a deep depression. Again he asks to die. At this

point God confronts Jonah with his wish to live, and asks him, "Are you really so angry about the gourd?" By this question, God shows him that his anger is really due to his discomfort. In other words, God is saying, "Admit it, Jonah, it's not ideology that concerns you, but rather having things your way, whether your way means being comfortable in the heat or saving face in public."

God's reaction to Jonah's ostensible death wish is, thus, a pedagogic one. Very much the psychiatrist, He shows Jonah his true motivation. Strangely, the book ends abruptly and does not tell us Jonah's reaction to the newfound insight. However, we may suppose it to have been cleansing and cathartic.

It is significant that on Yom Kippur afternoon, the liturgical reading of The Book of Jonah ends with the following verses from Micah (7: 18):

*Who is a God like you
Forgiving iniquity
And remitting transgression,
Who has not maintained His wrath forever
Against the remnant of His own people
Because He loves graciousness!
He will take us back in love
He will cover up our iniquities.*

If we put these words into the mouth of Jonah at the end of the book, they become a most appropriate response from the prophet who, roused from his depression, again assumes his responsibilities, both to God and to His people.

Is repentance an act of self-surrender or an act of self-affirmation? Judaism challenges the popular assumption that religions requires self-negation before God's will. By contrasting William James' "The Varieties of the Religious Experience" with the Rambam's "Laws of Teshuva," Levine argues that God has implanted in our very being the divine gift of constant moral awareness and the freedom of choice.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF REPENTANCE: THE VIEWS OF MAIMONIDES AND WILLIAM JAMES

Howard I. Levine

TRADITION 1:1 | FALL 1958

In our comparison of Maimonides and William James we shall see how the very basic differences in the nature of the religious experiences are directly related to differences in theological conceptions. The distinctiveness of Judaism lies not only in its objective content of observances and beliefs, but also in its inner world of subjective human experience. Let us turn now to the conclusions James draws from his examination of the records of religious conversions. These can be summarized in two major propositions:

1. Self-surrender is the vital turning point of religious life.
2. Conversion is a process of struggling away from sin rather than of striving towards righteousness.

We shall examine each of these propositions in turn as explained by James. Religion and psychology agree that the surrender of personal will provides the ideal circumstance under which conversion can take place. James quotes approvingly the words of E. D. Starbuck in *The Psychology of Religion*:

Starbuck seems to put his finger on the root of the matter when he says that to exercise the personal will is still to live in the region where the imperfect self is the thing most emphasized. ... What then must the person do? "He must relax," says Dr. Starbuck, "that is, he must fall back on the larger Power that makes for righteousness, which has been welling up in his own being, and let it finish in its own way the work it has begun." (206)

It is important for us to bear in mind that James sees the individual not only as being helped by a higher power — but as being acted upon by an external force in such a manner as seems inexplicable to the person himself. After relating a number of curious records of sudden conversions, James remarks:

I might multiply cases almost indefinitely, but these will suffice to show you how real, definite, and memorable an event a sudden conversion may be to him who has the experience. Throughout the height of it he undoubtedly seems to himself a passive spectator or undergoer of an astounding process performed upon him from above. There is too much evidence of this for any doubt of it to be possible. Theology, combining this fact with the doctrines of election and grace, has concluded that the spirit of God is with us at these dramatic moments in a peculiarly miraculous way, unlike what happens at any other juncture of our lives. At that moment, believes, an absolutely new nature is breathed into us, and become partakers of the very substance of the Deity. (222)

According to James then, this entire process must be considered as one that transcends the realm of normal experience. Thus James concludes:

It is natural that those who personally have traversed such an experience should carry away a feeling of its being a miracle rather than a natural process. Voices are often heard, lights seen,

or visions witnessed; automatic motor phenomena occur; and it always seems, after the surrender of the personal will, as if an extraneous higher power had flooded in and taken possession. Moreover the sense of renovation, safety, cleanness, Tightness, can be so marvelous and jubilant as well to warrant one's belief in a radically new substantial nature (224).

Though James distinguishes two types in conversion, the voluntary type and the type by self-surrender, he is by no means ready to admit that there are any fundamental differences between the two. In the volitional type the change is usually gradual, taking place over a longer period of time and involving the development of new spiritual and moral habits. In the types of self-surrender, however, the change is usually abrupt and no progressive development by stages is apparent to the observer or to the convert himself. Nevertheless the difference between these two types is not decisive and, according to James, the psychology of the self-surrender type is the vital link in our chain of understanding the entire phenomenon of conversion.

James is forced to acknowledge that this process of self-surrender must even require of the convert the loss of his individuality, which must be destroyed before an external power can take over and become "the new center of personal energy." Thus he quotes from the record of conversion of an Oxford graduate:

... "About midday I made on my knees the first prayer before God for twenty years. I did not ask to be forgiven; I felt that was no good, for I would be sure to fall again. Well, what did I do? I committed myself to Him in the profoundest belief that my individuality was going to be destroyed, that he would take all from me, and I was willing. In such a surrender lies the secret of a holy life..." (218-19).

James sees in this very attitude of the self-sacrifice of the conscious self the high point in all of religious life.

"We have used the vague and abstract language of psychology. But since, in any terms, the crisis described is the throwing of our conscious selves upon the mercy of powers which, whatever they may be, are more ideal than we are actually, and make for our redemption, you see why self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point or the religious lire, so far as the religious life is spiritual and no affair of outer works and ritual and sacraments. One may say that the whole development of Christianity in inwardness has consisted in little more than the greater and greater emphasis attached to this crisis of self-surrender"(207).

It is astounding to note how very different is Maimonides' conception of the process of Teshubah or Conversion in terms of the dynamic

involvement of the conscious self. Instead of deprecating the role of the personal will, he emphasizes the very opposite point of conscious self-direction in the act of repentance. Maimonides devotes two full chapters, the fourth and especially the fifth, to the proposition that man is a free moral agent and is self-determining as a religious creature. He finds it necessary in these chapters on repentance to bolster the individual in the belief in his own powers and in his unlimited opportunities of overcoming his moral shortcomings. With great acuteness and force he contradicts the notion that the conception of human freedom of choice and will undermines the role of God in religious experience and human existence. Maimonides declares that this doctrine of free choice "is an important principle, the pillar of the Law and the Commandment, as it is said, 'See I set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil,' and again it is written 'Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse (Deut. 11:26).' This means that the power is in your hands, and whatever a man desires, among the things that human beings do, he can do, whether they are good or evil. And because of this faculty, it is said, 'O, that they had such a heart as this always' (Deut. 5:26), which implies that the Creator neither puts compulsion on the children of men nor decrees that they should do either good, or evil, but it is all left to their discretion"(Teshubah 5:3).

We find here in this passage of Maimonides the vindication of natural man. Natural man, just as he stands, is a spiritual being. His spirituality is not superadded to, or superimposed upon his personality by the gift of grace or by perceiving a special light. God does not have to intercede at the moment of his repentance in order to give him religious dimension. He does not have to be redeemed by some outer force from his evil conscious self. Man's highest self, from the Jewish point of view, is his conscious self or rational self. God has implanted in natural man the divine gift of constant moral awareness and the freedom of choice at all times and to all degrees — even unto the moral perfection of Moses our Teacher, to use the example of Maimonides (Ch. 5:2). Man at the time of repentance can not be weak and dare not be at the mercy of outer forces which may save or condemn him. No outer force can subvert or guarantee man's moral integrity. He and he alone is responsible for his own moral dignity and worth. To conceive a purely external force as the source of his vindication is also to conceive a purely external force as the source of his damnation and moral failure. Judaism cannot approve of the attitude in repentance quoted by James:

"Lord, Thy will be done; damn or save!" cries John Nelson, exhausted with the anxious struggle to escape damnation; and at that moment his soul was filled with peace (205).

The very notion that man's religious justification is a gift of grace implies the converse proposition that man's moral damnation is thrust upon him from the outside. This latter conception is completely repugnant

to Judaism, for it leads to resignation to one's moral failures. James does not record how many have emerged from the crisis situation "damn or save" with the feeling that they have been damned and not saved. One shudders to imagine the deep and lasting harm wrought by such a negative experience. It might readily negate the good results described by James from this attitude of self-surrender.

Interestingly, the Talmud relates to us an instance of moral deterioration brought about precisely by the attitude of self-surrender in the face of imagined higher powers. The Babylonian Talmud tells us of Elishah ben Abuyah, the apostate teacher of Rabbi Meir and one of the most sublimely tragic figures of rabbinic literature:

Our Rabbis taught: Once Acher (Elishah b. Abuyah) was riding on a horse on the Sabbath and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah at his mouth. Said [Acher] to him: "Meir, turn back, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath-limit." He replied: "Thou too go back!" [Acher] answered: "Have I not already told thee that I have already heard from behind the Veil 'Return ye backsliding children' except Acher. [R. Meir] prevailed upon him and took him to a schoolhouse. [Acher] said to a child: "Recite for me thy verse." [The child] answered There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked. (Isaiah 48:22) . . . He took him to yet another schoolhouse until he took him to thirteen schools. All of them quoted in similar vein (Chagigah 15a-b).

In contrast to the teaching described by James, which might be rendered: Great is the Divine Presence for it brings man to repentance, Maimonides enunciates the Jewish teaching: Great is repentance for it brings man near to the Divine Presence (Teshubah 7:6).

That the experience of conversion is one of inner strength gained from new self-confidence in one's moral and spiritual powers can best be seen from the personal history of Rabbi Meir's other teacher, the great Rabbi Akiba. Rabbinic literature relates:

"And thirstily drink in their words" refers to Rabbi Akiba. What were the beginnings of Rabbi Akiba? It is said: When he was forty years of age he had not yet studied a thing. One time he stood by the mouth of a well. "Who hollowed out the stone?" he wondered. He was told, "It is the water which falls upon it every day, continually." It was said to him: Akiba hast thou not heard, "The waters wear away the stones?" (Job 14:19). Thereupon R. Akiba drew the inference with regard to himself: If what is soft wears down the hard, all the more shall the words of the Torah, which are as hard as iron, hollow out my heart which is flesh and blood! Forthwith he turned to the study of Torah (Avot D'Rebbei Nattan 6:2).

We have here the record of the conversion of Akiba, the ignorant shepherd, into Rabbi Akiba, the outstanding sage and religious leader of his time. At the age of forty, Akiba grew out of the narrow horizons of the shepherd, neither through the abandonment of personal will, nor through a process of self-surrender or yielding to a higher power. On the contrary, he expressed a new confidence in his own moral, spiritual, and intellectual powers, and a new drive for self-realization. There was not present a desire for escape from his occupation as a shepherd, but a desire for greater self-fulfillment as a disciple of Torah. We have not here a record of weakness, but one of strength; not an act of resignation, but of assertion.

In the attrition of the role of man's self-will in repentance, Judaism can see only the gravest of threats to religious living. Paradoxically, man must first be able to recognize his own power, in order to be able to serve as an instrument of God's power. When man loses faith in his own powers of decisive moral action, he not only undermines the foundations of his character and his potential for human achievement, but also impairs his fundamental relationship to God and is guilty of dereliction in religious duty...

How can sins become merits? Is trying to change the past a futile effort? Rabbi Blau explains how Rav Soloveitchik utilizes an insight of Philosopher Max Scheler to explain how we can change the meaning and import of our past actions.

AN EXCERPT FROM

CREATIVE REPENTANCE: ON RABBI SOLOVEITCHIK'S CONCEPT OF TESHUVA

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau

TRADITION 28:2 | SUMMER 1993

... The Yerushalmi (Makkot 2:6) presents a striking dialogue:

It was inquired of Wisdom, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" Wisdoms said "Evil pursues the wicked." It was asked of prophecy, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" Prophecy said to them, "The sinful soul shall perish." It was asked of the Holy One, "What is the punishment of a sinner?", and He said, "Let him repent and he will be forgiven."

This talmudic passage underscores the difficulties in understanding repentance. Both wisdom and prophecy reject any possibility for the sinner to absolve himself of his transgression. It remains for God Himself to affirm the worth of teshuva. We ordinarily assume that what's done is done and that the past is irrevocable. Indeed, the repentant sinner should resolve to improve in the future, but why torment him with the guilt of an unalterable past? Furthermore, our sense of justice demands that acts of wickedness not be dismissed cavalierly without some retribution. Would a civil court allow regret to completely obviate the need for punishment?

Many philosophers concur with the voice of wisdom in the YerushaImi. Spinoza and others regard repentance as worthless or even harmful. Spinoza writes that "repentance is no virtue, and does not spring from rea-son; but whosoever repents a deed is doubly oppressed and incapable."

Kant expressed the difficulties in understanding repentance from a perspective peculiar to his own thought. His conception of freedom man-dated that virtue can be exercised only by the person himself;

neither his fellow man nor God can vicariously atone for him. Thus, any achievement of atonement must be deserved by the sinner himself. However, Kant also believes that man must fulfill his duty, the categorical imperative, at all times. Therefore, man can never achieve the extra credit necessary to makeup for old debts.

Having asserted the futility of repentance, these writers then attempt to trace the psychological forces that spawned such a pointless concept. One view sees repentance as the "hereditary echo of earlier experiences of punishment." Memory of previous punishment has instilled within us a fear of further pain; we wish that we had not done that. We now call this wish "conscience."

Nietzsche suggests a more extreme hypothesis. Scheler's summation of this theory states that bad conscience arose "when passions of hate, revenge, cruelty and spite of all kinds, which once were allowed free play against fellowmen, came to be dammed in by state, law and civilization, and thereupon turned for their satisfaction against the life-matter of those who felt them." In Nietzsche's own words "Lacking external enemies and resistances, and confined within an oppressive narrowness and regularity, man began rending, persecuting, terrifying himself like a wild beast hurling itself against the bars of its cage."

Some religious thinkers, particularly in the Christian tradition, accept the irrationality of repentance and declare divine forgiveness an act of pure grace. Kant himself was forced to resort to grace though the very concept

denies basic assumptions of his thought. This thinking may be responsible for the bizarre penitential rites involving mortification of the flesh. Striving to atone for a misdeed that can't be changed, the pietists imagined greater and more effective ways to damage themselves, the hopelessly guilty sinners.

Although most Jewish writers on repentance (with the notable exception of the Haside Ashkenaz) do not recommend ascetic, penitential practices, many of them focus on teshuva as a manifestation of divine benevolence. R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto writes that true, untempered justice would immediately punish the sinner and allow no chance for forgiveness. In his view, the possibility of pardon reflects middat harahamim more than middat hadin.

Rav Menahem haMeiri, among others, offers an explanation for the necessity of teshuva, Man, by his very nature, occasionally fails. If there were no possibility of atonement, man would soon despair and abandon all hope. This approach portrays teshuva as an indispensable concession; it fails to explain how repentance can act positively. Such an approach circumvents the philosophic complaint but does not answer it.

Scheler counters that all the indictments of repentance rest upon a false notion of the internal structure of our spiritual life." They view our existence as human beings just as we view objective time, like a flowing river in which no later part of the river can exert any influence on a previous part. Time, however, is not one-dimensional and one-directional as far as the human personality is concerned.

Every instant of our lives includes the past, present and future. Of course, it is not the material reality of the past or future but rather the memory of the former and the anticipation of the latter. Who we are is, to some extent, determined by how we look at events in our past and what our aspirations are for the future. To be sure, from the perspective of historical reality, the past cannot be altered; yet, as far as the human personality is concerned, we can always change that part of ourselves that stands in relation to the past.

Thus, the significance of any previous act remains continuously dependent on how we relate to that act. Scheler writes that "We are not merely the disposers of our future; there is also no part of our past life which . . . might not be genuinely altered in its meaning and worth . . ." Each human life resembles a book in which the meaning of each chapter only becomes clear with the reading of the final chapter.

The Rav builds on this idea in explaining a problematic Talmudic passage (Yoma 86b). The Gemara presents two contradictory statements of R. Shimon ben Lakish regarding the greatness of repentance. One statement claims that after teshuva, sins are accounted as if they had been committed unintentionally; the other version states that the sins become converted into merits. The Talmud reconciles the two statements: the former refers

to one who repents out of fear while the latter refers to one who repents out of love.

The radical notion that "sins become merits" demands an explanation. As R. Shmuel Edels phrased it, "should the sinner benefit from his transgressions?" We might understand that God would absolve the repentant sinner of a punishment he had previously deserved; but why should his earlier errors have positive value?

Rabbi Soloveitchik addresses this issue by posing a psychological question: how does the repentant individual relate to his past filled with iniquity. The Rav depicts two possible reactions. One option involves cutting oneself off from one's past, neither thinking about it nor relating to it, even treating it as if it were somebody else who had lived those events. Indeed, many people prefer never to speak or think about entire areas of their lives.

In the alternative case, baale teshuva do not attempt to erase their past; their reaction is quite the contrary. They remember all their sins but look back at them with a tremendous sense of regret. Knowledge of past sins becomes a motivating factor in their repentance as the remorse they feel drives them on to perform better in the future, to make up for years wasted.

These two alternatives explain the two statements of R. Shimon ben Lakish. People who react in the first way now view their sins as belonging to someone else, as if they were involuntary transgressions. On the other hand, those who chose the latter alternative continue to relate to their sins, but turn those memories into a positive force. In this light the Gemara's assertion that "sins convert into merits" means not that the sins change metaphysically but that sins can serve a meritorious role in the forging of a new personality.

Here, the Rav draws on Scheler's notion but moves a step further. Rabbi Soloveitchik begins his explanation by mentioning the philosophic problem of trying to blot out the past and responds, as Scheler does, that memory and anticipation are crucial components of the human personality. Having established that how people relate to their past affects who they are now, the Rav outlines different possible relationships with the past. A sinner's repentance is incomplete to the extent he or she still identifies strongly with his past. Within repentance, two options emerge and the option chosen plays a significant part in the determination of character.

In the lecture presented, the Rav does not explain how those two approaches to repentance correspond to the Talmudic distinction between teshuva motivated by love and by fear. I would suggest that fear is more of a movement of recoiling while love involves a movement of attraction. Whether the Talmud refers to fear of punishment or awe before the Divine, the fearful personality disdains any associations that remind him of his terrifying past. The loving personality, on the other hand, faces that past head on and draws energy from his memories...

Generally, we assume that teshuva relates to sin and repentance. In a situation where no transgression has occurred, no teshuva is required. Yom Kippur epitomizes this definition of teshuva. With its emphasis on confession and atonement, Yom Kippur directs us to think of repentance as a process fundamentally related to sin. But, Rabbi Berman claims, a second concept of teshuva exists that is not about sins but life choices, not about wrongful actions but missed opportunities, not focusing on past mistakes but on building a better future. COVID-19 has done many things. It has certainly awoken the world. As we experience the Yamim Noraim this year, Rabbi Berman's insights into the teshuva of Rosh Hashana are especially meaningful.

AN EXCERPT FROM

THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE AND THE MEANING OF TIME: RAMBAM ON REPENTANCE

Rabbi Ari Berman

TRADITION 46:2 | SUMMER 2013

The teshuva of Rosh Hashana and that of Yom Kippur are critical for the spiritual life of each individual. One needs to atone for and grow from past sins even while one plans and builds for a better future, in order to establish a strong base for a lifetime of personal growth and development. But perhaps due to a narrow perception of Torah that translates our tradition into a checklist of acts one needs to do and averot one needs to avoid rather than also aiming to stoke ambition and inspire aspiration, we often consider only the Yom Kippur variety of teshuva. We think that teshuva is just about sins and reciting al het, but do not consider some of the larger assumptions on which our lives are built. Can we make different, more productive life choices? Are we taking advantage of our opportunities and maximizing our potential? Do we live consciously or robotically?

The lack of emphasis on the teshuva of Rosh Hashana, the disregard of these larger questions, comes with grave consequences. First, one cannot fully identify and analyze one's sins without placing them into a larger context. Rosh Hashana, which precedes Yom Kippur, enables us to first formulate the broader mission and vision so that we can better identify and understand where we have fallen short. But secondly, separate and apart from its relationship with Yom Kippur, a meaningful Rosh Hashana experience is often necessary for individuals to reorient and redirect their lives. Oftentimes we get stuck in our routines. Our lives are governed by decisions we made years ago and our days are filled with mindless, transitory activities. We forget about the fact that our time is limited; we forget about the meaningful ways in which we could be spending our days; we forget even our own dreams, the dreams we

had for ourselves in our younger years. At times life has a terrible way of beating us down with all of its difficulties, disappointments, challenges, and responsibilities; at times it is just easier to shut off, to live on auto-pilot, to stop thinking, to no longer dream.

I think of the man who is now close to 80 years old, who can never bring himself to consider life beyond his office walls. I think of all of his dreams that have gone unfulfilled, all of those regrets that will only be realized when it is far too late. Whether this counts as a sin against God might be an open question, but it certainly counts as a sin against oneself. Teshuva in all of its dimensions directs man to return to God, and the teshuva of Rosh Hashana is no exception. As Rambam writes in Hilkhos Teshuva, the sound of the shofar carries a direct message to the sleeper: "arouse from your slumber, examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember your Creator." But the "return" that is implied by the teshuva of Rosh Hashana has a second layer of meaning as well. In Hilkhos Mezuza, Rambam describes the awakening man as "hozer le-da'ato," as returning to one's senses and regaining consciousness. This teshuva directs one to return to oneself and recapture one's life. It presents us with the opportunity to remember our identity and our ideals. To think about – mi ani – who am I? What are my real goals? What are my real values? For what and for whom do I live? Rosh Hashana challenges us not just to think about fixing specific sins, but also to consider the big picture. Am I on the right path in life? Is there something more that I want for myself, or, more significantly, is there something more that God wants from me? Rosh Hashana enables us to change our routine, find a new path in life, and write a new chapter in our life story.

The COVID-19 Crisis has thrown many uncomfortable concepts at our society: "social distancing," "non-essential workers," and "vulnerable populations" among others. Many families have been confronted by the tragic loss of loved ones. The fear of illness and death have been keenly felt by so many. Thoughts of one's mortality lead to a certain focus. We prioritize what is important and let go of what is less so. Prof. Gellman argues that Judaism creates one day every year when we must go through this process.

TESHUVAH AND AUTHENTICITY

Prof. Yehudah Gellman

TRADITION 20:3 | FALL 1982

Consider the first human being ever to have danced a dance. It was surely a complete expression of the person's reason for dancing. All of his joy, or sorrow, or homage, was in that dance. But consider now the second person ever to have danced a dance. For him it was harder to dance his own dance. Why? Because he had once seen someone else dance, and now there was a danger of dancing not his own dance, but someone else's. There was a danger of allowing the form of the dance to replace its essence. And the more mankind has danced, the harder it has become to dance one's very own dance.

Teshuvah is a dance. It can be one's very own, or it can be a copy of someone else's. When repenting of the sin of the golden calf, the Jewish people are said to have mourned, *vayit'abbelu* (Exodus 33:5). And their teshuvah was accepted. When repenting of the sin of the spies we are told "and the people mourned greatly," *vayit'abbelu me'od* (Numbers 14:39). They did the very same. Yet their teshuvah was not accepted. It is said in the name of Simcha Bunim of Peshischa that for the sin of the spies the people were not forgiven because their mourning was a second time. Only the first time did it have that authenticity of self-expression that made it genuine. Precisely because it was a repeat of the earlier mourning, the mourning of the sin of the spies lost its authenticity. It had a precedent to attach to. It succumbed to the danger of conforming with the previous act in form, and lost its essence. (Note that the people mourned "greatly" over the sin of the spies. Isn't this typical of the individual who dances someone else's dance? He must dance it very hard-to convince himself that it really is his dance.)

The more I am surrounded by teshuvah the harder it becomes to do teshuvah. For the harder it is to dance my own dance. I turn to the literature on teshuvah and am told that there are twenty principles, six ways, eight levels, and so forth (See, Rabbeinu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah). I feel like the ballet dancer practicing my dance before the mirrors, making sure every step is just right. I confront the "laws of teshuvah" and feel some of the emptiness of those lives that enroll in dance schools to learn the foxtrot and waltz with the hope of finding something worthwhile in life. I read an erudite, insightful essay on teshuvah that speaks to the predicament of modern man, and it becomes that much harder to do teshuvah without merely re-enacting the "Man of Teshuvah." (Prof. Pinchas Peli told me recently that "the man of teshuvah" is in the lexicon. He has this on the highest authority.)

Today it is harder than ever to do teshuvah, what with "baal-teshuvah yeshivot" and even a "baal-teshuvah movement." The accretion-historical, literary, social-of teshuvah makes it almost impossible for me to do teshuvah. The temptation is too great, and the process too easy, to do someone else's teshuvah rather than my own. What am I to do?

When things were simpler Maimonides wrote of the possible negative influence of society. He encourages us to associate with the righteous and stay away from the wicked to find an environment of saintliness, and if that fails to isolate oneself in separation from those around him (Hil. Deot, 6:1). If all else fails, says Maimonides, flee to the desert, away from all possible social contact. Aristotle wrote that if you have no need for a

state you are either an animal or a god. In simpler times it was possible to be an animal or a god. It was possible to escape physically from society with the hope of the physical escape nurturing an internal analogue—an escape into self-authenticity.

But in these times can I hope for teshuvah by running from society? No. The process of my socialization is too great, too complete for me to run out to the desert without carrying society on my back. I am not a person. I am a pastiche of bits and pieces of social practice and social precedents. I am a mirage; a composite of internalized social forms. Too many late night movies of people lost in the desert make it nearly impossible for me to be lost in the desert without playing out at some unconscious level a movie role. Kierkegaard has ruined it for me once and for all. I can't ever be the single one, the, knight of faith, because I can never get beyond a portrayal of his single one. I can never become a lonely man of faith because driven by the effort to become the Lonely Man of Faith. Even psychoanalysis won't get me out of the paradox. Philip Roth has ruined that for me.

This is the predicament of modern man. He is so saturated with reflexive portrayals of others' lives, of others' visions, of their forms of life, that he loses his authenticity. This is the problem of teshuvah and authenticity. To escape society I must escape myself.

There exists the possibility of authenticity, but it comes too late. "When a person dies all of his deeds are displayed before him" (Taanit 11a). Heidegger has helped us appreciate the subjective truth of the moment of death. At death a person may have to look at the totality of the life he has lived and face it in complete truthfulness. At that moment there are no masks, there is no bad faith. In the face of death there is a totally honest subjectivity, in which the person must either reject the life he has lived or accept it. The acceptance or rejection is authentic because it is in one's own eyes, not in the eyes of others. The fact of death has the power to tear the individual out of the truth of the "they" into the truth of the "I." At that moment I exist in my primordial being. In the kabbalistic literature it is written that the Angel of Death appears to the dying man covered with eyes. When he beholds the apparition of Death full of eyes, the soul departs the body. The eyes expose one's life for what it is. Nothing is hidden. At the moment of death there is a brutal, honest, subjective judgment.

The existentialist philosophers were overly optimistic in thinking that the possibility of death and its demand for authenticity could bring to a life lived in authenticity. Heidegger thought we could live toward death. The awareness of death could make me now and here live a life that I accept rather than reject. There could be no greater joy than that of the person who looks back at the life he has lived and says to it "Amen," and

no greater sorrow than that of the person who must turn his gaze aside in shame when confronted with his life as lived. Awareness of this was supposed to have its impact on how I now live. Berdyaev wrote; "Life in this world has meaning just because there is death; if there were no death in our world, life would be meaningless" (The Destiny of Man). The ability to see life as a whole, with beginning, middle, and end, as a work of art, perhaps, was supposed to give meaning to my life now.

But these philosophers were wrong. The expectation of the authenticity of death does not create present authenticity. No philosophical argument here, just fact. It doesn't. That it doesn't does not have to be shown (it's obvious), only explained. The predicament of modern man is such that he can't anticipate his own death in advance. When he tries to do this he projects the internalized pastiche of all the deaths he has experienced, seen, read about instead. The very same difficulty we encountered earlier of projecting internalized forms of existence in place of one's authentic self-existence arises here. We are unable to anticipate our own death. We are deprived of its center of authenticity until it is upon us. The possibility of authenticity exists, but it comes too late.

That is why the Holy One, blessed be He, gave us Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is an attempt at simulation, a confrontation for each of us with his own moment of death, "And just as the merits and sins of a person are weighed at death, so every year. . . at Rosh Hashanah. The righteous are sealed for life, the wicked are sealed for death, and the balanced benoni are suspended until Yom Kippur. If they do teshuvah, they are sealed to life, otherwise are sealed to death." (Maimonides 3:3). There is a conceptual analogue between the judgment at death and the judgment at Yom Kippur.

The Talmud (Yoma 74b) deduces the prohibition to eat and drink on Yom Kippur in the following way. Since the punishment for not, 'afflicting one's soul' on this, holy day is "And I will cause the loss of the soul" and it is surmised that the "affliction" referred to is one that involves loss of life, that is, refraining from eating and drinking. (Although the Talmud later cites a different ground for the prohibition to eat and drink, it seems to have been ignored by Maimonides. See Hilkhos Shv'itat Asor 1:4.) The very act of fasting, therefore, simulates in the individual a turning towards death. He begins a process which, if it were to continue, would bring about his own death. To refrain from eating and drinking is to attempt to bring yourself into a position from which you can gain a glimpse, however far, of your own moment of death.

The conceptual analogue between turning toward death and Yom Kippur is preserved in the nature of the judgment of Yom Kippur. The famous saying of R. Yochanan that three books are open on Rosh Hashanah and that the fate of those for whom good and bad deeds are balanced is sealed

on Yom Kippur, is widely interpreted as pertaining to the judgment of our fate in the world to come. (The judgment of our this-worldly fate takes place exclusively on Rosh Hashanah. See Tosafot, Ve-nehtamin, Rosh Hashanah 16b and other rishonim. See also commentary of Gra to Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, 582, end.) This is precisely the type of judgment we endure at death.

Contrary to popular conceptions, the teshuvah of Yom Kippur does not relate to the wrongdoings of the previous year, as such. The unit of time over which we must confess our sins is the whole of our past lives. (See Maimonides, Teshuvah 2:8). The past year is only an accretion on to that life. On Yom Kippur I must look at the whole of my life and confront it as I must when turning towards death.

In awareness of my own death as Yom Kippur approaches, the fear of death becomes an operative halakhic principle. I hurry to confess my sins prior to eating the final meal before fasting lest "one choke on one's food" and die before having confessed, (Maimonides, Teshuvah 2:7). It is not the slight possibility of that happening that motivates this law, but the real concern for my death, being absorbed in death, gives rise to this halakhic expression of it.

As Yom Kippur approaches I cease eating and drinking in a turn towards death, don the raiments of the dead, and in that posture confront the whole of my life and its bearing on eternity. In this enactment exists the possibility of turning into myself, withdrawing from the entanglements and attachments of life, into an authenticity which makes teshuvah possible. In this state of mind I say the confession said by the person who is dying.

The opportunity exists on Yom Kippur, but it can be missed. Several years ago, when I was in graduate school, the calendar of studies allowed a month's vacation to study at a famous yeshivah in the greater New York area. The intensity of the learning contributed to a mounting sense of the seriousness of the day of judgment. By the time Rosh Hashanah came this feeling was very strong. The experience of Rosh Hashanah increased it to the point where at Yom Kippur I was completely gripped by the awesomeness of the day of judgment. My davening on that day expanded the experience of being judged more and more; until I got to the words Yodea mahashavot be-yom din, "He knows my very thoughts on this day of judgment " At that moment the utter simplicity of those words aroused within me the absolute conviction of their truth. For the first time in my life I actually believed that He knows my thoughts. As a result I couldn't continue to daven. I was paralyzed. All about me people were throwing themselves around, waving their hands in remorse and pleading. I couldn't go on. Since He knows my thoughts, He knows that what I am doing is a fake. He knows my true feelings, what I really believe

and what really is important to me. The external signs mean nothing to Him. He knows the truth. It's no use. I sat down, paralyzed. Finally, I went out for a walk in the neighborhood. Gradually the feeling wore off. The absolute conviction that He sees through me faded away. Then, when I no longer believed it, only then was I able to return to thebe it midrash and daven, shaking, waving my hands, contorting my face, with the rest of them. I had returned, from the I to the they. The disorientation of being torn out of context was replaced by the feeling of the beauty and the pleasure of castigating oneself in fellowship. The fear of being alone gave way to the strength of community.

Van Jones spoke these words facing modern university students. His message turns the discussion around safe spaces into a call to character development. He sets expectation (and by implication judgments) around what we do with our lives. Safety is never enough to define a life well-lived. We cannot live a life of meaning, if we only sit back and relax. This message extends beyond those who are derisively described as porcelain children. No matter how old we are, we must recognize that challenges are good for us. We should never see ourselves as fragile. We too must put on our boots.

TWO TYPES OF SAFE SPACE

Van Jones

There are two ideas about safe spaces: One is a very good idea and one is a terrible idea. The idea of being physically safe on a campus—not being subjected to sexual harassment and physical abuse, or being targeted specifically, personally, for some kind of hate speech—“you are an n-word,” or whatever—I am perfectly fine with that.

But there’s another view that is now I think ascendant, which I think is just a horrible view, which is that “I need to be safe ideologically. I need to be safe emotionally I just need to feel good all the time, and if someone says something that I don’t like, that’s a problem for everybody else including the administration.”

I think that is a terrible idea for the following reason: I don’t want you to be safe, ideologically. I don’t want you to be safe, emotionally. I want you to be strong. That’s different.

I’m not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I’m not going to take all the weights out of the gym; that’s the whole point of the gym. This is the gym. You can’t live on a campus where people say stuff you don’t like?! And these people can’t fire you, they can’t arrest you, they can’t beat you up, they can just say stuff you don’t like- and you get to say stuff back- and this you cannot bear?!

This is ridiculous BS liberals! My parents [...] marched; they dealt with fire hoses! They dealt with dogs! They dealt with beatings! You can’t deal with a mean tweet?! You are creating a kind of liberalism that the minute it crosses the street into the real world is not just useless, but obnoxious and dangerous. I want you to be offended every single day on this campus. I want you to be deeply aggrieved and offended and upset, and then to learn how to speak back. Because that is what we need from you in these communities.

The following joint letter sparked much public controversy, this spring. It argues that the free exchange of ideas is diminishing. It makes the claim that freedom of expression is critical to the protection of the weak within society. To defend the weak by silencing unkind voices ultimately harms the weak.

A LETTER ON JUSTICE AND OPEN DEBATE

Harper's Magazine

JULY 7, 2020

The below letter will be appearing in the Letters section of the magazine's October issue

Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we also raise our voices against the second. The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump, who represents a real threat to democracy. But resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting. The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides.

The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. More troubling still, institutional leaders, in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering

hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms. Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes. Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement.

This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other. As writers we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes. We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences. If we won't defend the very thing on which our work depends, we shouldn't expect the public or the state to defend it for us.

These two quotes speak to the important role of religion in protecting our freedoms. Former Harvard Business School Professor Clay Christensen died this past January of Leukemia. His words are very much in keeping with those of de Tocqueville.

EXCERPT ON RELIGION AND LIBERTY FROM DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Alexis de Tocqueville

Religion perceives that civil liberty affords a noble exercise to the faculties of man, and that the political world is a field prepared by the Creator for the efforts of the intelligence. Contented with the freedom and the power which it enjoys in its own sphere, and with the place which it occupies, the empire of religion is never more surely established than when it reigns in the hearts of men unsupported by aught beside its native strength. Religion is no less the companion of liberty in all its battles and its triumphs; the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims. The safeguard of morality is religion, and morality is the best security of law and the surest pledge of freedom.

Some time ago I had a conversation with a Marxist economist from China he was coming to the end of a Fulbright Fellowship here in Boston and I asked him if he had learned anything that was surprising or unexpected.

Without any hesitation he said, "Yeah, I had no idea how critical religion is to the functioning of democracy."

"The reason why democracy works," he said, "is not because the government was designed to oversee what everybody does, but rather democracy works because most people, most of the time, voluntarily choose to obey the law.

In the past, most Americans attended a church or synagogue every week, and they were taught there by people who they respected." My friend went on to say that Americans follow these rules because they had come to believe that they weren't just accountable to society, they were accountable to God.

My Chinese friend heightened a vague, but nagging concern of Harvard inside, that as religion loses its influence over the lives of Americans, what will happen to our democracy? Because if you take away religion, you can't hire enough police.

Former New York Times columnist Bari Weiss spoke the following words at the “No Hate. No Fear.” solidarity march in New York. There were an estimated 25,000 people in attendance. Many Jews allow hatred to define their Judaism. Weiss makes an impassioned call for something more.

REMARKS TO “NO HATE. NO FEAR.” SOLIDARITY MARCH

Bari Weiss

JANUARY 5, 2020

My name is Bari Weiss.

I am a proud American. I am a proud New Yorker. And I am a proud Jew.

I am not a Jew because people hate my religion, my people, and my civilization.

Not for a single moment does Jew-hatred, like the kind we are seeing in this city, make me a Jew.

I am a Jew because of the audacity and the iconoclasm of Abraham, the first Jew of all. The whole world was awash in idols and he stood alone to proclaim the truth: There is one God.

I am a Jew because my ancestors were slaves. And I am a Jew because the story of their Exodus from Egypt, their liberation from slavery, is a story that changed human consciousness forever.

I am a Jew because our God commands us to never oppress the stranger.

I am Jew because Ruth, the first convert to Judaism, told her mother-in-law Naomi, “your people will be my people and your god will be my god,” reminding us of the centrality of the Jewish people to Judaism.

I am a Jew because of Queen Esther, who understood that she had attained her royal position in order to save her people from destruction.

I am a Jew because the Maccabees were the original resistance. Because they modeled for us — and for all peoples — how to resist the temptation of self-erasure.

I am a Jew because when Rabbi Akiva was being tortured to death by the Romans he laughed. He laughed and he told his students that he could finally fulfill the commandment to love God with all of his being.

I am a Jew because even after the heart of Judaism and Jewish sovereignty were destroyed my people refused to accept the logic of history and disappear. And I am a Jew because some of our greatest renewals took place in exile.

I am a Jew because my people has been targeted and despised and murdered by the Nazis and Soviets.

I am a Jew because evil hates my people.

I am a Jew because my people managed to turn destruction into redemption by returning to their land after 2,000 years.

I am a Jew because our Founders saw themselves as new Israelites.

I am a Jew because the biblical words on the liberty bell — proclaim liberty throughout the land! — rang out from the righteous mouths of this country’s abolitionists as they fought for universal freedom in this New Jerusalem.

I am a Jew because it was Emma Lazarus who etched the biblical injunction to welcome the stranger onto the consciousness of America when she wrote the words: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

I am a Jew because of the martyred of Tree of Life and Chabad of Poway and Jersey City. And I am a Jew because of the courage of those who fought back in Monsey and who then, immediately after the attack, gathered together to sing. And I am Jew because my brothers and sisters in Crown Heights and Borough Park and Williamsburg who refuse to hide their Judaism.

I am a Jew because of students across this country who refuse to be smeared and denigrated because of who they are, who are standing up against humiliation, pressure and abuse to affirm the justness of Zionism.

I am a Jew because my brothers and sisters in England and France are battling the anti-Semitism of populist thugs and the anti-Semitism of politicians in parliament.

I am a Jew because I refuse to stay silent in the face of injustice. I am a Jew because I have no patience for leaders who speak boldly while failing to take the actions necessary to protect our community. Or for partisan hacks that claim anti-Semitism is the exclusive domain of their political opponents. Or for leaders who believe they can fight Jew-hatred while making political alliances with anti-Semites.

I am a Jew because I refuse to lie.

I am a Jew because Jews are of every color and class and politics and language. And I am a Jew because hatred of us has no color or class or politics or language.

I am a Jew because Jews do not cause Jew hatred. Ever.

Today, as in so many times in history, there are many forces in the world insisting that Jews must disappear or die. Some say it bluntly. Some cloak it in the language of progress.

But I am a Jew because I know that there is force far greater than that. And that is the force of who we are and the force of our world-changing ideas.

The Jewish people were not put on Earth to be anti-anti-Semites. We were put on Earth to be Jews.

We are the people whose God never slumbers or sleeps, and so neither can we.

We are the lamp-lighters.

We are the ever-dying people that refuses to die.

The people of Israel lives now and forever.

Am Yisrael Chai.

Shaarei Shomayim has a long and deep connection with Beit Midrash Zichron Dov and its Rosh Kollel Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner. Our shul member, Dr. Jeff Lipsitz deployed some of his amazing oratory and sensitivity in explaining what Rabbi Torczyner does for our community. But the message is about more than Rabbi Torczyner. It is about the Torah – that he stands for and that we stand for – and the Torah's place within a culture of ongoing questioning and learning.

REMARKS UPON PRESENTING THE ONTARIO MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AWARD TO RABBI MORDECHAI TORCZYNER

Dr. Jeff Lipsitz

NOVEMBER 3, 2019

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Ontario Medical Association – our association - has a COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD which it can award annually to deserving Non-physician members of a community for “significant contribution to the health and welfare of the people of a local community as defined by involvement in community health and public welfare, including length of involvement, roles fulfilled in local organizations, and personal achievements.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have been attending Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner's accredited Medical Ethics and halachah lectures virtually from their inception. I remember one evening a few years ago, after a Medical Ethics lecture that Rabbi Torczyner had just given at Shaarei Shomayim, having my “Aha” moment.

You see, after the formal Q+A that followed a very interesting lecture, Rabbi Torczyner was still standing at the podium patiently answering questions one-on-one from a long line of physician friends and colleagues, who themselves waited patiently to ask him their questions and seek the benefit of his wisdom and insight.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the long line of physicians that evening – and a typical crowd at any Rabbi Torczyner Medical Ethics lecture that I've ever attended – may include people like the Chief of Cardiology at a major uptown teaching hospital; the Professor of Medicine and one of Canada's leading breast cancer specialists from the same uptown teaching hospital; the Physician-in-Chief of a major University Avenue

teaching hospital, and similar representation of the best and brightest and most accomplished across numerous specialties and practice types and locales in the medical profession in Canada today, specialists and primary care physicians whether from academic and community-based facilities or community practices.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on that evening I was struck by the fact that big pharma and so many others would give anything to have – even for one evening – the kind of interest and attendance and the calibre of the loyal following that this series of Medical Ethics lectures has – and I am delighted that it will now be part of the Nusbaum Family Medical Halachah and Ethics Institute. But it is only the kind of knowledge that Rabbi Torczyner conveys, and the highly gifted manner in which he consistently conveys it, that can earn the kind of interest and devotion that is evident at any one of his lectures, and which would lead throngs of very busy doctors and others to come out, time after time, after a long busy day at work and always with numerous other personal and professional demands on their time, and then even to wait patiently for their turn at the end of the lecture, to ask one more burning question that they had, in the Q+A – or to wait, even longer, patiently in line afterward, for a one-on-one “consultation”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I suspect everyone in this room has already attended a Rabbi Torczyner lecture on any one of a breathtaking array of subjects from Agnon to a Gemara, from Job and Jonah to Joshua and Jeremiah, from Medicine to Accounting to the Law. And one knows

that one dare not let one's mind wander for even a moment in a Rabbi Torczyner lecture because Rabbi Torczyner remains laser-focused throughout, on a topic which – in the case of lectures for professionals – he may have researched mostly on his own, always thoroughly, but I think most likely over a matter of just a few weeks, and he nonetheless acquires a level of understanding and sophistication that we, the professionals who come to hear his lectures, have honed over decades.

And, in addition to his appreciation – in the case of his medical lectures – of the crucial clinical issues and technical considerations, he unfailingly fascinates and delights us with his masterful presentation of ethical challenges which we ourselves may not have appreciated or resolved – and then shares with us the ethical framework, considerations, and debates – from sources old and new – that we should have in mind in order to provide the best possible care, consistent with our traditions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, when one attends a Rabbi Torczyner lecture – and in this case I speak of the accredited Medical Ethics and Halachah series in particular – when one sits together with one's medical colleagues for an hour or an evening in this rarified environment and can be so edified, educated, inspired, excited and elevated by the beauty of the message and the erudition of its messenger – and then to have the privilege of being able to relate what one has learned, in practical terms, to one's professional practice in a meaningful way on a day-to-day basis – one cannot help but say – this was not verbatim in the notice we received from the OMA Board announcing their decision to award Rabbi Torczyner the community service award for 2019 – but one cannot help but say:

אֲשֶׁרִינוּ מֵה טוֹב חֶלֶק נָנוּ, וְמֵה נְעִים גּוֹרְלָנוּ, וְמֵה יִפְה יְרוּשָׁתָנוּ

Rabbi Torczyner, you enable us to be better at what we do while at the same time reminding us that the true Physician-in-Chief is above, and that we should always carry out our roles – which we are so privileged to have – ethically, with careful thought, sensitivity and compassion, humility, faith and hope.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of the Ontario Medical Association representing 40,000 physicians, residents and medical students – on behalf of the physicians of Ontario – it is a distinct honour and high privilege for us to present our Association's Community Service Award for 2019 for significant contribution to the health and welfare of the people of our community to our respected teacher and friend Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, to whom we wish continued success in all your endeavours, for many years to come.

Please join me in our collective Hakarat HaTov of the Avodat Kodesh which he carries out tirelessly, with such devotion and expertise.

This past January, we celebrated the conclusion of the cycle of Daf Yomi. In Jerusalem, Hadran hosted a women's Siyum HaShas with over 3000 participants in attendance. Dr. Erica Brown delivered one of the most inspiring advertisements for the place of Torah learning in a fully lived Jewish life.

WHAT IS LIFE WORTH? THOUGHTS ON THE SIYUM HASHAS

Dr. Erica Brown

TRADITION ONLINE | JANUARY 8, 2020

Author's note: This brief talk was presented at the Hadran Women's Siyum Ha-Shas in Jerusalem on January 5, 2020, 8 Tevet 5780. Standing at the podium, looking out on a sea of over 3,300 people, mostly women, celebrating Torah study together felt like walking in a dream. There was so much hope and power in that room. I recited the Hadran in tears.

In the seven and a half years since I began daf yomi, I turned fifty and celebrated both my thirtieth wedding anniversary and my thirtieth year as an educator. I lost one of my closest friends to cancer. I opened a center for Jewish education. My beloved bubbe died at 100, and I stood under the huppa with three of my children. My youngest is learning at Midreshet Lindenbaum and is sitting in this audience right now. I became a grandmother and grieved with friends who lost parents and some who, lo aleinu, lost children. As I traveled the Talmud's 2,711 pages, my daily learning was a sacred anchor for all these significant transformations. Learning the daf enhanced my daily sense of blessing, helping me actualize my own life's purpose in large part because there was one enduring question that kept surfacing for me in learning the daf: What is human life worth? Sometimes very complex sugyot can be reduced to a variation on this simple but profound question.

Life's worth, for example, is at the heart of the eighth chapter of Bava Kamma, "HaHovel beHavero":

Mishna: One who injures another is liable to pay five types of compensation: damage, for pain, medical costs, loss of livelihood, and humiliation (Bava Kamma 83b).

While money cannot relieve great physical and emotional losses, it signifies accountability and responsibility as part of a just society. In the Hammurabi codes of the Ancient Near East such physical reciprocity was deemed legal and appropriate. Poke out my eye, and I'll poke yours. But Bava Kamma presents one argument after another to show that "an eye for an eye" was never to be taken literally. Here's one of my favorites:

Rabbi Dostai ben Yehuda asks if "An eye for an eye" (Leviticus 24:20) means monetary restitution or the loss of an actual eye? But what if the eye of the one who caused the injury is large and the eye of the injured party is small? You cannot literally apply the phrase "an eye for an eye."

Your eye and my eye are not the same size. Ayin tahat ayin can never be executed literally because it cannot be executed precisely. Without the capacity to be precise, this type of violent recompense should not be used at all, echoing Gandhi: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Perhaps the Torah used this expression because the only way one can ever know what the loss of an eye feels like is to lose one. It focuses us deeply on the worth of every human life.

This perek of Talmud has had real-world application for millennia. To cite but one example, money can never compensate for life. But sometimes it has to. Kenneth Feinberg, a well-known D.C. attorney, was appointed Special Master of the U.S. government's September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. His was an impossible task. When people are grieving, the last thing they want to think about is putting a price tag on someone they

love, whether a CEO, a firefighter, a cook, or a janitor. Feinberg called it the most harrowing experience of his professional life.

In Bava Kamma, as in the 9/11 fund, the worth of life is determined in response to violence. Surely, I thought, there must be a way to measure human life as a response to joy or virtue. I found what I was looking for in Masekhet Arakhin. In Leviticus 27:1-8 a person donates his or her worth to the Beit HaMikdash as an act of thanksgiving or joy.

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When anyone explicitly vows to the Lord the equivalent for a human being...”

Human worth was assessed on a recognized compensation scale and that amount was vowed as a gift to God’s house, an intimate form of tzedaka. In fact, the Ha’emek Davar, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, writes that “It’s called a ‘pele,’ a wonder, because it’s not something that God asked of anyone.” It represents a desire to give more of ourselves than is asked. It’s hard to find a contemporary analogy to Arakhin, but it inspired me to finally give voice to something I had long wanted to do.

I come to this siyum having checked two goals on my spiritual bucket list profoundly connected to the question of life’s worth: finally completing the daf yomi cycle and donating a kidney. I have not spoken about this publicly and not much privately either. As of this past July 15th, my left kidney is in a man in Wisconsin who, like me, has four children and two grandchildren. Reflecting on the message of Arakhin and my incredible good fortune during these years of learning, I finally decided to give thanks in a way that forced me to think about what my life was truly worth to someone else. Anyone in good health can do this, but it is a serious decision. It’s also one of the best decisions I’ve ever made. No doubt, many others in this room have been influenced by their learning in unexpected ways. The donation helped move me from the beit midrash of my mind to contemplate the real-world suffering of others and the impact one life can have upon another, even, and especially, a stranger. The transition from Bava Kamma to Arakhin helped me understand the value of a life not only when violence strikes but also as a powerful response to deep joy. By the way, you can do daf yomi and keep all your organs intact.

Daf yomi also demands self-sacrifice, sacrifice for the sake of higher growth. How blessed I am – we all are – to be making this siyum here in Yerushalyim, celebrating not only our learning but how our learning changes us, helps us value life and lifts us up to a place of joy. This is a day that God has made, let us rejoice and be happy.

As we go through this crisis, we remember teachers who taught us about life in how they dealt with crisis. As we go through this crisis, we too are teachers. We don't always know who those students are. We don't always know what our lessons really are. This essay by Dr. Carlson beautifully teaches this point.

YOU DID NOT TEACH ME WHAT YOU THOUGHT YOU DID

Dr. Marie Archambault Carlson, MD, MPH

JAMA 322:16 | OCTOBER 2019

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything;

That is how the light gets in.

—Leonard Cohen

This is not the story of my leukemia diagnosis, nor of my subsequent stem cell transplant. Those are harrowing stories that make excellent Facebook click bait: “A mother of three!” “A doctor herself!” “Diagnosed at Christmas!”

It is more mundane than that.

It is the story of being chronically ill, while working among the well. It is the story of being diseased while wearing the healer's white coat. It is, most painfully, being fully human among those who know human bodies most intimately.

My cancer story did not go like I planned. I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia in 2013 at Christmas. I had a mutation that conferred higher risk and needed to get into remission with chemotherapy and then have a stem cell transplant. I thought if I did all those things, checked the boxes like it was a handwritten to-do list from intern year, I could return to my life as a hospitalist and a wife and mother. Induction chemotherapy, consolidation, transplant. Done, done, and done. I would either survive and move on, or I would die. I prepared for both. And neither happened.

I did not get well.

I got through the initial treatment and transplant with a few bumps along the way, which turned into a year away from work. We were buoyed by the support of colleagues who donated vacation time, of family who came and stayed and emptied the dishwasher, of neighbors who spontaneously raked our leaf-filled yard, and of friends who fed us and schlepped our kids around. I learned to ask for and accept help. We were not going to get through this alone, and countless people made sure we knew we did not have to.

After a year, I eased back into work. I didn't have the endurance to see patients or teach residents yet, so I learned new skills in administration and quality management. Outside of short hair and chipmunk cheeks, physically, I felt the same. So I dove in deeper and added patient care to the mix. At the same time, I was getting weaker. Oblivious to the larger meaning, I developed chronic graft-vs-host disease, a new disease gifted by the life-saving stem cell transplant. I battled gastrointestinal symptoms and then skin and fascia and muscle injury. The medicines turned on me too, with vertigo and double vision, more gastrointestinal upset, and then the steroids laid waste to my bones. I broke vertebrae, my foot, my hand. Everything was a step back. Increasingly, my colleagues eased my load, giving me easier shifts, more administrative tasks. I was in another territory now, with no end in sight, and I had to let people help me. My life depended on it. Patient lives depended on me setting limits on what I could do.

If that was a lesson I needed, I missed it. I did do less clinical work than I wanted, but more than I should have. I covered up my limitations when I could. When I couldn't reach over my head to set up suction, I pretended I didn't know how and asked a nurse for help. During bedside presentations, I ignored my postcall team shifting their weight on fatigued legs and leaned on tray tables to talk to patients. I blinked away tears as a patient reached down to grab a pen I dropped; he recognized that I would not try to retrieve it. I stopped in the hall when short of breath to look at my phone or patient list unnecessarily before I would straighten up and enter a room. I felt like an impostor.

I debated telling the house staff about my health condition. It seemed like a non sequitur, to just throw it out there without context. I needed them to know, but I could not verbalize why I needed them to know. It was not martyrdom, or a bid for sympathy, or an excuse to take the elevator. Perhaps it was a warning shot that I might react differently to what seemed inconsequential to them; eg, this attending might lose her temper if you keep a patient NPO [nothing by mouth] "just in case." I might press them on goals of care when a "do not resuscitate" order was discussed, or balk at glib references to medication noncompliance as a cause of decompensation.

I noticed other changes. I did not tear up when giving patients bad news, which had always embarrassed me before. I knew that pain and it no longer frightened me; I sat with it. Instead, my eyes blurred at odd times: listening to an oncologist talk about chemotherapy to a patient newly diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. I wondered whether this was truly informed consent. Had anyone informed me about the burden of graft-vs-host disease when I was consented for a stem cell transplant? Would it have mattered when I was facing down an 80% chance of death? There was a lesson here to impart, but I struggled to explain it to my team. "Does he understand what this means?" I would ask in a million different ways.

What does it mean to say, "I am not well," when you are a healer?

I worried about how could I possibly be a doctor or teach others to be a doctor when I was still a patient myself?

I had to believe there were lessons and healing to be found in brokenness or I could not go on. My white coat with its old familiar ink stains no longer fit literally or figuratively.

And then I spent a hot summer day painting pieces of wood for my son's new bed. While I carried a wet paint brush and lid carefully back into the house, I tripped and tried to protect the paint from splattering. I landed hard and when my husband helped me up, I could not put weight on my hip.

I was despondent. I had been through fractures and critical illnesses, a

myocardial infarction, multiple pneumonias, sepsis, and bacteremia, but this was really more than I felt I could take. I remember praying, please do not let my hip be fractured. But it was and I knew it. I was admitted to the hospital, and the orthopedics intern was on his way to see me. I stared at the television, not seeing. This was it, I thought. I cannot return to work. I have to admit that I am done this time.

I thought: I will never be well again.

The intern walked in, gowned and face masked and introduced himself. He told me he had been a medical student on my team some years before. I did remember him: he was a bit older, with military experience, and he was a solid student who did not blow smoke and pretend he was going to do internal medicine when he really wanted to do orthopedic trauma. As he went to wash his hands, he said that he wanted to thank me for a conversation we had about work-life balance. He had spoken then of his wife's desire to start a family soon, after they spent several years of moving around the country in the military. I had apparently told him that there was no good time to start a family; it is always hard and always wonderful. Balancing work and life is something that I frequently talk to my millennial residents about. I laughed as he told me they had 3 children now. And then he paused and said, "I'm so glad I got the opportunity to thank you for that. It meant so much to me at the time, and I've thought about that conversation many times over the years." I blinked through my tears and mustered a thank you.

This former student reminded me that we are often not teaching what we think we are. He probably remembered little of my talk on inpatient management of diabetes, but instead it was a moment of honest reflection on work and family that guided him. In that moment, I realized that God had not answered my prayer about avoiding a hip fracture, but that He instead answered an unspoken request for my life to still have meaning as a doctor. Perhaps by just showing up, I am teaching about living with disability. Sometimes the battered, suffering patient with a poor prognosis can rise again, not fully cured, but enough to regain a life. It is letting my colleagues see my weakness, see my value, and hold me up. Perhaps my job is not teaching pathophysiology but instead how to think about the person inside of patients, to recognize their fears and questions, to link their humanity with ours.

I did not get well. I will likely never be well again. But I will ring the bells I have and teach others to do the same.

Why is this pandemic happening? Rabbi Sacks does not give us an answer. He offers us a methodology through which to seek answers ourselves.

AN EXCERPT FROM

VAYIKRA IN THE AGE OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

If you look at the word 'Vayikra' in a Sefer Torah, you will see that the aleph, the last letter of the word Vayikra, is always written very small. It's an aleph ze'eirah, a small aleph. So the word looks at first glance like 'vayikar' and Rashi basing himself on the Midrash says the following. He says every time that God spoke to Moses and every time He gave him a command, these were prefaced by a karia: 'Vayikra', God summoned him. Rashi says, that is 'lashon chibar'. That is an expression of love, of preciousness. But in contrast, when He spoke to the prophets of the nations of the world (and here Rashi is referring to Bilam), it says vayikar instead. 'Vayikar Elokim el Bilaam', meaning God just 'happened' to Bilaam. What Rashi is doing, and this is absolutely fundamental to what I want to share with you, is he's making a clear distinction between two words that look very, very similar. 'vayikar', and he happened to, he chanced upon and 'vayikra', and He called.

In fact, we can put it slightly differently. The Hebrew words 'mikra' and 'mikre', 'mikra' with the letter aleph, 'mikre' with the letter hey. Mikra means a call and mikre means pure chance. What is the difference between a call and a chance? That is the message within the first word of Vayikra and I realised many years ago that deep insight can be shed on this if we look at the end of Vayikra. The end of Vayikra, parshat Bechukotai, contains a passage called the tochecha, the curses, and a key word of the curses is the word Keri, spelled k-r-y (kaf, reish, yud)

During the curses, the tochecha, we are warned, "If you don't listen to Me, [says God] and you walk towards Me with keri, then I will behave

towards you with the anger of that keri." Now what does the word keri mean? It's a very important word. It appears seven times in chapter 26, the penultimate chapter of Vayikra, and it appears nowhere else in the whole of Tanach. So it's clearly a key word.

When a word appears seven times, that's a key word, but also it's worth noting that it appears nowhere else. So the commentators have to guess what it means, because there's no clue from context elsewhere in Tanach. And so they say it means: rebelliously, overconfidently, refusing, hardening yourselves, etc. etc. or, If you walk indifferently to Me. However, the Rambam says something completely different. He says this not in one of his commentaries or in his philosophical work, but in the Mishne Torah where he deals with the halachot, the laws of a public fast. He writes at the opening of Hilchot Ta'anit: 'It is a positive command of the Torah to cry and sound the trumpets on any tragedy or any distress that happens to the community.' That's a biblical command, to sound the alarm. And then he says, "This is one of the ways of t'shuvah, such that when bad things happen, you resolve to come closer to God." And then he says, and this is the key, "but if they don't sound the alarm, and if they say "this just happened", "Things happen", and "this suffering is mere chance" then that is bad news and it causes them to cling to their bad behaviour."

"And that is what the Torah means," Rambam continues, "when it says 'If you act indifferently to Me and you see this as mere chance, then I will leave you to mere chance.'"

Rashi's comments at the beginning of Vayikra and the Rambam's comments on the end Vayikra are saying the same thing. That there is a very slight difference between things that happen by chance and things that are in some sense a call from God to come closer to Him. The difference is an aleph, and an aleph is silent.

In fact the difference is a little aleph, and the little aleph is almost invisible, but that is the difference between Vayikra, 'and God called' and vayikar, 'he just happened'. And that is really how the book of Vayikra begins and ends, saying yes, in one sense events are mere chance. In one sense. In the case of this pandemic it was a viral mutation that was almost randomly caught and transmitted and has now affected a quarter of the world's population who are in lockdown as I speak.

That is chance, but perhaps also specifically in our isolation at a time when we have the opportunity to listen to our soul, to our mind, to our heart in a way that we don't have at other times because we are so busy interacting with other people, perhaps also in our isolation, we can hear God's very quiet call. A little aleph, almost silent. He's asking us to question, is there someone I should call? Is there someone I should help? Is there someone I should thank? Is there a prayer I should be saying? Is there a text I should be learning? Is there a mitzvah I should be doing?

Is there something that I have been neglecting until now because I felt just too busy and now that I am in this isolation, in this silence, able to hear, able to think of? That is what vayikra means. It means an almost silent call, but one which we hear at moments of loneliness. Sometimes the really difficult times are the times of growth. They don't seem so at the time. But when we look back, we see they were. The help we give others at difficult times is a good deed that is never forgotten ever.

So I just think that it is worth thinking in these times: Can I somehow, underneath this all, hear that still small voice of Hashem saying to me, use this time of being at one with yourself to listen and to hear and to heed and to do and to grow, and thereby become strong by giving strength to others because it is not only to Moshe Rabbeinu that vayikra, 'God calls', but to all of us.

I wrote the words below as a draft for my colleagues among the Rabbinical Council of America leadership. We each recorded a paragraph – in our own voice – and we set these words to a slideshow, which we shared with our communities in advance of Shavuot.

A SHAVUOT MESSAGE FOR THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler

We celebrate Matan Torah at a challenging and sombre time in the life of our people and our world. A terrible pandemic threatens all humanity – a disease that can quickly slow breathing and end life. We mourn each neshama that has already been lost.

Medical professionals are risking their own health for the health of others; we are deeply grateful. We carefully observe recommendations from public health officials to stop the spread of this disease. We recognize that pikuach nefesh takes precedence over almost all mitzvot – including saying kaddish and gathering with a minyan in shul – that we all miss so much. As we do our part, we experience anxiety for not just our health, but also for our livelihoods. We feel these worries not just for ourselves, but also for our family, friends and neighbours.

The disease also threatens our sense of safety and security. We feel this keenly as Jews who have been horribly reminded of anti-Semitism in the years before this pandemic. We must stand together as one in the face of those who unfairly single out our people for condemnation. We are so grateful to face this challenge knowing that the state of Israel stands at the forefront of international efforts to overcome this disease.

Yet, the challenge to our safety and security exists within our communities, as well. We face an outbreak of fear and loneliness – and we recognize that this burden is felt uniquely by the stranger, the widow and the orphan – both literally and metaphorically. Loneliness is felt keenly by those who lean upon community for daily or weekly social

connection. Fear is felt most intensely by those without any financial cushion.

In this case, community is more important than ever. We cannot permit physical separation to become social isolation. This requires us to not just be empathetic but resourceful in our outreach – socially and financially. As we prepare for Shavuot, let us think about what it means to be k'ish echad b'lev echad. Please call / text / e-mail the people that you know need connection. We all need that connection.

In this eit tzara, we need to remember: As Jews – we have faced times of testing before. We do not face these challenges alone. We remember the grit of our grandparents. We know that our grandchildren will tell stories about how we persevere now. We are linked across generations. We draw strength from a legacy and a destiny of courage and of hope.

Compassion and basic kindness are essential and powerful. They are at the root of tzedek and chessed, which are the bedrock of Avraham's legacy to us his children and to all the world. Even at necessary social distance, we can find ways to make a difference in the lives of our neighbours, our cities and the countries that we love so much.

Faith exists to serve us at times like this. It is now that we call upon Hashem's love. We lean on our faith to give us the strength to sanctify God's name during these moments of opportunity. It is now that we pray that we might be the children, the parents, the spouses, the siblings, the friends, and the co-workers that we know Hashem wants us to be.

In this moment – we – all Hashem's children – are in this together. As we fight this common threat, we recognize the tzelem Elokim – the divine image within every person.

As we recommit ourselves to Hashem's Torah on Shavuot – let us live lives of meaning and of purpose. May we sanctify God's name with our last breath and with our every breath.

I shared the following remarks at a beautiful 90th Anniversary Synagogue Celebration. It is hard to believe that this event took place, this past year. COVID-19 has overshadowed so much - not only in the moment but also in memory. It is worthwhile to reflect on that evening and on its meaning. We are not just of any moment. We are connected to past and future. May we continue to harness strength from knowing what has come before us and our power to further that legacy long into the future.

SHAAREI SHOMAYIM'S 90TH ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler

Shaarei Shomayim begins its day – every morning at approximately 6:00 AM in the Weinbaum Beit Midrash. Rabbi Shore or I open the Talmud around a table of friends. On some level, the entire shul is with us in those moments. On some level, likewise, ninety years – the legacies of friends and family – are with us as we gather here this evening.

Among those legacies is the work of Rabbi David Monson, Rabbi Judah Washer, Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, Rabbi Emanuel Fohrman, Rabbi Henry Hoschander, Rabbi Chaim Sacknowitz, Rabbi Mark Dratch and Rabbi Moshe Shulman.

Allow me to quote from the Talmud with which our community begins its every day (Yoma 86):

Abaye said: "And you shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5), means, "You shall make the name of Heaven beloved." How should one do so? One should do so in that he or she should read Torah, and learn Mishna, and serve Torah scholars, and be pleasant with people in business transactions. What do people say about such a person? Fortunate is the parent who taught him or her Torah, fortunate is the teacher who taught him or her Torah.

Abaye spoke about each of us. His message applies not just to us as individuals – but also to us as a community. Together, it is our obligation to make the name of Heaven beloved.

What makes a great community? Every person who walks into our building should leave better for the experience. Having touched Jewish life and community (inside our walls or beyond these walls), that person – be it a member or non-yet-a-member – a volunteer or not-yet-a-volunteer – should be able to say, "This experience has enriched my life." That person should say about our community, "Fortunate are the parents who taught them how to perform mitzvot, fortunate are the teachers who taught them Torah."

Consider this, in any given week, far more than 250 people touch our community. Over the course of a year, far more than 12,500 touches happen here - in 90 years, far more than a million. Today, we don't celebrate 90 years. We celebrate over a million points of contact with inspiring Jewish life, Torah and community.

We celebrate:

- the families who bundle up against the cold to make it to shul so that their children can learn shul's sweetness from a lollipop and a smile from their rabbi.
- the high school boys and girls who wake up early on Shabbat to form a vibrant Teen Minyan and to teach our children with love and fun at our amazing Youth Programs.
- the beautiful songs of our chazanim, the careful Torah reading of Ralph Levine, and the inspiring Torah teaching of Rabbi Diamond.

- the bride and groom who walk down this aisle on the most memorable day of their lives
- the 106-year-old-man who received an Aliyah on the occasion of a yahrzeit for a father born in the 1800s.
- the confident Bar Mitzvah boy who stands to read the Torah for the first time with a “little” knot in his stomach.
- the Sisterhood which gathered before Sukkot for all those years to string up fresh peppers to make our Sukkah so beautiful.
- the little boys and girls who spin graggers on Purim.
- the mourners who help one another say the kaddish for the people who loved them most.
- the men and women who gather around to study chumash with Rashi every Shabbat.

Tonight, we rejoice not in a building but what takes place in that building: we rejoice in the light and the lives. The lives that are lived; the lives that are loved; and the lives that are changed. Shaarei Shomayim is the place of the Jewish present – where one million touches happen. Shaarei Shomayim is where Judaism lives. Tonight, we celebrate that life. Shaarei Shomayim, for 90 years, has made the name of Heaven beloved. May we, Shaarei Shomayim, continue to make the name of Heaven beloved.

On March 7, Shaarei Shomayim created a memorable and beautiful Shabbat Zachor! Thank you to everyone who joined us that day in celebrating our Canadian citizenship. Avital and I are so appreciative of everything the community did to make our becoming Canadian so special and meaningful. We appreciated the surprise presence of our MP Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship and the many kind words – shared publicly and privately with us.

The kiddush was spectacular, especially the fine touches like Tim Horton's Coffee, Canadian beer, a Hermes maple leaf cake, kosher Tim Bits, and pancakes with maple syrup. The many contributors made us feel truly welcomed and loved. And the gifts: We hope to use the Hudson Bay travel blanket as we experience the beautiful scenery captured in the books that the congregation gifted us. I share my remarks from that Shabbat, below.

We are so honoured to be Canadian and even more so to be a part of this amazing Shaarei Shomayim family.

O CANADA O JUDAISM

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler

Remarks Delivered on Shabbat Zachor, Parshat Tetzaveh 5780

Last night, our shul conducted a concluding ceremony for our Bat Mitzvah program. 16 young women presented divrei torah and reflections on the transition from childhood to adulthood. On the Sunday before last, Avital and I participated in another ceremony - the conversion of a young mother and her daughter, through the Toronto Beit Din. It was a very exciting day – a conversion followed by a wedding, which was over 18 months in the making. Last Friday, I called the convert to wish her and her husband a good Shabbas. I said that you both have been celebrating Shabbat for a while – but this Shabbat is going to be special. Your family will now all celebrate Shabbat together, as Jews. On that same morning, I attended my citizenship ceremony. We were 77 new Canadians from 38 countries. After we had sworn and affirmed our commitments to Canada – Judge Simmons asked us to loudly and proudly sing the Canadian national anthem. He said that as we sang “O Canada” for the first time as Canadians – it would be special. Honestly, it was.

David Brooks (who - by the way - was born in Toronto) wrote, “Rituals force a pause. Many wise people self-consciously divide their life into chapters, and they focus on the big question of what this chapter is for. Rituals encourage you to be more intentional about life.”

We do rituals. Many people look askance – at rituals. They’re boring – they’re rote – they’re stuffy. BUT - Rituals are tools that allow us – as individuals, as families and as communities – to live life more intentionally.

Our Torah portion describes the creation of a place where many rituals took place - the mishkan. Those rituals had an internal logic – but they

also created an appreciation for life's purpose.

The Torah says:

וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְשִׁכְנִי בְּתוֹכָם
אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיהֶם :

“And they shall know that I the LORD am their God, who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I might abide among them, I the LORD their God.”

The IBN EZRA explains: They will know ... to dwell among them. They will know that God brought them out of Egypt solely for the Sanctuary that they would build for Him.

The mishkan exists – ritual exists – to establish within our lives a realization of God's presence. Now, some would say – why do I need a fancy building – with dressed up priests – and lots of meat to achieve that awareness. I can experience God with my will alone. I can come in touch with that intentionality without all that ritual. That may be possible – it's just unlikely. When we speak of the ritual of Jewish life and Orthodox Jewish life – we are improving our odds of living a life of meaning and purpose. Rituals – like prayer and Purim – are not the ends; they are the means. They are not guarantees – but they improve our statistics. To paraphrase my predecessor, Rabbi Walter Wurzburger – “Halacha and ritual are the floor and not the ceiling of religious life.”

Becoming Canadian has pushed me in my own intentionality. In my study of Canadian ritual, I've thought about what it really means to be

Canadian. What distinguishes this society from any other? To what end do all the “Ehs,” hockey, and loons lead? I’m thinking a lot about the difference between “Peace, order and good government” and “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” What does it mean to prioritize peace and order over life and liberty? We want all these things – but what do we put at the top. How is life different when you think more of good government than of the pursuit of happiness?

It is in regards to this setting of priorities that I would like to make one last point. This week, we celebrate Purim. There is a Grinch – or a coronavirus – that might steal Purim. How is this Purim different from all other Purims? On all other Purims we talk about the alcohol content of our scotch; on this Purim, we talk about the alcohol content of our hand sanitizer. We hope and pray that coronavirus will not steal Purim. BUT – we as North American Jews face a broader problem. Purim has in many respects long been stolen. It has been stolen by a misplaced emphasis on what Judaism and religion-generally are. We have made religious life too serious.

Purim is about fun and laughter - children and silliness. These things are critical ingredients in how we live life, and how we integrate ritual. Judaism is not only they tried to kill us, it is not only the Holocaust, it is not only Yom Kippur. The intentionality of Judaism is to live a life of complex beauty in God’s presence. In the mishkan that we continue to create through the effort of our hands and our hearts, let us prize Purim. Let us rejoice and let everyone know how fortunate we are to live beautiful Canadian Jewish lives.

Many of us will not be in shul this Rosh Hashana / Yom Kippur. For those who will, it will be different. Wherever we are, in our minds, hearts, and memories, we will be in shul. Shul is not just our prayers. Shul is an experience of community in prayer. In engaging in communal prayer, we are not alone. We don't always know the influence that we have. This poem was written about our synagogue and its sanctuary. It reflects the meaning that we have in one another's spiritual lives. We teach without knowing that we teach.

THE BACK OF YOUR HEAD (YARMULKA)

Jonathan Rajskey

It occurs to me that you may not recognize my face so easily;
I've sat directly behind you in synagogue,
in the same seat that I've occupied for more than forty years.

I've watched the back of your head, (yarmulka tilted slightly to the left,
much the same way that your father wears his) growing taller above the
seat-back in front of me year after year as if in time-lapse photography.

I remember the first time that your father brought you into the sanctuary.
I was just a boy. You were an infant in his arms,
and he was a younger man than I am now, beaming with pride
and glowing with the hope and vision of the future as I've witnessed it unfold:
the two of you sitting side by side, year after year in those very same seats,
singing the same prayers, father and son together.

I bore witness as decades later you carried your own son to that very same spot,
wearing the identical expression of hope and pride that your father had worn.
And it dawned on me then that the days of our fathers had passed.
An entire generation had gone by, in the process of being replaced by the next one
like a continuous flame that burns from candle to candle.
But not before walking hand in hand, and sitting side by side in synagogue.
Singing, smiling and praying together, hopeful and proud.
From one candle to the next, eternity, year after year.

MIND PUZZLES

Answers Below

1. What gets wetter the more that it dries?
2. There are seven months with 31 days, but which of the months has 28 days?
3. What appears once in a minute, twice in a moment and not once in a thousand years?
4. The more you remove from it the bigger it grows?
5. What do a shark, a comb, and a zipper all have in common?
6. I am not alive but I have five fingers, what am I?
7. Starts with E, ends with E but contains only one letter?
8. What can travel around the whole world while staying in the same corner?
9. Give me a drink and I will die, but feed me and I will grow bigger?

The Shaarei Shomayim High Holiday Reader

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Best Wishes for a Happy and Healthy New Year