

A Call to Reflect

Plus61J

High Holidays

Supplement

תשע"ח



*Broadening the conversation
Israel, Australia and the Jewish world*

Contents

- 4 **Rabbi Sid Schwarz**
Reflections on Social Justice and Religion
- 6 **Anat Hoffman**
Bridge over Toxic Waters
- 8 **Rabbi Jeffrey B Kamins**
The sacred power of these days
- 10 **Rabbi Amy Eilberg**
Praying for all of humanity
- 12 **Dr Leah Kaminsky**
Recognising Human Weakness
- 14 **Shira Ben-Sasson Furstenberg**
Say No to Apathy
- 16 **Manny Waks**
Al Chet
- 18 **Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman**
The Revolutionary Promise of Yom Kippur
- 20 **Dr Jonathan Aikhenbaum**
Our sins into the depths of the seas
- 22 **Dalit Kaplan**
Is reading Hannah's story on Rosh Hashanah good for feminism?

Editor: **Dr Elan Ezrachi**

Editorial Board: **Dr Shahar Burla, Michael Visontay, Uri Windt**

Graphic Design: **Shira Halberstadt, Studioishi.com.au**

Illustrations: **Doron Briner, yentelstudio.com**

For all enquiries please contact editor@plus61J.net.au

This High Holiday Supplement may be republished with this acknowledgement:
'Reprinted with permission from the Australian-Jewish publication Plus61J (www.plus61j.net.au)

Introduction

The High Holidays are in effect, our *Jewish prime time*. Once a year, Jews worldwide stop their normal course of life and assemble for a period of unity, celebration, reflection and renewal. Though some of the central elements of the High Holidays originate from the ancient rituals that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem, the High Holiday season has evolved over the centuries as a universal, territory-neutral and all-inclusive experience. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are – the Jewish approach allows you to practise and reflect on the meaning of the year that has just ended, embrace the New Year and its consequences, and revisit fundamental moral and personal questions.

The Jewish tradition supplies us with rich inspiring tools to elevate the experience: masterful liturgical creations, the blowing of the Shofar, the Tashlich (the symbolic deposit of our sins in the ocean), fasting on Yom Kippur, the Sukkah and more. Add to that the lively family gathering, the good food and the power of communal solidarity.

But here is the catch: All those wonderful elements can become routine and trivialised. Year in and year out, we are predisposed to follow the manual that tells us what to do and causes us at times to forget the deep meaning behind the texts and the rituals.

It is with this in mind, and our aim to add to the cultural life of our community, that we at +61J are proud to present a supplement for the 2017 High Holidays. We bring you a collection of ten short essays reflecting on values and motifs of the High Holidays. Our contributors come from the United States, Israel and Australia. They were asked to choose elements of the season – based on texts or rituals – and reflect on the ancient through a contemporary prism and their own thinking. The items are relevant, thought-provoking and call for action.

We hope that you will find this short anthology enriching and inspiring, together with the timeless traditions that you practise.

We wish you all a good and meaningful year: Shana Tova שנה טובה.

The editors

שנה טובה

Reflections on Social Justice and Religion

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

How fitting it is that the Haftarah selection for Yom Kippur morning is Isaiah 58. The focus on the “inner work” of Teshuva, important as it is, can easily lead the congregant into a mindset that Judaism is primarily about personal transformation. Along comes one of the most powerful passages in all the Torah, reminding us that without a commitment to social justice, religions don’t work.

It is precisely because of the rise of religious extremism, violence and intolerance in the world today that we must reclaim the value of religion. This requires us to understand the difference between righteousness and self-righteousness. Righteousness is when we act towards others in a spirit of tolerance, justice and compassion.

Self-righteousness is when we come to be convinced that our own religion, lifestyle or philosophy of living is superior to alternate paths. When we cross the line between righteousness and self-righteousness, we find ourselves in territory that leads to prejudice, hatred and death.

In a similar way, there is good religion and bad religion. Bad religion is triumphant. It confuses ends and means. It places doctrines over people. It accepts injustice as a divinely-ordained condition, beyond the ability of humanity to affect. It breeds self-righteousness.



Good religion recognises that there are many equally valid paths to God. It puts a premium on acts of kindness and compassion for others. It is based on the belief that every person is made in the image of God. Good religion promotes the belief that a human being’s duty is to repair a broken world. In the Jewish tradition, we call this concept tikkun olam.

Every religion has elements of good religion and bad. Ironically, when our loyalty to our own religion blinds us to the truth and wisdom of another’s tradition, we go down the road that has given religion a bad name. This is why it is so easy to hate religion, and why so many dismiss it. This is also why so many have overlooked the possibilities that

Social justice is to religion what love is to family. One is the institution; the other is a quality that makes the institution worthwhile

religion offers to create a reality more just, compassionate and peaceful world than that in which we currently find ourselves.

Life is a journey through a wilderness filled with much pain and suffering, injustice and inequality. Religion has the power to move us toward the messianic future. It is no coincidence that many of the most important movements for justice in the world have rallied around religious personalities whose leadership was deeply rooted in their respective faith traditions.

Mahatma Ghandi used Hindu teachings to rally Indians against an unjust British occupation of their land. Dietrich Bonhoeffer used Protestant theology to articulate Christian opposition to Adolf Hitler. Dr Martin Luther King Jr was a minister who used his pulpit to stir the conscience of America against the evils of racism. Desmond Tutu invoked Christian teachings about forgiveness and reconciliation to keep South Africa from plunging into a cycle of violent revenge after it succeeded in ridding itself of the white minority apartheid government. Elie Wiesel went from being a chronicler of the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust to an international voice of conscience in the world, speaking on behalf of people experiencing oppression

in every corner of the globe.

What has given these individuals, what might give us, the strength to be, in the words of Martin Luther King, “drum majors for justice,” in a world filled with poverty, oppression and selfishness? Good religion gives people just such strength. Persons of faith believe that good can triumph over evil despite the injustice that they see in the world and a way to make that belief true.

Social justice is to religion what love is to family. One is the institution; the other is a quality that makes the institution worthwhile. Just as a family without love is dysfunctional, so is a religion dysfunctional when it does not teach and manifest a deep commitment to social justice.

Isaiah 58 minces no words. It is a warning that religions—if they are to “work”- must balance the way they can inspire personal transformation with the never-ending task of advancing social transformation as well. While the former might be effectively advanced in the sanctuary, the latter calls upon Jews to leave the quiet of the sanctuary and enter the public square where we need to be God’s agents to ally with the most vulnerable among us ●



*Rabbi Sid Schwarz
(www.rabbisid.org) is
a Reconstructionist
rabbi based in
Washington DC This
selection is excerpted*

*from his book, **Judaism and Justice:
The Jewish Passion to Repair the
World.***

Bridge over Toxic Waters

Anat Hoffman

In my youth I was a competitive swimmer. I received over 300 medals, several of them during the Maccabiah Games. Having been a Maccabiah champion made it more difficult for me to face the tragedy of the collapse of the bridge at the opening ceremony of the 1997 Maccabiah. The Australian delegation took the biggest hit because delegations were marching into the stadium in alphabetical order.

I was appalled by the attempts of the Maccabiah leadership to avoid taking responsibility for the faulty building work, and its obligation to support the families of those who lost their lives. I was disappointed with our government who neglected to enforce regulatory standards and was responsible for the toxic pollution of the Yarkon River. Specifically, I was troubled by the lack of empathy toward the family of Sasha Elterman, who was critically injured in the incident and had to undergo extensive treatment and multiple operations in the years that followed.

In 2004 I organised a protest. I collected Maccabiah medals from fellow Israeli swimmers and travelled to Australia to present the medals to Sasha, as a token of solidarity with her suffering. In my visit I felt the rage of the Australian Jewish community. I felt that a fist was pointed against Israel, the Israeli government and

The Jewish tradition gave the “fist” another meaning. On Yom Kippur, we use our fist to awaken ourselves, particularly to awaken our hearts.

toward the world Maccabi leadership. They felt betrayed.

A fist is clenched when we need to convert the soft open hand into something hard that can protect us from an assault or inflict injury on to others. One way or another, the fist symbolises aggression and violence. However, the Jewish tradition gave the “fist” another meaning. On Yom Kippur, we use our fist to awaken ourselves, particularly to awaken our hearts.

Five times during the service, we perform a “confession” (vidui). We stand with the rest of the community, form a fist with our right hand and hit our chest while chanting a list of sins in alphabetical order: “Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu...” (we sinned, we betrayed, we stole, etc.). This is a solemn moment to focus on our own role in the collective sin.

I find much meaning in this ritual. It is first and foremost an act of taking responsibility, of being accountable.

Clearly, when I chant those verbs I am aware of the fact that I did not commit all those sins that are mentioned on the list. But I still announce in public that I committed them. Second, we announce the sins in the “plural”. It is not “I sinned, I betrayed, I stole...”, it is us. We take responsibility in public and we do it collectively.

All my life I have been fighting for the fulfilment of this standard: take responsibility, be accountable. I actually initiated the invention of a Hebrew word for “accountability” that did not exist in our Modern Hebrew vocabulary. It turned out to be a very hard word to pronounce and therefore is not often used (the word is אחריותיות achrayootiut).

Yom Kippur gives us an opportunity to rest from blaming those who are directly responsible. It allows us “a pocket in time” to look at our role as ones who are indirectly responsible. I believe that our silence is our main sin. When it comes to Israel I find that my counterparts in the Diaspora are often silent. They explain and justify their silence by the fact that since they don't pay taxes here and do not send their children to the army they

have to stay silent. They are afraid to add their criticism to the unjust accusations against Israel by its enemies.

I believe Israel is way too important to be left only to the Israelis. Israel is the most significant collective Jewish project of our lifetime. Being engaged with Israel is not like being spectators in a sports tournament. It requires active participation. Diaspora Jews are a precious reservoir of wisdom and wealth. Do not hold back. Speak out openly and lovingly. We are all together walking on a narrow bridge.

והעיקר לא לפחד כלל ●



Anat Hoffman is a Jerusalem-based activist. She is the President and CEO of IRAC, the Israel Religious Action Centre and Chair of Women of the Wall

The sacred power of these days

These ten days inspire and invigorate us to take action and heal that which is wrong in our life and our world

Rabbi Jeffrey B Kamins,

“The cradle rocks above an abyss, as our common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for,” writes Vladimir Nabokov. (Part 1 of chapter 1 of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*). Humanity’s existential crisis, our knowledge of our impending death, can lead some to paralysis, others to hedonism, and others to a life of right action. That latter choice is at the heart of our liturgy in this season of reflection, which compels us to live with renewed energy and clear direction in this brief crack of light that is our existence.

For that reason, I find compelling U’netaneh Tokef, recited at the height of the service on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It begins: “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day.” The sacred power of these days is that we have the opportunity for deep introspection about the state of our personal life, and how we are conducting our life in relationship with others. These days empower us

to reflect on our choices to date and to rededicate ourselves to our purpose or chart new direction.

The prayer reminds us that our lives are short and fragile, providing a sense of urgency to the choices in front of us: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed – who shall live and who shall die.” The poetic imagery insists that we consider that the days of our lives are indeed limited, and none of us knows when our physical existence will come to an end. Judaism teaches however that we are not powerless puppets whose terminal status makes life meaningless, but just the opposite. Each of us is an autonomous individual whose daily choices provide purpose and meaning in life.

U’netaneh Tokef sets up the process of how to live life fully human, how to deal with our existential crisis. It is “teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah that annul the severity of the decree.” The decree does not change: each of us will die and return to the eternity of darkness as Nabokov imagines it. None of us truly knows what happens to our soul or conscious essence once we die. All we know is that in our hand is the answer to



the question: “how will you live?”

Teshuvah, or repentance, teaches that we have the opportunity to change our ways and our habits. As bleak as the world may seem at times, we can repair both our relationships and the world we inhabit. Tefillah, generally understood as prayer, means, as well, self-criticism. This step is essential if we are to consider in which ways we have succumbed to despair, complacency or selfishness in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges we face. Tzedakah, right action, requires us to do the nitty gritty work “out there” that makes a difference.

We live in a time in which so many aspects of society seem broken because of ignorance and fear, inequity and injustice. Sometimes it can feel like there is not even a crack of light between the eternities of darkness. These ten days inspire and invigorate us to take action and heal that which is wrong in our life and our world. (And just a few things I can think of that need to be addressed urgently and importantly here in Australia: a treaty with the original inhabitants of this land; just treatment of refugees, especially those in detention and on Manus and Nauru; marriage equality; a

more equitable economy; a considered response to climate change, including stopping the Adani mine).

Yes, each of us will die, and that we cannot control; but yes, each of us can shine more light in this world by the daily life choices we make. That is the sacred power of these days. As Moses teaches in the one Psalm attributed to him: “Teach us to number our days that we may acquire a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12) ●



Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins OAM has served as Rabbi at Emanuel Synagogue since his ordination from HUC-JIR in

1989, serving as Senior Rabbi since 1999. In 1991, he began Australia’s first Conservative (Masorti) service, and is committed to the principles of egalitarianism, inclusion and diversity within the synagogue and the broader community

Praying for all of humanity

Rabbi Amy Eilberg

It is a truism that Jews are connected to one another. Our Torah predominantly describes us as a people in communal relationship with God, with a collective journey through history. Even our confessional prayers are formulated in the first-person plural (“We have sinned”).

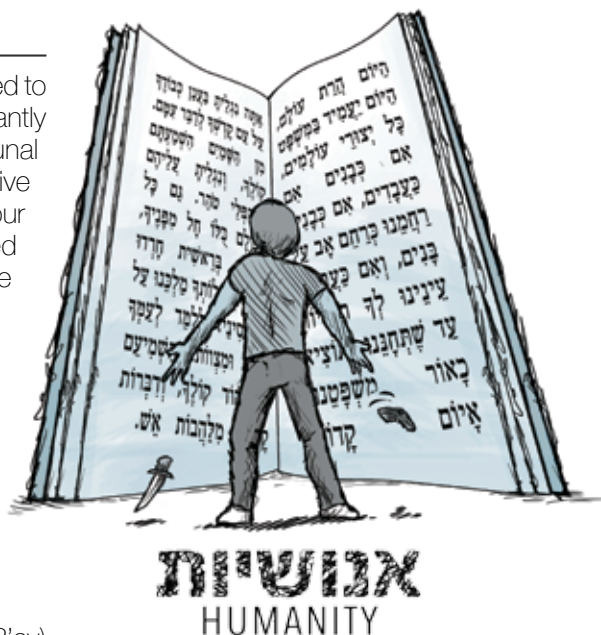
Against this background, it is striking that the prayers we recite on the High Holy Days are largely focused on issues of concern to all humanity, not only to Jews and the Jewish people. While other holidays focus on the unique historical experience of the Jewish people (e.g. Passover, Shavu'ot, and Tish'a B'av) and the particular practice of Jews (e.g. Sukkot), the High Holy Day Machzor focuses largely on themes of human powerlessness, mortality and moral development.

Consider the following three examples.

Ki Hinei Kahomer

On the eve of Yom Kippur, we recite the beloved liturgical poem, Ki Hinei Kahomer (As Clay in the Hand of the Potter). The prayer begins with the evocative language: “As clay in the hand of the potter, who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in Your hand, Guardian of love.”

The poem elaborates the image of God as creator of humanity, suggesting our dependence on God and ongoing mal-



leability as we move through life. We are as stone in the hand of the mason, as iron in the hand of the blacksmith, as cloth in the hand of the draper. Surely, the metaphors are imperfect: we make countless autonomous choices in our lives.

But the poem emphasises those dimensions of life that we do not control: the family and community we were born into, the gifts we are given, the particular life challenges that are ours to navigate. Uncomfortable as this perspective may be, the High Holy Day prayers direct us again and again to the limits of human power and agency in this life. This is true for all humanity, not only, of course, for Jews.

In this time of unbearable violence, hatred, and injustice in our world, these themes in the Machzor direct our attention toward our essential humanity

Unetaneh Tokef

Perhaps the most famous and most difficult prayer of the holiday season is the Unetaneh Tokef (“Let us speak of the sacred power of this day – profound and awe-inspiring”). This prayer imagines God reviewing our moral successes and failings of the previous year and on the basis of these, decreeing our fate for the coming year. “Who will live and who will die? . . . Who will be at peace and who will be troubled? . . . Who will be impoverished and who will be enriched? . . .”

Contemporary Jews struggle mightily with the apparently deterministic and threatening theology beneath these images. Yet the prayer has enormous power, because it captures a reality of human life that is irrefutably true, however

we may wish to deny it. We have far less control over the facts of our lives – and, of course, the end of our lives - than we like to imagine. Again, while this poem is a Jewish reflection on mortality and human vulnerability, these are issues that pertain to all human lives.

Hayom harat olam

Multiple times over the holidays, the Machzor declares: “Today is the birthday of the world.” This image vividly invites us to contemplate the creation of the world, and brings us to a sense of radical newness and possibility so important for our spiritual work on these Days of Awe. Needless to say, the world’s birthday is common to all peoples.

In this time of unbearable violence, hatred, and injustice in our world, these themes in the Machzor direct our attention toward our essential humanity – not only as Jews, but as members of the human family. Thus, our prayers on these sacred days are not only for ourselves and our own people – those who are like us, those with whom we feel comfortable, those with whom we agree – but for all humanity, including those beyond our usual field of concern.

May we rise to the challenge of holding our entire human family in our prayers this holiday season, and may our prayers be heard ●



Rabbi Amy Eilberg is the first female rabbi ordained in Conservative Judaism (1985). She is the director of the Pardes Rodef Shalom (Pursuer of Peace) Communities Program. She also serves as a spiritual director and interfaith activist in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Recognising Human Weakness

Nowadays we don't need to torture goats to atone for the crappy ways we have behaved during the past year

Dr Leah Kaminsky

There are no proper swear words in Hebrew – they are all borrowed from other languages. One of the insults that is actually in Hebrew, used widely when you want to get the upper hand in an argument, is Lech L'Azazel – even more effective when shouted while waving your hand.

Loosely translated, the equivalent expression in English is 'go to Hell'. But Azazel is a mysterious word – Leviticus refers to it as the name of a supernatural demon mentioned in connection with the ritual of Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement. Outside of Satan, for whom Azazel kind of blazed the trail, he enjoys the distinction of being the most mysterious extra-human character in sacred literature.

The Parsha we read on Yom Kippur is a troublesome one for me. It's about the ritual of animal sacrifice, which in the day, was the accepted gig to get in good with God. In the parsha, two goats, similar in appearance, height, cost, and time of selection are lined up on either side of the High Priest, who puts both his hands into a wooden case, and takes out two labels, one inscribed "for the Lord" and the other "for Azazel."

The high priest then lays his hands upon the two goats and says, "A sin-

offering to the Lord". He ties a red woolen thread to the head of the goat "for Azazel" and recites a confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness. The poor scapegoat is then led to the precipice in the lonely wilderness and legend has it, pushed off the edge, separating it forever from the people of Israel.

Nahmanides talks of the purpose of this ceremony as a symbolic expression of the idea that the people's sins and their evil consequences were to be sent back to the desert, the spirit of desolation and ruin and source of all impurity, viewed by the people of Jerusalem as a means of ridding themselves of the sins of the year.

Nowadays we don't need to torture goats to atone for the crappy ways we have behaved during the past year. Nor do we need a belief in an omnipotent God to spur us on in asking for forgiveness for our hurtful behavior to others, as well as to ourselves.

Each of us has two lives. The second starts when we first realise that we only have one. That is the point where we need to figure out what our values are and what we want our life to look like. Which path will we follow – the one towards the altar of light, or the one to Azazel? "Who shall live and who shall die?" Both involve a sacrifice –but searching for the light calls

for atonement, a humility, an awareness of not only our inner selves, but how we connect with the wider world.

Leave it to us Jews: ten days after stuffing our faces with apples and honey cake on Rosh Hashanah, to devote 25 hours rehearsing our own deaths by fasting and wearing white, the colour of the traditional burial shroud. We don't wash, shave, brush our teeth, wear makeup, have sex, or binge-watch *Offspring*.

Why do I bother seeking out a service to join every Yom Kippur? I think back to my teenage years of shul-hopping each Yomtov, to schmooze and check out the talent. A huge crowd of us hung around the front of the building chatting and flirting. No guards in those days.

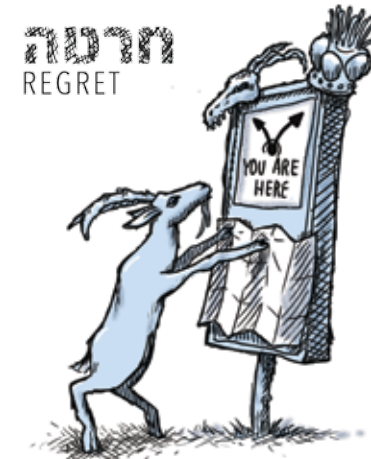
But there was a "pinteleh yid" in me, a spark of Yiddishkeit, that needed to acknowledge Yom Kippur, drawn in by the haunting melodies rising with the blast of the shofar. Even my mother, who lost God somewhere between Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen, never setting foot inside a shul again, still

quietly fasted on Yom Kippur.

The wonderful Israeli writer, Etgar Keret, writes that out of all the Jewish festivals and holy days it is Yom Kippur he loves most of all: "Maybe it's because Yom Kippur is the only holiday I know that, because of its very nature, recognises human weakness. "On Yom Kippur, we're not a heroic dynasty or a people, but a collection of individuals who look in the mirror, are ashamed of what demands shame, and ask forgiveness for what can be forgiven."

We are drawn to come together as a community on Yom Kippur to atone for our sins, surrounded by others who join us in trying to figure out how we won't individually or collectively lech l'azazel this year. But I say, every day should be a private mini Yom Kippur.

I wanted to finish by wishing everyone gmar hatima tova, but my computer autocorrected it to omar fatima ova. Google translate says that means "eloquent, captivating egg". May we all continue to be eloquent, captivating eggs in the coming year ●



Dr Leah Kaminsky won the prestigious Voss Literary Prize for her debut novel, 'The Waiting Room' (Vintage 2015, Harper Perennial US 2016). Other books include 'We're all Going to Die' (Harper Collins, 2016), 'Writer MD' (Knopf US), and she co-authored 'Cracking the Code' (Vintage 2015). She holds an MFA in fiction from VCFA. (www.leahkaminsky.com)

Say No to Apathy

Shira Ben-Sasson Furstenberg

Last year I sat in my synagogue on Yom Kippur. All of us together, women, men and children, wore white clothes and were excited for the big day: the Day of Judgement had arrived. I knew that soon we would sing all the beautiful prayers and piyutim (liturgical poems) which we wait for all year long. We looked introspectively into our lives over the past year and hoped to get a verdict that would write us for life. In anticipation toward the Viduy (confession) prayer, which reviews all the sins that we have sinned over and over again, our deeds have come to us and we were prepared to shout the long list starting with the words "For the sin that we have committed against You ..."

One of the members of my congregation came up to the front to say a few words after the Kol Nidrei service. She chose to speak about the concept of "Judgement", about the trial we are going through on Judgement day. She referred to

the need to look at our actions and see what must be corrected. Her message was that the Judgement should be softened. She had one message for us as a community and as individuals. She said - do not be tough with yourself. Do not overly judge yourself. She explained that we are so hard on ourselves, always; we expect to meet such difficult standards all the time. This year, on Yom Kippur, she said to all those sitting in the synagogue: make it easy for yourself, gives yourselves a break - accept yourself without too much Judgement.

I moved uneasily in my chair. This is not the message I was expecting to hear on Yom Kippur. On the contrary, I do not need encouragement to cut corners, to behave less than 100% with God and humans, not as a private person and not as a community. This message is particularly true given that this essay is read by people on the other side of the globe. We do not know each other personally and therefore our confessions



So let's do our search and confession together as a public. Let's not make it easy for ourselves. Let us ask ourselves as a community: did we act to fix what is wrong?

are public statements. This is not a time for personal confessions. We will take care of our most private confessions in our personal prayers. In the Viduy of Yom Kippur that we recite five times we will ask ourselves how WE were and how we would like to be as human beings.

Yom Kippur invites us to move between our need to improve our ways as individuals and as a community. This journey is in the heart of the Yom Kippur liturgy. Kol Nidrei begins with undoing the vows of the individual, and concludes with reference to the vows of the whole community. In the verse immediately after Kol Nidrei "And we shall be forgiven" This statement pertains to the whole congregation of Am Israel, including the stranger who lives among them"

So let's do our search and confession together as a public. Let's not make it easy for ourselves. Let us ask ourselves as a community: did we act to fix what is wrong?

Perhaps Yom Kippur is perceived in our consciousness a day of private reckoning, despite the collective mani-

festation of the day. On the other end of the calendar, there is Tisha B'Av as a day of national accountability. If so, in the space between them, I feel that the great sin that threatens us as a public is the sin of apathy. The sin of apathy is the one we must not fall into. It is apathy that allows hunger to grow, the gaps to deepen, the fabric to disintegrate.

You do not have to be crazy warriors of justice. You do not have to leave your workplaces or your family. Nor should we leave repairing the world (Tikkun Olam) to our youth. Each and every one will find the issue that bothers them the most. There are plenty. On top of all our privileges, there is one privilege we must not adopt - we must not be indifferent. We must take responsibility. Pick one thing, pick three, four things, pick two. Make a Jewish New Year's resolution that will not let you slip into indifference. Fight against the occupation, for gender equality, against sexual abuse, for workers' rights, against racism, for pluralistic Judaism - you name it.

For the sin that we have sinned against You with indifference...No more. Let's stand together as a community next year and say: Avinu Malkeinu, Our father, our king, bless us כי יש בנו מעשים, there are deeds within us ●



Shira Ben-Sasson Furstenberg is a senior staff member of the Jerusalem headquarters of the New Israel Fund

AI Chet



Forgiveness is a human necessity, especially in the context of significant injustices. Moreover, forgiveness may be a powerful tool – both for the one giving the apology and its recipient

Manny Waks

To many victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, especially those abused within an institutional setting, Jewish festivals are a particularly challenging period. They trigger thoughts and behaviours that may be incomprehensible to others. The desire to survive this period – to literally remain alive – may often be a daily, if not an hourly challenge to many.

Unfortunately, based on personal experience, I fully understand some of these challenges.

I was raised in an ultra-Orthodox Chabad family. Between the ages of around 11 until 14 and a half – some of the most important years of a religious child, which includes the venerated year of the bar mitzvah (13) – I was sexually abused, by two different men. Some of the abuse took place inside places of religious significance, including a

synagogue and a mikvah (ritual bath).

Naturally, during the period of abuse and its aftermath, I rebelled against everything I knew – not least my religion. This extracted an additional price from me in terms of my family, school and community.

It is important to highlight the impact sexual abuse and its aftermath has on the Jewish identity of its countless victims.

To me, the place I feel most uncomfortable in the world is inside a synagogue. I also instinctively tune out of most religious discussions; religion itself disinterests me (as opposed to my community, history, traditions, etc.). I am unsure whether I believe in God.

Religious studies and texts cause me difficult emotional responses. They often act as an unhealthy trigger, which is often challenging to handle.

The concept of forgiveness is an

important one in Judaism; a core Jewish value. At least that's what I was taught at my childhood school, Yeshivah College, the venue of some of my abuse.

Of course, often, seeking or accepting forgiveness is not easy. Acknowledging our mistakes may seem like increasing our vulnerability. And acknowledging the mistakes of others, especially in circumstances where they have hurt us in a profound way, may seem insufficient through a mere apology, at least initially.

But forgiveness is a human necessity, especially in the context of significant injustices. Moreover, forgiveness may be a powerful tool – both for the one giving the apology and its recipient.

Over the years I have sought to forgive the many who have wronged me and others – for the cover-ups, intimidation and/or inaction. My only condition has been that the apology be genuine, which has not necessarily always been easy to discern. I have received and accepted dozens of such apologies, including by those claiming to adhere to Orthodoxy, though their apology clearly did not conform to its standards.

All those who have apologised should consider those they hurt. Was that one-off apology or public statement sufficient? If they claim to follow Halacha (Jewish Law), was their apology consistent with Halachik requirements? Can they be doing any more to alleviate the pain they caused (directly or indirectly) their victims?

In this context, Rabbi Moshe Gutnick's 2013 world-first and powerful public **Yom Kippur apology** on behalf of the Orthodox Rabbinate deserves a men-

tion. It demonstrated that the Rabbinate was (belatedly) acknowledging some of its gravest failures. This apology had an incredibly positive impact for many around the world.

However, based on recent developments – for example, the **hiring of (Rabbi) Meir Shlomo Kluwgant** by the Adass community in Melbourne or the case involving **my first abuser Velvel Serebryanski** – it seems clear that while we have progressed as a community in significant ways in this area, we still have a very long way to go.

For as long as I have the strength to do so, I will continue to advocate for justice, accountability and prevention. Despite the ongoing personal cost, I have not given up because I have witnessed the significant progress and become fully aware that this process will take a generational change to fully implement.

Until then, when we pray, repent and celebrate during our wonderful Jewish festivals, we should consider what we may do to alleviate the pain and suffering of so many others, especially if we were in any way responsible for that pain. Perhaps at some point after this I and my fellow victims may finally be able to join the broader community in the celebrations ●



Manny Waks is CEO of "Kol v'Oz" and the author of "Who Gave You Permission?" (with Michael Visontay)

The Revolutionary Promise of Yom Kippur

When we look inward and acknowledge our shortcomings we are acting godlike.

The Biblical God is dynamic, ever-changing and constantly learning

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman

The well-known Kol Nidre prayer that opens the Yom Kippur service is followed by a series of Biblical verses which the congregants recite: "In your unbounded lovingkindness, please pardon the sins off this people. Forgive us as you have forgiven our people throughout all times." This is followed by: "And the Lord said (to Moses, in the biblical source): 'I have pardoned them as you have asked'."

When the rabbis composed the Kol Nidre service they chose the verses quite consciously. The most famous national sin reported in the Bible is the sin of the Golden Calf. The people engage in idolatry as Moses is receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai. If we were looking for an example of a national sin and divine forgiveness, that might be a good place to start. But these verses are from the book of Numbers. They relate to a different national sin - the spies.

In the book of Numbers, it is told

that Moses sends 12 leaders, one for each tribe. They are assigned to scout the land of Israel in preparation for prospective entry. Ten come back with a list of negative reports. "The people who inhabit the country are powerful... they are of great size. Compared to them we looked like grasshoppers! (Numbers 13.28-33). The other two, Caleb and Joshua, offer a different report: Let us go up, we shall possess the land! Numbers 13.30). The people at large believe the negative report and fall into fear and despair. "If only we had died in Egypt" (Numbers 14.2). God is furious and decides to destroy the people of Israel. Moses pleads for forgiveness (Numbers 14.19) and God



The story also invites us to be confident about being in the land of Israel despite objective hardships. Yes, there are many challenges to having a sovereign Jewish state. But we must not fall into the trap of despair.

The story also presents a theologically unsupportable idea - God admits to being wrong and is convinced to do right by a mere mortal. How can God, who is omniscient, be wrong? The Biblical authors want us to understand that God's nature includes the ability to do Teshuvah, to recognise that we are wrong and to do the right thing. When we look inward and acknowledge our shortcomings we are acting godlike. The Biblical God is dynamic, ever-changing and constantly learning. This is what it means to be created in the divine image. The revolutionary promise of Yom Kippur is that we are not stuck. We can change. That is the true meaning of Teshuvah ●

acquiesces; I have pardoned as you have asked (Numbers 14.20).

By choosing these two verses for the Yom Kippur service, the rabbis communicate multiple messages, political and theological. First of all, the great Biblical sin that we evoke on this night when we ask for forgiveness is not the sin of idolatry. It is the sin of believing in leaders who spread fear and despair. It is the sin of ignoring the voices of hope and confidence. On the eve of Yom Kippur we are called to seek worthy leaders.



Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman is the founder of Kehilat Kol Haneshama in Jerusalem, a board member of Rabbis for Human Rights and an interfaith dialogue activist.

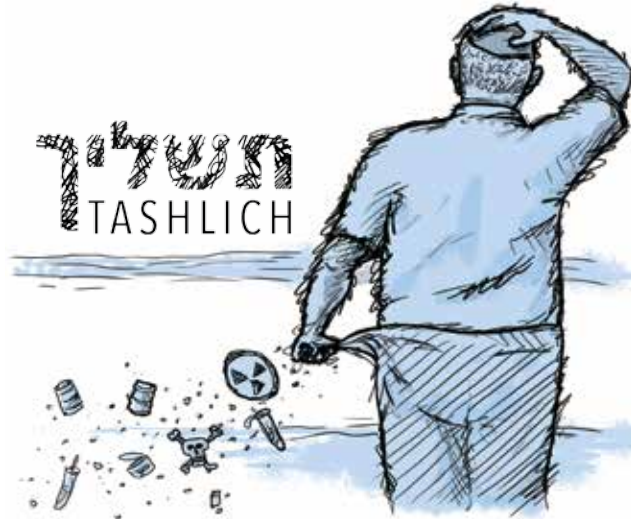
Our sins into the depths of the seas

Dr Jonathan Aikhenbaum

Every Rosh Hashanah, we go to the sea or to any stream of water and empty our pockets. This tradition – in Hebrew called Tashlich (the act of throwing away) – has existed for centuries and symbolises the disappearing of our sins. We do not only empty our pockets; we also open our hearts and empty our inner selves so we can start the new year on the right foot.

What is actually happening with our sins? The prayer that accompanies this tradition clarifies this issue: Our sins go in the sea, the endless sea, as we borrow Joel's prophetic words and request from God to "conquer our iniquities", and to "cast them into the depths of the seas".

The idea of the depths of the seas has an interesting role in this process. The depths accept our sins. They are this special place that is so far, so large and so unreachable that we can be sure our evil side will not return from there. They seem to be beyond the physical boundaries of the world.



However, the development of science and economy on the seas and under them has changed this perspective, and invites us to redefine the way we see the Tashlich tradition. During the past century, we have been able to establish the cartography of the deep sea and to understand the abysses in the same way we understand the high summits of the Himalayas. We are able to witness the particular forms of life that are developing and fructifying there, with their special shapes and colours.

We have also begun to dig into the deep sea, to lay communication cables,

Tashlich does not stand by itself but is part of a larger process of forgiveness... If we learn from our mistakes and correct our ways, the sea will always be willing to absorb our mistakes

gas or oil conduits and to catch fish. The scarcity of fish over the seas is so severe (for example, there are 90% less fish in the Atlantic than a century ago) that we are breeding comestible fish into farms and nourishing them with deep sea species. Pollution is so significant in closed or half-closed seas (like the Mediterranean) that oxygen is becoming scarcer even in the deep sea.

Do we still throw away our sins to the deep sea today? To some extent yes, and maybe even more than in the past. The problematic situation of the deep

sea from an environmental perspective is nothing but the reflection of our failure, as an occidental civilisation, to develop ways of life and economic growth that keep themselves within the limit of natural boundaries, recognise the right of future generations to enjoy a natural capital and that of every element of the creation to stay in place - simply.

In an ecological system where all species are interacting with one another, the damage we cause to the deep sea, as well as what we are causing to all the environment, is coming back to haunt us. At the end of the day, pollution affects human health; the disappearance of species of plants or animals underlies our capacity to adapt to new challenges and situations.

In essence, the Tashlich process has a very clear rationale, which follows the general movement of this period: Tashlich does not stand by itself but is part of a larger process of forgiveness. God forgives us because we are willing to forgive ourselves and turn a new page. If we learn from our mistakes and correct our ways, the sea will always be willing to absorb our mistakes. The willingness of humankind to assume its mistakes and take responsibility endlessly enlarges the boundaries of the deep sea and of all our world ●



Jonathan Aikhenbaum is Greenpeace Israel Campaign's manager and the founder of the Environmental Bet Midrash "Makom". His fields of expertise includes environmental discourse and Judaism.

Is reading Hannah's story on Rosh Hashanah good for feminism?

This coming Rosh Hashanah, I will read the story of Hannah with different eyes

Dalit Kaplan

I was nine-weeks pregnant on the first day of Rosh Hashanah last year. Becoming pregnant had not been easy for me. But by that ninth week of my pregnancy, my memories of the treatments and yearning of all that came before were eclipsed by the discomfort of early pregnancy: nausea, exhaustion, irritability, sore breasts... you know the drill.

I spent most of the Shul service supervising my busy toddler. But I did catch a small portion of the story of Hannah, the Haftorah that is read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

If you're drawing a blank on the story of Hannah, let me refresh your memory: Hannah was one of the two women married to a man named Elkanah. His other wife, Penina, had given birth to many children. But Hannah couldn't even have one. She went to the Temple to pray to God to give her a child. The

High Priest, Eli, happened to be present and witnessed Hannah moving her lips without making a sound. Eli watched Hannah's strange mutterings and concluded that she must be drunk. He told her off. Hannah defended herself. She was not drunk, she explained. Rather she was praying to God for a child. Eli had a change of heart and blessed her. Bam! She fell pregnant. She had a baby. That baby was Samuel, eventual prophet of the Israelites. And, Hannah's "strange mutterings" would ultimately serve as the template for personal Jewish prayer in Jewish tradition.

I cringed as I read the story last year. It bothered me that we learn about Hannah, like most women in the Torah, through her reproductive status. So often in the Torah, a woman's capacity to be a mother is the chief marker of her identity. Sarah laughs when she is told she will have a child in her nineties. Leah is celebrated for her fecundity. And everyone remembers Hannah as the woman who can't have kids (and then invents prayer).

In case there was any doubt, the Talmud brings this message home when it offers us a description of the content of Hannah's prayer at the Temple. According to the Talmud, Hannah had



asked God why God had bothered to give her breasts if she couldn't use them for suckling a child (Berachot, 31B):

"Sovereign of the Universe, among all the things that You created in a woman, You have not created one without a purpose, eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk with, breasts to give suck. These breasts that You have put on my heart, are they not to give suck? Give me a son, so that I may suckle with them."

Ouch! A nose for breathing, legs to walk, and breasts to feed our babies. There I was, in all my pregnancy discomfort, on

one of the most important days of the Jewish calendar, being reminded that this was my main function: child-bearer and child-rearer.

Surely, by reading and re-reading these sorts of stories, we are reinforcing a deeply disempowering vision of what it is to be a woman in Judaism. Were there no other narratives about women to read on Rosh Hashanah? To this young Jewish feminist, reading Hannah's story as part of this central holiday service felt decidedly unfeminist.

That's what I thought last Rosh Hashanah. Enough with women and babies. There is more to us than that.



Dalit Kaplan a writer, podcast producer, entrepreneur and chronic oversharer. In another life, she was a lawyer, and she still practices a bit of community law on the side as a hobby. She has lived in Sydney, Jerusalem, New York, Austin, Chicago and recently returned to her hometown of Melbourne. She can be contacted at hello@storywell.com.au



The story of Hannah, I concluded last year, was not good for the feminists.

But this coming Rosh Hashanah, I will read the story of Hannah with different eyes. Because that pregnancy I described above ended at twenty-seven weeks when I delivered a stillborn baby. This year, as I read of Hannah's grief during the Rosh Hashanah service, I will also be grieving for what would have been my daughter. And I will probably find comfort in the fact that one of the most significant services in the Jewish calendar is partly devoted to recounting this universal narrative: the story of a woman yearning for a child. An experience that feels so invisible and lonely will be recounted to an audience of millions of people around the world.

I am not looking to obscure the sexism of the text. It is still true that the text of the Torah reflects a time in which a woman was valued mainly for her reproductive capabilities. This is still a view that feminists are fighting today both inside and outside of the Jewish community.

But the Torah is also filled with stories about people. And as we move in and out of the different stages of our lives, as readers of the text we will sometimes identify strongly with those people. At other times, we will feel challenged and perhaps indignant. But therein lies the power of reading and re-reading

I feel that my story – and the story of so many women before and after me – is strongly reflected in our cultural mythology

the same ancient text every year: it angers and it comforts. It alienates and it provides solace. We see how vastly different we are from societies that have come before us, and how similar we are to the individuals who lived in those societies.

So now I am a little bit grateful that the story of infertility and pregnancy loss features so frequently in the Torah. I feel that my story – and the story of so many women before and after me – is strongly reflected in our cultural mythology. I am grateful that this unique, yet painful, story – so familiar to so many people – occupies prime “real estate” in the Rosh Hashanah service. Hannah sheds light on the silent pain of struggling with fertility. The rabbis articulate the tragic quality of not having a child almost perfectly. By placing a uniquely female story at the centre of the service, the Talmud is doing something positively feminist, albeit unintentionally ●



*Broadening the conversation
Israel, Australia and the Jewish world*