

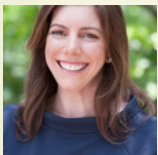


מהר"ת
maharat

Yamim Noraim Reader 5787: Maharat Torah for the Days of Awe



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Introduction</i> Dr. Rachel Rosenthal, Director of Learning Initiatives	3
	<i>Suffering and Connection in Unetane Tokef</i> Zan Alhadeff '27	4
	<i>HaGozel Shofar: Hearing the Ownerless Cry of the Shofar</i> Emily Bell '27	9
	<i>Tefillat Chana</i> Rachel Berke '29	12
	<i>Is Everyone Redeemable? Change and Teshuva</i> Elisheva Cohen '29	16
	<i>The Architecture of Sacred Memory: Zichronot and the Creative Power of Remembrance</i> Amanda Goldstein '27	19
	<i>Seir LeAzazel: The First Scapegoat</i> Shana Krakowski Burstein '28	22
	<i>Casting Our Sins Into the Water</i> Yehudit Mazur Shlomi '27	26
	<i>Teshuva: A Return to Nothingness?</i> Yael Turitz Kaplan '27	30



Yamim Noraim Reader Introduction

Dr. Rachel Rosenthal, Director of Learning Initiatives, and Gemara Faculty

There is an inherent contradiction built into the Yamim Noraim. It is the most solemn time of year; it is the happiest time of year. We stand trembling before God, asserting all the ways in which we are not worthy, while staking an audacious claim to the right to be forgiven anyway. We simultaneously face God on God's chair of din, of judgment, and on God's chair of rachamim, of mercy. We join with our community, but each of us are judged alone. We are filled with self loathing. We are filled with hubris. We are filled with fear. We are filled with hope.

Perhaps my favorite piyyut in all of Yamim Noraim liturgy is the chazan's prayer of Hineni, traditionally said before the beginning of musaf on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The chazan begins by saying, "Hineni he'ani mima'as—Here I am, impoverished of good deeds." The chazan, who has been chosen to guide their community through the perilous journey of musaf, presumably for their ability to daven forcefully and meaningfully, starts by saying, I do not deserve to be here. And yet, he knows he will continue, leading the community in their petitions. So he has no choice but to ask God not to hold his sins against his community, and to remove any impediments to his prayer. The tefillah ends, Blessed are You who hears prayer. The chazan does not invoke God's names in his closing. Instead, he addresses God with intimacy—it is You, it is me, it is us. Please, let us find a way to come together. The challenge is figuring out how.

The pieces in this reader are the second set of articles born out of our new Hear Her Voice: Center for Writing, Homiletics, and Communications Training. Over the course of the previous academic year, our first, second, and third year Core Semikha students attended seminars and workshops once a week in order to strengthen their writing skills across different modalities. The goal of the program is to amplify our students' voices. We know that their Torah is powerful, and we are excited to give them more tools to allow it to be heard by more and more people. These eight pieces each represent the Torah of our students' hearts, guiding us through this beautiful, terrifying moment in the Jewish calendar with warmth, compassion, and faith.

As the pieces in this reader make clear, there is no single path towards God in this season of awe and fear and joy. The jumble of emotions evoked in each of us is the intentional outcome of the liturgical and ritual structure of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We must be humble enough to admit our failings but brave enough to argue that we deserve another chance. The question of how to balance those contradictions is different for each person. Whether you find answers in the machzor, in the leining, in the sound of the shofar, in the rituals, or in your own reflection, we hope that these pieces will guide your path to teshuva.

G'mar Chatima Tova



Suffering and Connection in *Unetane Tokef*

By Zan Alhadeff, Class of 2026

It is the morning of Rosh Hashana, and a hush fills the sanctuary. The ark is open, displaying all the sifrei Torah enrobed in white. This is the moment that many consider the emotional climax of the High Holidays: Unetane Tokef. "And with a great shofar it is sounded, and a still small voice shall be heard..." The piyut begins with fear and trembling, as it describes all of us passing before Hashem like sheep, measuring our deeds and our days. As the poem continues, I feel a wave of dread.

On Rosh Hashana it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire...

My mind passes over everything that has happened to friends, loved ones, and the world during the past year. Illness, death, and suffering stalk us all. Unetane Tokef teaches that our fate is inscribed by God on Rosh Hashana. All things, good and bad, are determined at this moment.

For me, Unetane Tokef has been difficult to pray for many years. In 2013, my mother passed away on Erev Yom Kippur. Every year, I recall the weeks leading up to the end of her life. And this piyut, with its themes of death and judgment, always feels too pointed. Can it really be saying that God decrees an early death, that we deserve all of our suffering? At the time of year when my own loss is the most present, the liturgy feels like a spotlight on that grief.

The piyut continues, offering us a way that we can play a role in our own fate. Although God determines the judgment, our actions can create change. The paytan writes, "U'teshuva u'tefillah u'tzedaka ma'avirin et ro-a ha'gezera," "But repentance, prayer, and justice/charity avert the evil of the decree."

After suffering losses, we wonder—does this really mean that we just didn't pray hard enough? Can we really erase "evil decrees" from our lives? And how can we sincerely pray this text, as challenging as it is?

I have gone through my own journey with this difficult text. Some years, I have read it, or avoided it, or wrestled with it, and tried again and again to find a way through.

Part I: Rabbinic Origins

Unetane Tokef is a rich text, weaving Torah and rabbinic intertexts with the author's own poetry. To understand "ma'avirin" the evil of the decree, we must examine its sources in Talmud and Midrash. In

Bereishit Rabba (44:12), it states, "Three things nullify (mevatlim) evil decrees, and these are: tefillah, tzedakah, and teshuvah." We see the same "three things" in our liturgy, but the language is different. In the midrash, the decrees are nullified completely. However, in Unetane Tokef, we "avert/pass away the evil of the decree."

In Rosh Hashana 16b, we see a different version of the same idea, "Four things tear up (mekar'in) the decree of judgment for a person, and they are: tzedakah, crying out (to God), changing one's name, and changing one's deeds." Crying out to God is an analog for prayer, whereas changing one's deeds is similar to teshuvah. Similar to Bereishit Rabba, the evil decree is completely erased. In this text, the decree is literally torn up, much like a legal document that is invalid.

Whether by *nullifying* or *tearing up*, in Unetane Tokef the evil of the decree is made to pass away. Poetically, just as God passes over us like a shepherd over his flock, we can make God's harsh decrees pass. However, the language is ambiguous. What does it mean for the evil decree to pass away? Does this mean that the decree itself will be changed, or will the "evil" only be mitigated?

Dr. Reuven Kimelman, in his article "Unetaneh Tokef: A Commentary," on the website Torah.com, argues that the addition of the word ro'a, "averts the evil of the decree," suggests that the decree will be mitigated rather than annulled. It is the "evil" of the decree, rather than the decree itself, that is lessened or removed. We may not be able to tear up the judgment, but we can soften its harshness. As Rabbi Alan Lew puts it in his book *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*:

But do prayer, Teshuvah and Tzedakah actually change our fate? The rabbis who came along later realized that of course they do not. The real change is in the way we perceive the world. So they changed the language of the prayer accordingly. Now we say, Teshuvah, Tzedakah and Tefilah ma'avirin et ro-a ha gezerah.

Rabbi Lew suggests that the way we soften the harshness of the decree is by changing ourselves, and by changing the way we approach our own lives. To do this, we have to consider how we look at suffering and difficulty.

Part II. The Chasidic Lens on Suffering

What if overcoming the evil of the decree is really about changing ourselves, and our perspective on what happens to us? Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us that when we re-orient our vision towards God, we can change our experience of suffering.

In Likutei Moharan (65:3), Rebbe Nachman reflects on the problem of suffering. If God is all-Good, why is there suffering in the world? He writes: "Thus we see that whatever evil and suffering a person

experiences, God forbid, if he focuses on the ultimate purpose—i.e., God's intention—he will not experience it as suffering at all..." Rebbe Nachman's view is that the suffering we experience is a result of how we see our experiences and where we place our focus. We suffer because our awareness is taken from us. He likens this experience to the phenomenon of a person closing their eyes when they experience severe pain, because they are trying to shift their focus away from that pain. So too, we must close our eyes from our own suffering and re-orient toward the "ultimate goal of Creation:"

One has to close one's eyes and fix one's gaze on the ultimate goal. This is because the light of this ultimate goal is very distant from a person. The only way for him to see it is by closing his eyes.

This interpretation of human suffering shows us that perhaps, the "evil" of our suffering is a result of our own perspective. When we focus our vision on our relationship with God, we can mitigate the intensity of our pain and how we view our experiences.

Alternatively, does this pain come because we are distant from God? Is this the reason for evil and suffering? For centuries, some Jewish thinkers have claimed that we experience suffering because God has turned God's face from the Jewish people (the concept of hiddenness, or *hester panim*). However, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943) in his Warsaw Ghetto work, *Esh Kodesh*, rejects this idea:

How is it possible to say that that suffering is a result of *hester panim*? Indeed, "I will be with them in distress," (Tehillim 91:15 "Imo Anokhi b'Tzarah"). Further, it is God who bears the burden of our suffering...(5701, Re'eh).

The Esh Kodesh teaches us that in reality, God has not hidden Godself from us. To the contrary, God feels and carries our pain with us. He goes on to say that it is only our perspective on our pain that creates this feeling of distance and concealment when we are in pain. Perhaps we can lessen the "evil" or the suffering that results from painful experiences, because God is present with us in these difficult moments. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

Part III. Offerings

We learn from these Chasidic teachings that the way we might lessen our experience of suffering is through focusing on God's presence. When we open our eyes to the reality of God, we can mitigate the "evil" of the experience. When we remember that God is with us even in dark moments, it may be possible to let some light in.

In *How God Becomes Real*, sociologist Tanya Luhrmann explores how different religious groups make God manifest in their lives by "kindling" God's presence. She relates a story about a group of nuns who contracted chronic tropical diseases in the process of their work. One nun was able to transform her experience of her disease through prayer and connection with the divine:

She called a meeting of all her amoebas and told them that she loves them. These days, every morning she stands in front of a mirror and "addresses all of God within herself." She still experiences pain, but it no longer seems significant. It no longer feels like God's punishment...(p. 150).

This vignette suggests that by reframing her disease from a punishment to a way to experience God, this nun was able to diminish her own suffering. We may not be able to nullify physical or emotional pain, but we can change our experience of it by "kindling" God's presence and feeling that God is with us.

So, how do tefillah, teshuvah, and tzedakah avert the evil of the decree? By calling out to God in prayer, by drawing nearer to Hashem and the mitzvot, we are deepening our connection to God. It is through our relationship and our experience with Hashem itself that we soften the experience. Much suffering is the result of loneliness and of distance—from our community, from ourselves, and from God. When we do teshuvah, we try to close that gap. And in this way, we have the possibility to change our experience of loss and difficulty.

However, it is not always possible to recognize that God is with us in our narrow places. Because of the depth of our pain, sometimes we feel angry and distant from God, even if we try to pray, connect with mitzvot and our community. However, anger is not always a path of distancing oneself from God. In Jewish sources, anger can even be a valid way of communicating with God.

On the *What Now?* podcast, Rabbi Eliezer Diamond relates that anger can be part of the Divine-human relationship. He says that we see this in the Psalms of complaint or lament: "My whole being is stricken with terror, while you, O Lord, How long?!" (Tehillim 6:4). When we recite these psalms, we are channeling a deep tradition of raging against and arguing with God. And when we argue with God, we are still expressing a relationship and a desire to connect.

In my own life, after my mother's passing, I went through a period where I was angry with God and I found it difficult to pray. In my own way, I believe that sometimes even not praying can be a way of crying out, of protesting loss and tragedy. We are angry with God because we believe deeply that God should be a force for goodness and justice. According to Elie Wiesel, "Indignation may in fact be the most authentic expression of faith, for it is a testimony of our belief—in spite of what we see—that God

is just" (Ariel Burger, *Witness*, p. 93). When we rage at God, we are expressing a deep faith in God's justice, even when it seems lacking in the world.

Part IV. Conclusion

There is no one right way to approach Unetane Tokef in light of deep human suffering. For some, it may be impossible to reconcile its striking words with our own experience. For others, this piyyut may offer comfort. Rabbi David Kraemer, also on the *What Now?* podcast, shares a story of a terminally ill person who found great comfort in the idea that tefillah, teshuvah, tzedakah could change his own health. Unetane Tokef might bring a contradictory combination of comfort, rejection, and acceptance, whether for different people or for a single person at different points in their lives.

The challenge of "ma'avirin et ro-a ha'gezera" is that when we read this line, we ache for the gap between its promise and the suffering and loss that we still experience. Despite our prayers, bad things happen. And when we reach this line in our machzor, we wonder whether we should have done more. However, there is another way to read this part of the piyyut. Unetane Tokef begins, in terrible majesty, describing God's great power to judge all of humanity. Dr. Shira Billet suggests that "tefillah, teshuvah, tzedakah" actually reflects the potential for agency and human power in the face of mortality. Even as God has awesome power to determine our fates, there is still room for us to create change.

In this way, Unetane Tokef reminds us that tefillah and teshuvah can diminish the "evil" of the decree by reawakening us to God's presence. By building a closer relationship with God, we remind ourselves that we are not alone. Through this relationship, we have the power to change ourselves and our perspective. Perhaps, by crying out to God, by drawing near to the divine with intention, we can sweeten some of the bitterness of life and death.

This can be a long process. Perhaps there are years when we need to leave the room, or when we cannot pray at all. At these times, we can imagine that God is crying with us, in God's innermost chambers. When we learn to feel God's presence, even in dark moments, that is how we begin to transform our fate. And so, when we pray this Yamim Noraim, may we feel that God is with us, b'eit tzarah, in the time of our suffering. As we deepen our connection to God and to each other, may we lighten our burdens together.

HaGozel Shofar: Hearing the Ownerless Cry of the Shofar

By Emily Bell, Class of 2026

On Yom Teruah, Rosh Hashana, the call of the shofar calls us forth to face God's judgement. Hearing the shofar is the central mitzvah of this solemn day, following the intense spiritual preparation and introspection of Elul that is also marked by daily shofar blasts. How could it be, then, that we can fulfill our obligation to hear the shofar's cry through theft?

In fact, this is precisely what the Shulchan Aruch permits: "The one who steals a shofar and sounds it has fulfilled their obligation even if the owners have not despaired of recovering it" (Orach Chaim 586:2).

This ruling is surprising for two reasons. First, it is hard to understand how fulfilling a mitzvah through a significant transgression could be permitted during the most spiritually precarious time of the year, when we strive to be on our very best behavior. Second, the language of "hagozel shofar," the one who steals a shofar, immediately recalls the seemingly analogous case of the stolen lulav from the third chapter of Sukkah, "Lulav HaGazul."

In Mishna Sukkah 3:1, the Mishna states unequivocally that a stolen lulav is unfit for fulfilling the obligation of taking the four species on Sukkot. The mishnah doesn't give a reason for this prohibition, but it seems intuitively obvious that stealing something to fulfill a mitzva would be problematic. Surely, then, a stolen shofar should be similarly unfit for discharging one's obligation. The Shulchan Aruch's ruling, however, rejects this assumption. Therefore, it seems that the essence of the mitzvah of shofar differs in some key way from the mitzva of lulav. In fact, the themes of ownership and ownerlessness relate to the two holidays in different ways, offering us a new way to think about our teshuva process on Rosh Hashana.

The Gemara in Sukkah (29b-30a) presents two potential reasons for the mishna's ruling that a stolen lulav is invalid for use: first, that the essence of the mitzvah of lulav has to do with ownership, and for this reason one cannot fulfill their obligation on a stolen lulav because it does not belong to them; and second, that this constitutes a mitzvah haba'a b'aveira—a mitzvah that comes by means of a transgression.

The idea that fulfilling the mitzvah of lulav hinges on ownership comes from the rabbis' reading of the verse in the Torah where the mitzvah is first mentioned:

And you shall take for yourself on the first day the fruit of hadar trees, palm branches, branches of leafy trees, and willows of the brook and you shall rejoice before Hashem your God for seven days (Vayikra 23:40).

The Rabbis understood the seemingly superfluous language of “for yourself” as coming to teach that one must take the four species from their own property, meaning ownership is essential to fulfilling the mitzvah. Thus, one cannot fulfill their obligation with a lulav that they do not own. The Rabbis compare using a stolen lulav to bringing a blemished animal for sacrifice. Just as an animal with disqualifying blemishes cannot be made fit for sacrifice, so too a stolen object continues to carry the blemish of its acquisition, even if its original owners despair of recovering it and thereby relinquish their claim. Waving a stolen lulav is an affront to God and to the entire system of mitzvot which are meant to perfect our behavior and distance us from sin. So why doesn’t the stolen shofar follow this same logic?

The Talmud Yerushalmi offers one explanation for the difference between the cases:

What is the difference between a shofar and a lulav [such that the ruling differs]? Rabbi Yosei says: Regarding the lulav, it is written, “And you shall take for yourself,”—from your own property, not from that which you are forbidden to benefit [i.e. the property of others]. But here it says “A day of blasts it shall be for you.” Rabbi Elazar says: there [in the case of the lulav] he fulfills his obligation by the thing itself. Here [in the case of the shofar] he fulfills his obligation by its sound, and is there a sound from which he is forbidden to benefit? (Talmud Yerushalmi, Sukkah 3:1).

This framing provides two important insights for our consideration of what defines the mitzvah of shofar. On a purely halakhic level, we learn that lulav and shofar simply operate by different logical frameworks. Where the mitzvah of lulav is fulfilled through the object itself, the shofar is merely a vehicle for the mitzvah to hear its call. Beyond this, however, Rabbi Yosei’s and Rabbi Elazar’s statements prompt us to think about the symbolic meaning of the requirement of ownership for lulav.

At Sukkot, a time when we celebrate surviving the spiritual peril of the Yamim Noraim and the material peril of the immediate time before the fall harvest, the mitzvah of u’lekakhtem lakhem, and you shall take for yourselves, asks us to give freely of our choicest produce to Hashem for a purely ceremonial purpose. Taking the four species as commanded imposes a financial burden at a time of otherwise material plenty, providing a grounding counter to the celebratory nature of the holiday. It reminds property owners of their place in relation to the Master of the Universe. For this reason, fulfilling the mitzvah hinges on ownership.

In contrast, shofar is not an offering we make to God akin to a sacrifice, but rather a tool for our benefit—a wake-up call to repent according to Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4), an expression of our spiritual distress according to the Rosh, or possibly a cry for mercy according to Rabbeinu Tam (both found in R. Shlomo Fischer, Derashot Beit Yishai Siman 17). Through its very sound, it reminds the listener of the cosmic order and our status as subjects of God. This accords with Rabbi Elazar's statement that we do not forbid one to benefit from a sound, but only from an object. In its treatment of the two seemingly similar cases, the Yerushalmi suggests that not only is ownership not essential to fulfilling the mitzvah of shofar, but in fact ownerlessness may be something that defines the call of the shofar.

By connecting shofar to the theme of ownerlessness, the case of the stolen shofar points us towards the liberatory nature of the holiday itself. It may seem counterintuitive to connect Rosh Hashana's central theme of God's sovereignty to liberation, but through the experience of shofar—and the very order of the Rosh Hashana mussaf from Malkhiyot, to Zikhronot, to Shofarot—we see the liberatory potential of being in a covenantal relationship with God. After we reaffirm God's rulership over us, we invoke the memory of the Akedah in word (the final blessing of Zikhronot: "And the binding of Yitzchak, on behalf of his descendants, may You remember is today with compassion," Machzor Ashkenaz), and in sound, each time we sound the shofar, itself a symbol of the animal that replaced Yitzchak on the altar.

Just as the sound of the ram's horn travels from its narrow origins up towards heaven, bringing our hopes for a better year and world with it, so too the shofar witnessed Yitzchak being released from his physical bindings while also being drawn deeper into his relationship with God. Yitzchak's release from the sacrificial pyre represents his liberation from the dehumanizing institution of child sacrifice and the petty whims of the Canaanite pantheon. This liberation, however, is bound up in a renewed and expanded covenantal obligation to the One God.

In this way, the call of the shofar speaks to the deep connection between affirming God's sovereignty and breaking free from spiritual bondage, while the Yerushalmi's treatment of the stolen shofar versus the stolen lulav invites us to think about Rosh Hashana as a moment of breaking free from material bondage as well. On Sukkot, we are required to offer our choicest property, acknowledging our agency as free property owners. But on Rosh Hashana, the shofar is ownerless, and we sound the shofar from whatever narrow places we inhabit, grounding our teshuva in the reminder that we are free from all earthly bindings and bound only by our service to the Melekh Elyon.

There was a time, before “business casual” became the norm for office dress, when I would walk into shul on Rosh Hashana dressed as though I was heading into a formal negotiation. As a practicing attorney, I understood the importance of preparation, presentation, and persuasion. Likewise, each year, I came to shul in my best corporate suit prepared to do business—to advocate and make my case before God.

Perhaps my Rosh Hashana mindset was somewhat irreverent. But in retrospect, it may not have been entirely misguided. After all, Chana, whom we read about each year on Rosh Hashana, is a woman who appears before God to do precisely as I intended: make her case and come away with a “win.”

Chana comes to the Mishkan with something deeply personal and unresolved. She is not described as bringing an offering or expressing praise. She has a specific request: a child. She presents it with intensity and vulnerability, and ultimately, her prayer is answered: “And the Lord remembered her... and Chana conceived and she bore a son” (Shmuel I 1:19–20).

I. Why Chana on Rosh Hashana?

Chana’s story, which we read as the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashana, reflects several central themes of the day. Both Chana and the day of Rosh Hashana are defined by tefillah. In fact, Chazal deem Chana to be the prototype for effective prayer. The Gemara (Berachot 31a) derives core elements of the Amidah from her behavior: she “spoke upon her heart,” establishing the requirement of internal sincerity; “only her lips moved,” teaching that the Amidah is recited silently; and her focused, almost total absorption models the level of concentration expected in prayer. Chana did not perform tefillah—she created it.

Rosh Hashana is also called Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance, and Chana’s story echoes this theme when the text explicitly states: “And the Lord remembered her.” The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 11a) expands this idea, teaching that several barren women—Sarah, Rachel, and Chana—were remembered by God on Rosh Hashana. The day is not only about proclaiming God’s kingship; it is about Divine remembrance of individuals and their hopes and dreams.

While it is clear that Chana and her answered prayers are a thematic fit for the day, it also reflects something counterintuitive about how one approaches God on Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana is the day in which we annually commemorate God’s coronation as our King and His sovereignty over the world as its Creator. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, observes that Rosh Hashana is associated with the theme of Malchuyot, or Kingship, because it is the day we coronate

God as King. Chana, however, approaches Him not with grandeur and formality, but with vulnerability and direct communication (Likkutei Sichot, Rosh Hashana/Shabbat Teshuvah 5725). She offers no sacrifice, and no mandatory ritual. Instead, she brings only a deeply personal plea. And it is precisely that form of prayer that is answered and ultimately changes Jewish history with the birth of Shmuel.

II. Chana and Eli: A Debate About the Nature of Prayer

If Chana represents the model for prayer, then her interaction with Eli HaKohen provides the framework for understanding the boundaries of that model. The text describes Eli observing Chana as she prays silently, her lips moving without sound, and he berates her by exclaiming, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” (Shmuel I 1:14). This reaction raises an obvious question: If Eli genuinely believed that Chana was intoxicated in the Mishkan, why did he wait until she had completed her entire prayer before confronting her? A drunken presence in the Mishkan would surely require immediate intervention.

Eli’s lack of immediate action suggests that Eli’s critique may not have been literal. Rather than accusing Chana of intoxication, Eli may have been responding to the form of her prayer—its intensity, its emotionality, its deeply personal focus. Such a display may have appeared inappropriate within the sanctity of the Mishkan. The Mishkan is a makom kadosh, a holy place, designated for avodah—structured service, reverence, and the acknowledgment of God’s greatness. It was not perceived to be the forum for subjective, emotionally driven, personal requests.

Chana’s response is not defensive; it is instructional and enlightening for Eli. She explains, “Oh no, my lord...I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the Lord” (Shmuel I:15). Her prayer, she insists, is not a lapse in decorum but an authentic act of recognizing God’s sovereignty. Indeed, the Lubavitcher Rebbe frames this exchange as a fundamental disagreement about tefillah. Eli views personal petition as inappropriate in the presence of God’s holiness. Chana demonstrates that when properly framed, such a petition is not only appropriate—it is an essential component of avodat Hashem, service to God.

III. The Tension Within Rosh Hashana

The disagreement between Eli and Chana mirrors a broader tension within Rosh Hashana itself. On the one hand, the day is defined by Malkhuyot—the coronation of God as King. The liturgy minimizes personal requests and instead emphasizes God’s sovereignty, transcendence, and authority. On the other hand, Rosh Hashana is also a day of judgment for each and every living being. Individuals stand before God with very real needs—life, health, livelihood, and peace. The instinct to ask is both natural and unavoidable. The question, then, is not whether we may ask, but whether asking is compatible with coronation, the theme of the day.

In our daily prayers, this tension is present but less pronounced. When we say the amidah, we begin with praise to God and then proceed to a structured series of requests. But Rosh Hashana is God's special day of coronation. The day seems to demand a singular focus: the recognition of God as King. Eli's position reflects that conventional thinking—the Mishkan is God's special place where it is all about Him. Chana's response challenges it.

IV. Request as Recognition of Sovereignty

Perhaps the resolution lies not in choosing between coronation and request, but in understanding the relationship between them. Additionally, our understanding of coronation is limited by the fact that we no longer experience true kingship and the power that it wields. Therefore, allow me to offer a modern day analogy—for illustrative purposes only. The dynamic of supplicant and sovereign is captured vividly in the opening scene of *The Godfather*. On the day of his daughter's wedding, Don Corleone receives a series of petitioners. By custom, precisely because it is "his special day," he cannot refuse their requests. Each petitioner approaches him with deference, carefully acknowledging his supremacy before presenting a deeply personal need. The requests do not detract from his power; they affirm it. The act of asking, in itself, is an expression of his authority. So too, on Rosh Hashana, it is specifically because we are coronating God as King that we bring our requests before Him.

Chana's own tefillah reflects this orientation. She does not simply ask for a child; she situates her request within a larger framework of Divinity. She implores God, "If You will grant Your maidservant offspring... I will dedicate it to the Lord all the days of its life" (1:11). Her request is not an endpoint; it is a vehicle for *avodat Hashem*, her service to God. In this sense, Chana is not interrupting the coronation; she is participating in it. She is not just asking for something; she is aligning her needs and desires with God's kingship and the Almighty's very creation of those needs and desires.

V. The "Business" of Rosh Hashana

Perhaps, then, my instinct, years ago, to come to shul "dressed for business" was not entirely misplaced. Rosh Hashana is, in a sense, a day of negotiation—but not in the adversarial way I once imagined. It is not about facing God as adversaries. It is about positioning ourselves correctly before Him and framing our requests in terms of His great capacity to fulfill them and our intention to dedicate the blessings bestowed upon us to the service of God.

We are not negotiating with God in the conventional sense. We are not persuading God to act against God's will. Rather, we are aligning ourselves with it. We begin with coronation—with the recognition that God is the source of all existence. In fact, our need for sustenance as well as inherent longings, like Chana's unfulfilled maternal instinct, were placed within us by our Creator. Our very needs were created by God and our prayers and requests are merely recognition that God is the one who fulfills them.

With this construct, we come to crown the King. To declare, with humility, that God is the source of all life, all judgment, all possibility. And within that framework, we ask not as entitled claimants, but as subjects. Not as independent agents, but as God's creations, intentionally made by God with individual needs and aspirations. Not in spite of God's Day of Coronation, but because of it.

Chana's story therefore, reminds us that the deepest form of prayer is not choosing between coronation and request—but weaving them together. Perhaps that is what it means to truly be remembered. It is not merely a Day of Remembrance for God. God recalls us—but we too, remember who we are, standing before Him. Ready, once again, to do the most important "business" of all.

Is Everyone Redeemable? Change and Teshuva

By Elisheva Cohen, Class of 2028

As we approach the High Holidays, the idea of teshuva seems to be on everyone's mind. Often, especially in my line of work as a psychiatrist, I get asked questions related to forgiveness. The questions usually take the form of asking if there are acts people commit that mark them as incapable of change, and whether it is possible for these people to obtain forgiveness for their actions if their behavior wouldn't be different in the future. When thinking about this question of teshuva—a core one for the Yamim Noraim—one model, in particular, comes to mind to help us understand how to approach these questions: the case of the ben sorer u'moreh, the stubborn and wayward son.

In Deuteronomy 21:18–21, the Torah describes a son who is stubborn and rebellious, disobedient to his parents, and “a glutton and a drunkard.” He steals money and then consumes a meal of meat and wine in the company of lowly men. The son is brought before the elders of the city and prosecuted and then, if convicted, “all the men of his city shall stone him to death” (Deuteronomy 21:21). The Torah's own language implies that this is a last resort—the warning must be given first, and the son must meet certain criteria before he can be sentenced to death. The gemara, in the eighth chapter of Sanhedrin, adds many other highly specific conditions, which functionally make the law nearly impossible to apply in practice. The gemara outlines specific actions, types of food, occasions, and even characteristics of the parents, seeming trying to limit the case out of existence. It then quotes a baraita, taken from the Tosefta Sanhedrin 11:2, which explicitly says that such a son has never existed and will never exist. What, then, is the purpose of all this discussion and how does it help us to understand the idea of teshuva?

Rabbi Kenny Schiowitz, in his book *Madrish La-Moreh*, suggests that all of the limitations applied by the gemara intend to teach us that there never has been and never will be a case in which it is legitimate to make assumptions about a person's future choices. In other words, even as the mishna lays out a conceptual framework of “nidon al shem sofo” (the son is judged on his end, meaning he is killed so that he does not sin further, Mishna Sanhedrin 8:5), it simultaneously makes it clear that there will never be an instance in human experience in which a person can truly be “nidon al shem sofo.” Each person is vested with autonomy and infinite potential for growth.

So what does the stubborn and wayward son teach us about the Yamin Noraim? This idea of people always being able to change, to grow, and to live their own destiny is at the heart of the idea of teshuva. According to Rabbi Schiowitz, the stubborn and wayward son teaches us that while we may never be able to forgive certain acts, people should always be assumed to have the capacity for change. Someone's past actions can never guarantee something about who they will be in the future.

While a moving idea, the concept that people can change is not universally accepted. The Sfat Emet, in his writings on Parshat Va'era, says that when a person sins once, he should lose his power of choice, because sins draw him to continue to choose bad. He often emphasizes that sin leads to a state of habituation and spiritual decline, which restricts a person's ability to choose goodness. As the Rabbis say (Bereishit Rabbah 67:8): "The wicked are held captive by their hearts." How, then, is true change possible? Doesn't this mean that some people should be judged according to their assumed ends?

Once again, the Torah suggests a possible answer. Moses tells the Israelites, "See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deuteronomy 11:26). He is reminding them that they are being presented with two paths—one of blessing and one of curse—but only they get to choose which path to take. The Sfat Emet notes that God specifically says that He is placing before them today, the blessing and the curse. Why the usage of the word "today?" The Sfat Emet explains that while technically speaking, a sinner will remain a sinner, God, in His mercy, renews the opportunity each day to choose good, and that is why the verse says: "See, I put before you today"—each and every day—"blessing and curse."

In Judaism, the belief that God renews the world daily is even found in our liturgy. Every morning during Shacharit, we say, "He renews in His goodness every day, always." This means that every day, or even every moment, we have the chance to come before God as someone different than who we had been. We, as people, need not be the same from one day or even one minute to the next. When someone grabs on to the opportunity to change and renew, they become a different version of themselves. They are a new being, free of the sin of their previous version.

The Talmud (Chagigah 12b) teaches, "Morning comes and evening leaves, and He renews the acts of creation every day." Rashi explains this as the daily cycle of light and darkness—morning light "entering" and evening light "leaving"—symbolizing the renewal of creation. While the p'shat might point to a reference to the day-night cycle, many classical and mystical sources interpret it as a reference to God's ongoing creative activity. This idea also shows up in Jewish philosophy. In the Guide for the Perplexed by Maimonides, he discusses the idea of "yesh me'ayin"—"something from nothing." The Tanya of the first Lubavicher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), uses this term to teach the doctrine of perpetual creation. This means creation is not a one-time event but a continuous act: at every moment the world exists only because God actively sustains and renews it.

In speaking about the wayward son, the gemara instructs us to study and expound on the issue, as that is the only reason the law exists. It is only there for us to obtain merit from that learning. To me, this is the key to the idea of teshuva. The imperative to interpret and gain merit shows us how we ourselves can change by making our way out of a place of fixed determination. Through the process

of contemplation and understanding, we will be able to renew ourselves internally. Just as God renews the world minute by minute, we are afforded the ability to renew ourselves and our internal world as soon as we choose to do so.

The process of teshuva involves a review of our actions. We must think carefully and review the data before making choices that will influence the lives of other people. But doing that is not enough. We are then required to approach others and ask, with words, for their forgiveness. This use of our words and power of speech to articulate something has the power to fundamentally change the trajectory of our relationship with another person. As the world was created by God with speech, so too, we must remember that our speech has the power to change the trajectory of the world. As God created the world from nothing at all, so can we create hope and positivity where there exists only absence or negative feelings. This is not a one-time exercise, but rather something that can be changed yearly, daily, even minute by minute. The result of this introspection is that we emerge as different people who look at the world differently, and who can thereby influence our environment in new ways. It is thus through the act of teshuva that we partner with our Creator to enrich and better our lives and the lives of those around us.

May this be a truly new year for us all.

The Architecture of Sacred Memory: Zikhronot and the Creative Power of Remembrance

By Amanda Goldstein, Class of 2027

A teaching long attributed to The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidic Judaism, holds that "Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption." These words suggest that the state of the Jewish people, as well as the state of the human soul, is not primarily determined by action or law, but by memory.

This insight finds its fullest expression in the second of the three central blessings of the Rosh Hashana Mussaf Amidah, labeled Zikhronot. On the day the universe was called into being and on which all creatures pass before God "like sheep before a shepherd," the Jewish people gather to converse with God in the language of memory. It is not merely a recitation of historical events, but rather a radical claim that memory creates reality.

In order to understand the theological reality of creative memory, it is essential to have an understanding of how memory functions. Episodic memory refers to a form of long-term, conscious memory that enables a person to recall specific personal experiences, events, and situations from their past. According to the research of Daniel Schacter and Donna Rose Addis published in their article "The cognitive neuroscience of constructive memory: remembering the past and imagining the future," published in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, March 2007, "episodic memory is widely conceived as fundamentally constructive, rather than reproductive." This means that memories are largely formed by retrieving fragmented bits of information such as sensory details, emotions, and key facts and piecing them together like a puzzle. This model is echoed in the Rosh Hashana liturgy. Just as human beings engage in an act of reconstruction every time they remember, so too the liturgical portrayal of Divine memory reflects this constructive quality. The theological language of Zikhronot mirrors the cognitive insight that remembering is not simply the retrieval of stored data but a generative process, one that brings something new into being through the act itself.

One does not ordinarily think that God requires a reminder of anything. Yet, the liturgy does precisely this: it reminds God to remember. To understand the true depth of the Zikhronot section, one must sit with this philosophically demanding claim: memory is not merely descriptive but constructive. When God "remembers" Noah, the waters do not subside because God has recalled an obligation; the creative act of Divine remembrance is itself the cause of the receding flood and prevents the destruction of the world. In another instance, in Bereishit 30:22, God remembers Rachel and she conceives. Noah and Rachel together trace the full arc of what Divine memory can do. In one, a world is drawn back from the edge of annihilation. In the other, a life is summoned into existence where, for

too long, there was none. Preservation and conception exemplify the two poles of creation, and both are set in motion by single acts of Divine remembering. Memory, once again, is a creative act.

However, even as we ask God to remember in the Zikhronot blessing, we are not asking God to remember everything. The tradition is explicit about the desire for selective memory. The Mishnah states unambiguously: "We do not reference verses of Zikhronot, Malkhuyot, and Shofarot if they are negative" (Mishna Rosh Hashana 4:6). The liturgy of remembrance is curated. Certain memories are deliberately excluded because summoning them before the Divine serves no redemptive purpose. To invoke God's memory of our failures would be to weaponize memory, rather than to sanctify it. Our Sages understood that what we summon during tefillah shapes the spiritual reality that we are trying to construct. They understood that on the day when the world itself is born anew, yom harat olam, the day of the world's conception, every human soul stands pregnant with possibility. Rosh Hashana asks us to remember selectively, as an act of faith that we are not yet finished. To exclude the negative verses is to insist, liturgically, that what we carry into the new year is the living potential of what we might still become.

What first seems like ritual evolves into a deeply human truth about how memory lives within us and shapes the contours of the soul. Psychologists and neuroscientists increasingly recognize "selective forgetting," the brain's capacity to suppress certain memories in order to function effectively, to heal, and to move forward. Far from being a flaw, this is a feature of human memory, as selective forgetting functions as a kind of psychological housekeeping. The Rosh Hashana liturgy applies this principle theologically. We ask God, in essence, to exercise the same mercy toward us that a wise and loving mind exercises toward its own past.

This has a profound implication for what we are doing when we stand in prayer on Rosh Hashana. In addition to recounting history, we are attempting to direct Divine memory with hopes of invoking a new reality. We are asking that the God who remembered Noah in the ark, who remembered Rachel who begged to conceive, who remembered the slaves in Egypt, who swore an oath at Moriah, to remember us now, in our particular exile and confusion, and that this remembrance function as it always has: as the opening for a new possibility.

Human memory operates in a parallel manner. When we recite the names of the patriarchs, when we narrate the Exodus, when we read the Torah over and over again, we are reminding ourselves, as much as we are reminding God, of who we are and what our heritage is. In Judaism, memory is identity.

To read Zikhronot in this way is to receive an invitation. We are asked to understand and participate in the sacred architecture of memory itself. In choosing what to recall and what to conceal, we imitate the Divine rhythm of covenant in an ongoing creation sustained by compassion.

If memory is a Divine act of creation, then forgetting must not be dismissed as its failure, but understood as its necessary counterpoint. The Talmud in Menachot (99a) teaches that both the whole Tablets and the shattered fragments rested together in the Ark. Rav Yosef likens these broken fragments to a Torah scholar who has lost their memory. With this in mind, it's clear that housing the broken fragments in the Ark transforms forgetting into a sacred gesture, an acknowledgment that even what is lost retains covenantal value.

Just as God commands Moses to place the broken Tablets in the Ark, we are asked to enshrine our own partialness, to remember what we can, and to make peace with what we must forget. In doing so, we imitate Divine memory itself, a memory that creates, forgives, and sometimes, with exquisite compassion, lets go. Memory, in this liturgy, is not only a record of the past, but it is that by which the future is made possible. In remembering as God remembers, creatively, mercifully, and with the courage to forget, we participate in redemption itself, the secret the Ba'al Shem Tov glimpsed.

Seir LeAzazel: The First Scapegoat

By Shana Krakowski Burstein, Class of 2028

Every year on Yom Kippur, our holiest of days, we read about a ritual that was done on this day in the Mishkan and Beit Mikdash: the seir leAzazel, the goat for "Azazel." This practice, which involves a goat sent to the wilderness in addition to one that is sacrificed, is utterly distant from our modern world. While the whole system of sacrifices might seem foreign to our modern sensibilities, this one involves something extra dark and mysterious—sending an animal off to oblivion without even sacrificing it. The text also uses a strange phrase, "to Azazel," whose meaning is unknown.

I have found one piece of this ritual particularly puzzling, which is highlighted in the following verses:

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated agent. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness (Vayikra 16:21-22).

As we see here, the verse suggests that the goat is carrying our sins off with it. Could it really be that easy? Do we just need to name our sins and place them on a goat, and all is forgiven? Is it like confession?

To understand this idea, Ramban offers a long explanation of this ritual, filled with mystical meaning and extrapolations of what he calls "secrets." Ramban explains that the word Azazel means essentially a power of evil. He writes:

Now this is the secret of the matter. They used to worship "other gods," namely, the angels, bringing offerings of a sweet savor to them...Now the Torah has absolutely forbidden to accept them as deities, or to worship them in any manner. However, the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded us that on the Day of Atonement we should let loose a goat in the wilderness, to that "prince" [power] which rules over wastelands, and this [goat] is fitting for it because he is its master, and destruction and waste emanate from that power, which in turn is the cause of the stars of the sword, wars, quarrels, wounds, plagues, division and destruction (Ramban on Vayikra 16:8).

Ramban claims that the angels would worship "other gods" even though the Torah forbids this. But on Yom Kippur, God commanded us to let loose a goat and give it over to the power that resides over

destruction in the world, which seems to suggest that we too are acknowledging other powers. It is as if we are giving a sacrifice (the goat) to what we believe is the power behind destruction.

This commentary by Ramban is hard to understand at face value. It seems to indicate that there is some power of evil in the world and that we are “feeding” it on this day. Are we giving some validity to this power—a power that seems to be outside of the Divine—on our holiest of days?

Ramban then goes on to clarify:

Now the intention in our sending away the goat to the desert was not that it should be an offering from us to it (the power of Evil)—Heaven forbid! Rather, our intention should be to fulfill the wish of our Creator, Who commanded us to do so.

He offers a parable to help us understand this idea:

This may be compared to the case of someone who makes a feast for his master, and the master commands the person making the feast, “Give one portion to that servant of mine,” in which case the host gives nothing [of his own] to that servant, and it is not to show him honor that he acts in that way to him, but everything is given to the master and it is the master that gives a gift to his servant; the host only observes his command and does in honor of the master whatever he commanded him to do. The master, however, out of his own compassion for the host, wanted all his servants to derive some enjoyment from it [the feast], in order that they may all speak of his [the host’s] praise and not of his shortcomings.

The parable is explaining that the power of evil is also a servant of God and on this day out of his compassion God gives it some gifts and commands us to do so. This implies that there is some power of evil, that God is, of course, master of, but is its own separate entity.

This idea is one that is hard to relate to with a rationalist’s mind, as mystical powers are not usually part of our vernacular. Ramban is saying that there is something beyond human understanding behind this ritual. We are sending a message that validates the evil powers in the world but also seeks to appease or quiet them. Which begs the question: why are we doing this on Yom Kippur when we are supposed to be distancing ourselves from sin?

To try to answer this question, I turned to the Rambam for a more rationalist approach. In his Guide for the Perplexed he writes about this practice and addresses the question, how can we just give our sins away to a goat? He writes:

There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress men with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent; as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible (Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3, 46:20).

Rambam explains these actions that we take on Yom Kippur are symbolic, meant to evoke something in us. When we put our sins on the back of this goat and watch it walk away, we can feel moved to leave our evil ways and free ourselves to become another self. We are not feeding an external power, but instead, releasing the sins within ourselves. Essentially, this helps us let go of our evil ways in the most powerfully evocative way.

The Rambam's explanation evokes the modern custom of tashlich, where we literally throw our sins away into the water. It is obvious to the Rambam, who wrote a comprehensive explanation of Hilchot Teshuva in the Mishneh Torah, that this can not come in place of the real hard work of teshuva. Instead, the ritual is the inspiration for that work.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch also sees the goat as a symbol meant to evoke something, but he places an emphasis on each of the two goats mentioned in the text as each representing a different side of us humans, and a choice we have. He writes in his commentary on the Torah:

Each one of us is one of the goats. Each one of us has the power to resist, the ability to firmly oppose any demands made on our will. The moral worth of our life depends on the way in which we use this power. We can use it in service of God, we can become a seir l'Hashem, a goat for God...Or we can become a se'ir l'Azazel, a goat for an alien power. We can use this power of resistance in obstinate refusal to obey the voice of God...We can surrender ourselves, without a fight, to sensuality and its allurements—even though the whole reason God gave us the power of resistance is to combat sensual temptations (Hirsch on Vayikra 16:10).

Rav Hirsch is saying that the two goats represent a choice between two ways of living. One is a path of hedonism that leads to nothingness and the other is a choice to be Godly and overcome all the impulses that pull us away from God. As he puts it, "We are faced with the decision between God and 'Azazel.' We stand at the Sanctuary entrance, to choose between God and the power of our senses. Inside the Holy of Holies rests the Torah as the holiest of holies. With our eyes on the Torah, we make our decision."

Many rationalists may connect with both the Rambam's and Rav Hirsch's explanation of the goat for Azazel as a symbol. However, I think the mystical approach brought by the Ramban lends itself to a deep and poignant aspect of Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur we atone for our sins and pray for life; we wear white and we act like angels. Yet the inclusion of this ritual gives a nod to another side of humanity, the destructive side, that which wages war, that which gives into base temptations. This ritual, according to this explanation of the Ramban, "feeds" that dark side of humanity or appeases it in some way. This offers an insight into how we as humans need to reckon with ourselves and our world. In order to truly do teshuva, we need to acknowledge the darker sides in us and the darkest sides of humanity; we can't ignore these nor look away. On this day we acknowledge them, we even pay some homage to them, but we choose another path; we choose to let those sides of us wander away so we can turn again to God and the Godliness within.

Casting Our Sins Into the Water

By Yehudit Mazur-Shlomi, Class of 2027

The cycle of the Jewish year never stops. Even in the face of wars, uncertainty, fear, and losses, we, as a nation, are always looking ahead to the time when once again we will be standing in front of The Almighty praying for a new, better year. At that moment, we are looking back and ahead at the same time. In general, Jews, even those who are deeply spiritual, are rational people. However, during the High Holiday season, we find ourselves drawn to some very mystical rituals.

There are many rituals that shape the experience of the Yamim Noraim, The Days of Awe, but one of the most indelible ones is Tashlich, which feels almost inseparable from Rosh Hashana itself. However, its uncertain origins show that it is not an original part of the Yamim Noraim liturgy. It is absent from the Mishna and the Talmud. The earliest records of it appear only in medieval Ashkenaz. Despite this—and despite occasional hesitation from rabbinic authorities—Tashlich has become firmly rooted in Jewish practice, not only for Ashkenazi Jews, but even for most Sephardim.

Tashlich does not come from a single source or moment in time. Instead, it emerges from layers: a verse, a metaphor, a story, a minhag, each of which add something of their own. Most sources point to the initial origins of Tashlich as a single word from Micah 7:19:

[God] will take us back in love,
[He] will hurl [tashlich] all their sins
Into the depths of the sea.

What is striking is that this is entirely a divine act. God is the One who casts away sins. There is no instruction for us to do something, no ritual attached to it. The Malbim, writing in the 19th century, emphasizes that even our intentional sins are removed so completely that they are no longer remembered. It is a promise of complete unearned compassion. It is through this verse in Micah that water as the medium to carry away our sins enters the ritual.

Throughout Tanakh, water is never just water. It carries tension within it. It is the source of both life and danger. It purifies, but it can also overwhelm. It is the Torah itself, but it also contains the chaos that threatens to swallow a person whole.

That tension comes through powerfully in the Midrash Tanchuma about Avraham on the way to the Akeidah. Satan places a river in his path. As Avraham enters, the water rises—knees, waist, neck—until he can barely stand. He cries out: if he drowns now, how will God's command be fulfilled? Only then

does the water recede. It is hard not to hear, in that moment, the echo of Tehillim: "Save me, O God, for the waters have reached my neck" (Psalms 69:2).

There is something deeply human here. The feeling of being overwhelmed—not only by circumstances, but by the weight of our experiences, by everything carried from the past year—is a universal one. On Rosh Hashana, that feeling is especially sharp. We stand in judgment in front of God, aware of how fragile we really are, unsure of what the coming year will bring. In the years since October 2023, this feeling of fragility of life has become even more personal—so much so that we find ourselves understanding our ancestors in a far more immediate and profound way. Seen in this context, Tashlich begins to make sense, not as a formal halakhic ritual, but as a human response to the vulnerability of the moment. A person goes to the water because the water says something they cannot quite say themselves. We feel freedom and we feel fear, all at the same time. We stand there, looking into something deeper than ourselves, and we imagine letting go of what pulls us under.

The book of Nechemiah presents another connection. On Rosh Hashana, the people gathered at Sha'ar Hamayim—the water gate—to hear the Torah read publicly (Nechemia 8:1). It is a moment of collective awakening, a renewal of the Divine Covenant. The setting is not incidental. Instead, the water marks a transition: from distance to return, from emptiness to fullness, from passivity to responsibility. In his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus mentions a decree of "Publius Servilius Galba, son of Publius, proconsul to the magistrates" that is issued for many provinces including the one of Halicarnassus stating that "Jewish men and women who so wish may observe their Sabbaths and perform their sacred rites in accordance with the Jewish laws, and may build places of prayer near the sea, in accordance with their native custom" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*:14).

And yet, with all these allusions to the connection between water, repentance, and Rosh Hashana, Tashlich is never mentioned in early rabbinic literature, which tells us that Tashlich is not a fixed part of the halakhic structure of the day. Instead, it is a custom borne out of an innate desire to cast off the heavy parts of ourselves. It developed precisely because there was space and need for it.

The first clear description of Tashlich in the form we know now comes from the Maharil, Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin, who lived in the 14th–15th Century in Ashkenaz. He records the custom of going to a river on Rosh Hashana and reciting the verse from Micah cited above, connecting it to the midrash of Avraham crossing the water. Already here, the essential elements are in place: movement toward water, communal participation, symbolic action. (We do not seem to have the original version of the Maharil, but Rema, Rabbi Moses Isserles of 16th century Poland, cites the Maharil in his work, *Darkhei Moshe*, Orach Chayim, 583:2.) Some of the later authorities additionally reflect on the vulnerability of fish—constantly exposed to the net—and draw a parallel to human life under divine judgment. With this metaphorical framework in place, the Rema gives the custom his approval, calling it "a proper

practice.” From that point on, Tashlich becomes part of the reality of Ashkenazi Judaism, a strong custom even though it lacks the force of law.

Because of the lack of a legal text on which to build the ritual, the framework for the practice of Tashlich remains in flux. The Mishna Berurah prefers a body of water outside the city, evoking the Akeidah (583:2:8). Fish are ideal as they are not subject to ayin hara, evil eye, so we shouldn’t be as well. However, if necessary, a well suffices—even a dry one. The Chatam Sofer would stand at a distance and look toward the Danube. For him, then, water was meaningful, but it was not an absolute requirement. Water is there to carry the symbolism, not to define the ritual.

As the practice spread, it also has grown. In many communities, Tashlich’s liturgy expanded beyond a single verse into a fuller service—a recitation of God’s 13 attributes, the recitation of Tehillim, additional prayers. Like many minhagim, Tashlich accumulated weight over time, anchoring itself more firmly in tradition.

However, the evolution of Tashlich into a core part of the Rosh Hashana experience was not without controversy. Some authorities were uneasy. The Vilna Gaon did not practice Tashlich at all. Apparently, his opposition stemmed from both the lack of Talmud source for Tashlich and the resemblance of some Christian rituals of common folk. Others worried about issues of propriety, because of the narrow boundary between meaningful symbolism and empty gesture. The Aruch Hashulchan reflects this ambivalence, noting that there were places where people refrained from going altogether, and that it is not proper for women to go, and if they do go, then men should “refrain from it because of a reason known to them, and it is proper” (Orach Chayim 583:4). Several later poskim also get concerned about possible improprieties should men and women go together.

Part of the beauty of this ambivalence and fluidity is the flexibility it allows in creating an accessible and meaningful ritual. Even today, the practice adapts to circumstance. When one lives too far from a body of water to walk, such that there is no possibility to go on Yom Tov itself, Tashlich may be postponed for people to have a chance to drive to the nearest body of water all the way until the end of Sukkot. Where there is no natural body of water, people improvise by using small decorative pools in the front yards of houses, or even fountains which clearly lack any fish. In some communities, men and women go separately. There is no single, fixed form.

And maybe that is exactly the point.

Tashlich was never meant to be rigid. It is not one of the established laws; there is no mandate behind it. It lives in a different space—somewhere between halakha and mysticism, between text and

experience. It allows for a kind of religious expression that is not fully prescribed, and therefore not fully limited.

There is something meaningful for everyone laying beneath Tashlich's layers: a verse that speaks of divine mercy, a midrash that gives that mercy emotional depth, a medieval community that gives it form, and generations that continue to reshape it. And that is why it still resonates.

At its core, Tashlich gives expression to something we still feel. We arrive at Rosh Hashana carrying more than we know how to put down. We stand, like Avraham in the water, aware of how close everything is to slipping beyond our control. And we hope—quietly, stubbornly—that something can be lifted from us. Instead of waiting for God to do it for us, we show up to act as partners, ready to cast away our failings and try again. Standing by the water, we are not just reenacting a custom. We are placing ourselves inside a possibility: that what weighs us down does not have to define what comes next.

The verse from Micah promises that God casts away sins. Tashlich does not make that happen. But it allows us to stand there, at the edge, and believe that it might.

And so we return to it, year after year. Not because we have to—but because we need to.

Teshuva: A Return to Nothingness?

By Yael Turitz Kaplan, Class of 2027

As we approach the high holidays, we speak a lot about teshuva. Translated ubiquitously as "repentance," the call to do teshuva during this time promotes deep introspection, a major focus of the time surrounding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But the root of the word teshuva is the shoresh שׁוּב, to return. Throughout the Torah, there is little reference to the word teshuva as repentance. The root shuv is used over and over again to describe literal acts of return. When God punishes Adam, God tells him that he will "return to the dust of the Earth" (Genesis 3:14). Noah sends out a raven that does not return and a dove who does return (Genesis 8:9-12). God instructs Abraham's maidservant Hagar to return to her master Sarah (Genesis 16:9). It is only in the later books of the Prophets that we see the root shuv used to describe the act of repentance. Ezekiel cites God saying that God wishes for an evil person to "turn back from his ways" (Ezekiel 18:23), and Hosea begs the Jewish people to "return, oh Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have fallen because of your sin" (Hosea 14:2).

It is these later uses of the word teshuva that we often associate with this time of year. When defining the teshuva process, the Rambam writes that teshuva is indeed a process of returning—of leaving the undesired behavior behind and returning to a state of innocence, along with vowing never to do the sin again (Mishnah Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:2). This understanding of repentance having to do with returning always made intuitive sense to me. If we humans were created without sin, then our ultimate goal must be to return to that initial state of innocence. Or, as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks describes it, a "spiritual return to God" (Two Concepts of Teshuva: Nitzavim in Covenant and Conversation).

But there's a baraita cited in Pesachim that forces me to re-examine the relationship between teshuva and returning. On Pesachim 54a, it says:

Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and repentance, and the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, and the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of Messiah.

Ignoring the obvious theological questions this baraita raises by implying that anything existed before the world, it is almost comical that teshuva would make this list. As we have explained, teshuva literally means "returning"—and here we are talking about the world before it even existed. How can the act of "returning" exist when there is nothing to return to, when the world and humanity did not exist? What is this baraita trying to tell us by saying that the concept of teshuva, of returning, existed even before the world did?

Perhaps, if we take this baraita seriously, it is telling us that the act of teshuva might be connected to the state of the world pre-creation. It is saying that teshuva wouldn't be about returning to our initial state of innocence at creation, but to something that existed even before that. But how does one return to a state of pre-creation? What even is a state of pre-creation?

In the first few pesukim of Bereishit, the Torah describes the state of the cosmos pre-creation, saying, "The earth being unformed and void (tohu va'vohu), with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water" (Genesis 1:2).

Much has been written about the meaning of tohu va'vohu, with translators and commentators disagreeing on the exact meaning of these words. The JPS translation, cited above, defines it as "unformed and void." Prominent biblical scholar Everett Fox translates it as "confusion and chaos," while Robert Alter translates it "welter and waste." The Rabbinic commentators on the Torah also struggle to explain these words, with Rashi defining it as "emptiness," Rav Saadiah Gaon calling it "the deep," Ibn Ezra saying it means "a howling wilderness," and so on. Whatever translation they choose, all understand tohu va'vohu as referring to some particular trait about how the cosmos operated (or didn't operate) before God created the world as we know it today.

But our baraita in Pesachim tells us that amidst that state, within the chaos or the waste or the emptiness, teshuva existed. The notion of "returning" somehow existed before there was anything to return to. What could this mean?

If we persist in understanding tohu va'vohu traditionally, that it refers to a state of emptiness or lacking, then the notion of teshuva existing within it can imply a dark reality: that even before God created the world, God anticipated that it would not always flourish. Instead, its beings would need to spend their time striving to return to the "clean slate" that existed before. This understanding is echoed later in Tanakh, where the words tohu va'vohu are used by the prophet Isaiah to describe the ominous destruction that would befall his generation of Jews due to their sinfulness (Isaiah 34:11). The verse states: "Jackdaws and owls shall possess it; Great owls and ravens shall dwell there. He shall measure it with a line of chaos. And with weights of emptiness." In the Talmud, the Rabbis suggest that there were times when God looked at the world in disappointment and wanted to revert it back to tohu va'vohu, such as during the reign of the infamous king Jehoiakim (Shabbat 88a). Similarly, in his commentary on the initial term used in Bereishit, the 14th century biblical commentator the Ba'al HaTurim suggests that it serves as a forewarning, an implication that God knew that the world God was creating would need to be destroyed (in the form of the Temple being destroyed) due to the sins of its beings.

Each of these interpretations support the notion that *tohu va'vohu* refers to a state of emptiness in the realm of sin; that before God created the world, there was no humanity and therefore no human error, and that *teshuva* needed to be built into that world from its conception because God knew that creating humans would ultimately mean creating sin. But this is a stark way to look at *teshuva*, implying that it was created like some sort of insurance plan built into the cosmos of the world for when we as humans ultimately fail.

I'd like to suggest a different read, based on a comment made by the Netziv, the 19th century scholar Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, in his biblical commentary *Ha'amek Davar*. About the phrase *tohu va'vohu*, he writes:

And void: This name [bohu, which when broken down is made up of 'in it' and 'it'] rests [on this concept] because much was included 'in it;' meaning from the dry land below the waters, to the end of the waters, the nature of all creation was included in it, [as well as] the potential of the creatures [that would be created] afterward (*Haemek Davar* on Genesis 1:2).

The Netziv's understanding drastically changes our understanding of *tohu va'vohu*. For him, the state of the world before creation was not hollow and empty, but bursting and full, and, in particular, full of potential. God did not take something lacking and create something to replace it; rather, God took all of the potential—the potential for celestial and terrestrial beings, for good and bad, for productivity and destruction, and everything else—and folded it into one cosmos that we know as our world.

This idea, that *tohu va'vohu* means "in it" and refers to the magnitude of potential, is echoed in the words of the Kabbalists (see Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Inner Space*, page 82). Similarly, twentieth century leader of the American Modern Orthodox community Rabbi Moshe Feinstein also suggested that *tohu va'vohu* is meant not to spark emotions of fear and emptiness, but of wonder and amazement at all of the potential in God's world (*Kol Ram*, vol. 3.).

If we accept this understanding of *tohu va'vohu*, then suddenly our baraita in *Pesachim* takes on an encouraging and uplifting tone. *Tohu va'vohu* represents all kinds of potential, the good and the bad. *Teshuva*, thus, is both return and repentance in that, when done properly, it is the act of reclaiming our potential and using it for the good. And perhaps this is what the Talmud means when it claims that *teshuva* existed before the creation of the world; that the potential for all kinds of human action have always existed, but so has our ability to take hold of that potential.

Within this new framework, we can understand why the word *teshuva* is the word used for repentance. When we do acts of *teshuva*, during the High Holidays and throughout the year, we are, on some level,

returning to a pre-worldly state. However, that state is not one of emptiness and clean-slatedness, but rather, one of potential. Yes, as the Rambam said, teshuva mandates recognizing where we have strayed and vowing to start over, but that restart should be a revitalization, a recognition of the sheer potential that we have as figures of divine creation. Teshuva through this lens is less about the act of erasing and getting rid of our pasts, than about returning to a state where we look forward with hope, recognizing the potential in all of us to better the world around us and make an impact.

May we merit to see that potential and look hopefully toward the future, using that potential for the good and to better the world and to return to a sense of wonder and amazement.