



HIGH HOLIDAY COMPANION

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Noah Millman • Elliott Horowitz • Adam Kirsch • Ilana Kurshan
and more

JEWISH REVIEW of BOOKS

JEWISH REVIEW

OF BOOKS

The *Jewish Review of Books* (Print ISSN 2153-1978, Online ISSN 2153-1994) is a quarterly print publication with an active online presence for serious readers with Jewish interests published by Bee.Ideas, LLC.

New York, NY

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www.jewishreviewofbooks.com

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ISBN-13: 978-1-941678-07-7

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Introduction

Dear Readers,

Going into the fall holiday season, we make lists both material—seats, apples, honey, sukkah—and spiritual—forgiveness asked for and given, resolutions for improvement and growth, an accounting of where we have been and where we hope to go.

Here at the *Jewish Review of Books*, we think about where we have been by paging through the stack of the 34 quarterly issues we've published to date, along with our growing archive of Web-only articles. We've selected 10 favorites that follow the arc of the fall holidays, from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to Sukkot and Simchat Torah. You can read them on the *JRB* app or print them out to take to synagogue (or read in the shade of your sukkah).

We begin with “Notice Posted on the Door of the Kelm Talmud Torah Before the High Holidays,” by the great 19th-century moralist Simcha Zissel Ziv, and end with Ilana Kurshan’s thoughtful review of Shai Held’s recent Torah commentary. In between you’ll find Noah Millman’s eye-opening explanation of what Shakespeare’s *King Lear* can teach us about the love between Abraham and Isaac, architect Shari Saiman’s essay on a collection of unique structures that reimagine what the festival of booths could look like, Allan Nadler’s ruminations on the surprising links between Leonard Cohen and the reemergence of Old World cantorial art, and half a dozen other pieces by leading scholars and thinkers.

Rereading these articles has helped us get ready for the holidays, and we hope that you will enjoy (and reenjoy) them too.

Best wishes for a sweet new year,
The Editors

Notice Posted on the Door of the Kelm Talmud Torah Before the High Holidays

BY RABBI SIMCHA ZISSEL ZIV, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GEOFFREY CLAUSSEN

In the early 1850s, Simcha Zissel (Broida) Ziv (1824–1898) left his hometown of Kelm, Lithuania to meet Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter, the controversial rabbi who had recently been hired by the Jewish community in the city of Kovno. Rabbi Salanter had been giving public sermons that called on his fellow Jews to devote time and energy to mussar—to the deliberate and methodical improvement of one’s moral character. Salanter urged his listeners to fear for the punishments that would await them if they did not focus on developing virtues of reverence, humility, justice, and kindness. Many traditionalists admired Salanter’s fierce opposition to the Jewish Enlightenment movement (Haskalah), but they were disturbed by the prospect of a new sectarian movement that, like Hasidism, seemed to reject the central role of Talmud study and to introduce other models of piety.

As a devoted student of Talmud, Simcha Zissel seems to have initially shared the concerns of these traditionalists. Having also studied some of the modern subjects favored by the Haskalah, including German, he may have also been troubled by Salanter’s fierce opposition to general studies. But he found himself enthralled by Salanter’s spiritual vision and personality. When Salanter resigned from his communal post and established a new private study hall for young men in Kovno, Simcha Zissel followed him.

In the 1860s, Simcha Zissel returned to his hometown and founded a unique yeshiva inspired by Salanter, the Talmud Torah of Kelm. In some respects, the Talmud Torah was fiercely traditionalist, expelling students who challenged Orthodox theology, including Isidor Elyashev, who later became a distinguished literary critic. In other respects, however, it was open to the Haskalah’s legacy. The

Talmud Torah was the first traditionalist yeshiva in Eastern Europe to set aside time for general studies, including mathematics, geography, and Russian language, literature, and history. Simcha Zissel also insisted on adopting the manners and dress of European bourgeois culture, encouraged many of his students to consider careers in commerce, and made periodic references in his lectures to figures such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, whom he regarded as great ethical teachers.



Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv’s Talmud Torah in Kelm. (Drawing by Loren Hodes: www.lorenhodesart.co.za)

Perhaps most radically, Talmud Torah’s curriculum cut yet further into the time traditionally allotted for the study of Talmud by devoting an unprecedented number of hours to the study of moral literature, contemplative visualization exercises, impassioned chanting, meditative prayer, and group discussions on issues of moral development. This was met with political opposition in the Jewish community, and Simcha Zissel was eventually forced out

of Kelm. He briefly reestablished the yeshiva in Grobin (in modern-day Latvia) but was forced to close it down after only a few years due to his declining health. He spent the last decade of his life back in Kelm teaching a few close disciples who would eventually spread the mussar movement throughout Europe and beyond. He came to be known as the “the Alter,” or elder, of Kelm. Among the most influential of his students were Rabbis Reuven Dov Dessler, Yerucham Halevi Levovitz of the Mir Yeshiva, and Nosson Tzvi Finkel (who was eventually known as the Alter of Slobodka).

Rabbi Simcha Zissel posted the following notice on the door of the Kelm Talmud Torah in the month of Elul, which immediately precedes the High Holidays. In its specific prescription for ethical self-development through meditation and its careful, rigorous, even philosophical linking of devotion to God with devotion to one’s fellow man, it is characteristic of the mussar movement.

As is known, the sages taught [that God commanded]: “recite verses of kingship before me . . . so that you make me king over you” (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 34b).

When we meditate upon the power to maintain a kingdom [ruled] by [a king of] flesh and blood, [we find that] the kingdom is maintained only when the king’s subjects are all like one person in their service to him. And if . . . division were to emerge among the subjects of the king, the knot of the kingdom would be untied, and (God forbid) the world would be destroyed. As our sages of blessed memory said, “were it not for the fear [of the government], a person would swallow his neighbor alive” (Mishnah Avot 3:2). Thus the unity of the subjects maintains the kingdom.

Rabbenu Tam of blessed memory wrote in his *Sefer ha-yashar* that we can find the way to serve the King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One, based on the service given a king of flesh and blood. And so we can understand that the essence of fulfilling [the commandment] “that you make me king over you” is in the unity of the servants of the Blessed One. Thus it is written, “There will be a king in Jeshurun”—when?—“when the heads of the people will be gathered, when the tribes of Israel will be united” (Deut. 33:5).

Therefore there is an obligation upon us, prior to the

Day of Judgment (may it come upon us for good), to occupy ourselves during the entire year with the positive commandment “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). And through this there will be unity among the subjects of the Blessed Lord, and [God’s] Kingship will come into our hands well . . .

But if (God forbid) the sin of hating people is on our hands, how can we not be ashamed and disgraced to be speaking lies . . . when we ask [in prayer for God to] “rule over the entire world, in Your glory”? We have not prepared ourselves to do what is essential for maintaining the kingdom of heaven in power over us . . . And so we must accept upon ourselves the work of loving people and of unity. With this, one’s path will slowly, slowly improve—and, in any case, one will already have turned a little bit toward repentance. And, if we merit a community that is immersed in this work during the entire year, who can measure the greatness of the merit for us and for the entire world?

No one should say that this work is too difficult. It is not only the decree of the King, but we hope that when one works at this, with appropriate reflection, it will slowly, slowly, become easier, and one will find great joy in it . . . This message should remain before our eyes all year long. And so may we all merit to be written and sealed for good [in the Book of Life] with the whole people of Israel. Amen—may this be God’s will.

It is good to set aside a place for thinking of this matter every day during prayer. The clear place for it in prayer is in the blessing “True and Firm” [when praising God for redeeming Israel from Egypt, with these words]: “Upon the shore of the sea, they were all together”—this is love and unity. And thus [the liturgy continues] “they all praised God and made God King.” Without such [love and unity], God forbid, there is no full acceptance of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to continually make an effort at this, and may we merit to fully accept the kingdom of heaven with the whole people of Israel.

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Darkness and Light: Leonard Cohen and the New Cantors—A Playlist for the High Holidays

BY ALLAN NADLER

Just 10 days before Rosh Hashanah 2016, on his 82nd birthday, Leonard Cohen released the title track from his latest and, sadly, his very possibly last album, *You Want It Darker*. It is a breathtaking reminder of his spiritual depth and artistic power. (Editor's Note: Leonard Cohen died November 7, 2016, just weeks after this essay appeared on our website.)

His reputation for darkness and a voluptuary life notwithstanding, Cohen has always lived in a theistic, deeply Jewish universe. He is a sinner, not a heretic (which is not to say that he is a conventional believer). What he asks for, repeatedly, is to be accepted into the framework as himself, with all his imperfections. As he sings in his now-classic “Hallelujah” (1984): “Even though it all went wrong / I'll stand before the Lord of song / with nothing on my tongue but hallelujah.”

In *You Want It Darker*, Cohen returns to the *Yiddishkeit* of his youth, indeed to the shul of his early years, Montreal's Shaar Hashomayim, where his spoken word lyrics are accompanied by its vocally brilliant cantor, Gideon Zelermyer, and his all-male choir (led by the gifted Roï Azoulay). The song features the aged Cohen, who in so many earlier works was the wicked son, the naughty boy, and the dirty young and, later, old man, in a dialectical duel with God, in which it is the Holy One, not he, who represents the dark side, one that culminates with Cohen's submission—and ending with a chant of “*Hineni*,” Abraham's “Here I am.”

The song is a uniquely Cohenesque form of Midrash and Psalm, a troubling twist on the Akedah, which, as Cohen knows, will be read next week, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. It deserves—and no doubt will receive—its own exegesis. But Cohen has given us a second gift this fall: He has reminded us that *khazones*, the classical Ashkenazi cantorial art, is undergoing an exciting revival with young cantors such as Shaar Hashomayim's Zelermyer leading the way.

Before I introduce Zelermyer's five stellar young colleagues (none of them over 40), it is only fair to begin with the progenitor of this renaissance and Zelermyer's mentor, Hazzan Naftali Hershtik, who trained a full two generations of cantors at the Tel Aviv Cantorial Institute. Here then is Hazzan Hershtik's rendition of the great Yos-sele Rosenblatt's “Tekah be-Shofar (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7jqayeZM0I>).”



Leonard Cohen.

This concert was a landmark event, a cultural coup staged in the very heart of secular Israel's inner sanctum, its “Palace of Culture,” the Heichal Hatarbut in Tel Aviv. Like Yiddish language and culture, cantorial music had grated on the ears of the vast majority of Israelis, both religious and secular, since the heady days of the Second Aliyah. This began to change when the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra accompanied Hershtik and a group of young, mostly Israeli-born *hazzanim* in this shofar-centered prayer whose words are all about *shivat tziyon*, the

return to Zion. The old and tired dichotomy between the “*galuti*” (diasporic) minor-key prayers from shuls in Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary and the proud major-key ballads about soldiers and young girls in the Yishuv, or dance music for the hora, was shown up for what it was: silly ideology. And, forgive my snobbishness, but this piece—like the entire rich oeuvre of *khazones*—is surely more musically interesting, demanding, and moving than “Hava Nagilah.”

Let’s return to Zelermyer and his choir leader Azoulay, here accompanied not by Leonard Cohen and the Shaar Hashomayim choir but the McGill Chamber Orchestra, performing the two powerful paragraphs linking *Unetaneh Tokef* to the *Kedusha* (“man is dust and to dust he shall return,” the classical *paytanim* could go dark but beautiful too (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5DV26Wk-V8>).

Zelermyer is part of a generation of incredibly gifted young cantors whose vocal production and mastery of the incredibly complex techniques required to sing classical *khazones* I would argue is impressively, amazingly close to those of any of the great masters of the Golden Age of Cantorial Music, such as Moshe Koussevitzky (1899–1965), with whom Hershtik sang as a young man, the fabled Yossele Rosenblatt (1882–1933), and (for my money, the greatest of them all) Zavel Kwartin (1874–1952).

When I first moved from Montreal, a city historically blessed with an overabundance of great cantors, to Manhattan, my second most dispiriting experience (the first being the major cost and minor size of my apartment) was the paucity of traditional cantors to be heard anywhere on this Jewish island. As I was raised in an Orthodox environment and trained by my father Yossel Nadler in the kind of *khazones* only heard in Orthodox shuls, I was stunned to learn that only two synagogues in Manhattan employed what my Dad (himself a wonderful, but determinedly part-time cantor) and I would snobbishly consider to be “proper” *hazzanim*. Both were on the East Side: Joseph Malovany at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue and Ari Klein at the Park East Synagogue. Even more disappointing is that neither of these great cantors were accompanied by choirs, except on the High Holidays. The Lincoln Square Synagogue had the lively, warm, and musically engaging Sherwood Goffin, but his style was that of the folk singers of his youth, not the cantors of the classical age. The elite Jewish Center on West

86th Street had been under a no-cantor ban established by its founding rabbi, Leo Jung. Quite *frum* back then, it was my desperation to hear a “proper” *hazzan*, namely the superb Dov Keren (who is still the shul’s cantor), that led me for the first time in my life to sit next to and *daven* with the women in the pews of the Conservative Sutton Place Synagogue, with rapidly decreasing discomfort.



Gideon Zelermyer.

How things have changed! Where *khazones* was once banned by the anti-musical edict of Rabbi Jung, the Jewish Center’s services are today led by Chaim Dovid Berson, a magnificent lyrical tenor who combines traditional, “proper” *nusach ha-tefilla* with both classical and contemporary styles of *khazones*. Listen to Berson’s rather daring decision to divide his *Unetaneh Tokef* between a modern, secular Israeli version (<https://soundcloud.com/chaim-david-berson-1/untane-tokef>) before returning to the classical communally sung refrain, familiar to the Center’s congregants, of *Be-Rosh Hashanah Yikateivu* (on Rosh Hashanah our decree is written).

That Berson, an Israeli alumnus of the haredi yeshiva world, now sings this most hallowed of High Holiday prayers to a tune commissioned by a far-left, secular kibbutz in the wake of its devastating losses during the Yom Kippur War shows that the erasure of borders begun by Berson’s teacher Naftali Hershtik when he joined the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra on the stage of Heichal Hatarbut continues in the works of his students.

The relatively new, and very young, cantor of Manhattan’s Lincoln Square Synagogue, Yaakov “Yanky” Lerner was raised (and remains) a Hasid. While a Hasidic cantor in full regalia (Hasidic *kapoteh*, not a cantor’s

gown, that is) leading the prayers at a Modern Orthodox synagogue is hardly new—for the past two generations, the Hasidic community has produced some of the world's greatest cantors, including Isaac Meir Helfgot and Yaakov Y. Stark—Lemmer's musical imagination and his broad interest in other musical traditions are. Here is Lemmer singing with the profound feeling of an Old World cantor,



David Guber.

the moving, almost desperate imploration to God to hear our tears, *Shomea Kol Bichyos*, taken from the Neilah service that concludes Yom Kippur, accompanied by Frank London and his klezmer musicians, a demonstration that the revival of *khazones* has come full circle, now joining in the revival of its largely secular klezmer cousin (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtaRZEL_gfc). I admit to having been skeptical when I heard about the Lemmer-Frank collaboration, but the result shows that they have expressed the broken-heartedness required of a *tefilla* that speaks of God hearing and gathering into Himself the collective tears of his chosen but tormented people, the *krekhtzen*—is that translatable? It is a kvetch on crystal meth—the deliberately broken notes are brilliantly amplified by London's trumpet.

Perhaps the most cerebral (in this case very literally) of today's *hazzanim*, Zevi Muller spent years immersed in talmudic learning at the Ponovezh Yeshiva and then Beth Medrash Govoha, the Harvard and Yale of Bnei Brak and Lakewood, New Jersey, followed by even more years studying neuroscience at Columbia University, where he is now working on his doctorate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Muller's greatest gift, aside from an impressively multi-

ranged and rich voice, is his exactitude. When I first heard him, at last year's *Selichot*, I was struck by his meticulous diction, a quality alas never taken for granted even among the world's greatest cantors, as well as his wide range and vocal coloration, allowing him to oscillate seamlessly between lyric and dramatic moments. Muller's rendition of Mordechai Hershman's *Halben Hataeinu* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxZsnourRCM>), the standard refrain in all the services of Yom Kippur, shows Muller's great gifts (do your best to ignore the pianist).

Cantor David Guber is also a truly gifted performer, a natural, with a stage presence very rarely found among cantors since the death of the two greatest ladies' men of *khazones*, Moishe Oysher (1906–1958) and Pierre (ahem) Pinchik (1900–1971). Here he sings *Av ha Rachamim/Kehilos ha-Kodesh* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBbF3uti8Ug>), recited every Shabbat before returning to Torah to the Ark, but most dramatically at the end of *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur. My choice of this particular piece, aside from Guber's mastery of its every nuance, is the elderly man seated to Guber's immediate left, but almost jumping from his chair out of his abundance of love and enthusiasm, namely the unbridled *nakhes fun a Yiddish'n tateh*, Cantor Shlomo Guber, who was the senior cantor of the prestigious Berea Synagogue in Johannesburg, where David was raised before the Gubers made aliyah.

We all know that most popular of old Zionist standards from pre-statehood Jewish Palestine, "Tzena, Tzena," calling upon the girls to come out and behold the *chayalim ba-moshava*, while instructing them to abandon shyness in meeting these sons of valor, men of arms. A decorated veteran of the IDF, where he served during the 2006 war in Lebanon as sergeant in the legendary 890-Brigade of the *Tzanhanim*, or paratroopers, Guber embodies in equal measure the heroism of his generation of IDF soldiers and the tenderness of the cantorial music which he so mimetically imbibed from his father.

Zvi Weiss, the final master of our selective but hardly arbitrary *Hamishah humshei ha-hazzanim ha-hadashim* sounds to me like the one with the most authentic Old World sound and style. I first heard him singing not live in shul or stage, but on a cheap CD recorder in the back room of Montreal's finest kosher bakery, Chezkie's, whose owner and namesake is a hugely learned fan of *khazones*. While I could not quite identify him, I was sure he was a long-dead Hungarian or Galician survivor

cantor from the mid-20th century, someone like Yehoshua Wieder or Moshe Stern. Weiss is, however, no Golden Age impersonator. He, too, was trained by Hershtik,



Zvi Weiss.

and he masters the classics with his own unique sound, combined with a vocal endurance that still manages to take my own breath away. Here is Weiss chanting the emotionally charged version of the festivals' *Mussaf* classic, *Umipnei Hata'enu* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hom-o-YNIDg>), by Rapaport, performed, as it happens in the same Heichal Hatarbut. There are many other versions, of course, the most popular one being that recorded by Moshe Koussevitzky, but Rapaport's is by far the most demanding and stamina-testing, and the young Cantor Weiss just nails it and remains standing. It's actually astonishing to behold.

Now that you have listened, go back to 2:30 and listen again to how he narrates the prayer—such *hazzanim* used to be called “*zogers*,” somewhat similar to St. Louis Blues “shouters” like Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong—an almost lost art. At the same time his rich coloratura is just short of the greatest master of that technique, Zavel Kwartin (who himself composed two settings for *Umipnei Hata'enu*).

My late father sadly informed me, over and again, that once the last East European-born and trained *hazzan* died, it would be “the end of the Jewish people as we knew it.” But had he lived to hear Weiss sing *Umipnei Hata'enu* he would certainly have proclaimed, “*Ot, ot. Doss iz takeh a Khazn!*”

Let us now conclude our service, errrr, I mean survey, with, what else but “Adon Olam”?

Actually, make that a double—a joyous and fun-filled medley of that ultimate closing hymn of all major Jewish services, allows us to sneak in two other superb young cantors, Azi Schwartz and Simon Cohen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ5wQ6u4zQI>), both of whom are blessed with gorgeous tenor voices, followed by a similar medley of “Adon Olam” featuring the Upper West Side's three young new cantors, Chaim David Berson, Yanky Lemmer, and Zevi Muller (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_paTMZqdUns).

Time for kiddush!

Allan Nadler recently retired from Drew University, where he was a professor of comparative religion and director of the Program in Jewish Studies.

At the Threshold of Forgiveness: A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud

BY MOSHE HALBERTAL

Near the end of tractate *Yoma*, the Mishnah limits the scope of the Day of Atonement:

For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. But for sins between a man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases his fellow.

In a sense, the injured party becomes the master of his injurer's future, for only his pardon can make atonement possible. R. Elazar ben Azariah is quoted as having derived this principle from a biblical verse that describes the purifying force of the Temple service on Yom Kippur: "For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be cleansed before the Lord" (Lev. 16:30).

In its plain sense, the phrase "before the Lord" simply refers to a place, the Temple, where atonement occurs. It probably also indicates that it is God who grants this atonement. But R. Elazar ben Azariah treats "before the Lord" as a restrictive clause, understanding it to mean that only sins against God—those that are "before the Lord"—are atoned for by Yom Kippur. Atonement for transgressions committed against other people depends not on God but on reconciliation with the injured party.

The Talmud develops this requirement for human forgiveness into a full-fledged legal institution. First, the request for forgiveness must be public: "R. Chisda said that he must placate his fellow before three lines of three people." This is, again, tied to the creative reading of a biblical verse, but the clear intent is to make the request for forgiveness a social fact. A single, casual encounter involving only the injurer and the injured will not suffice. The next talmudic statement ensures that, on the other hand, the injurer does not become a permanent hostage to the injured party: "R. Yosi bar Chanina said,

'whoever seeks forgiveness from his friend should not seek it more than three times.'"

Every request for forgiveness is preceded by some forgiveness that makes the request itself possible.

The Talmud then emphasizes the centrality of the moral community to this process of effecting atonement for an offense against someone who has died:

And if [the injured person] has died, [the injurer] brings ten people, and has them stand next to his grave; he then says, "I have sinned against the LORD, God of Israel, and against so-and-so, whom I injured."

Here, the community serves as a substitute for the injured party, but there must also be the sense of a real encounter.

There are ethical and religious systems in which an encounter, public or otherwise, between the injurer and the injured party is not central to the idea of forgiveness. The Stoic, for instance, grants forgiveness as an expression of autonomy, foregoing what is properly due him. The point is not to restore a relationship but rather to free oneself from one, since the toxic force of a grudge might harm his inner life. In contrast, one who forgives as an act of Christian grace is concerned with the injurer's soul, ideally extending forgiveness in advance of any expressed remorse. The absence of any necessary encounter between injurer and injured makes these models of forgiveness quite different from the one formulated by the Talmud.

The juxtaposition of law and narrative is a characteristic and important feature of the Talmud. After discussing the formal requirements for requesting forgiveness, the Talmud presents four brief stories of encounters in which rabbinic masters attempt to reconcile with those they have injured. Each of the stories raises the question of the power and limits of the law to structure such a complex human moment. I will focus on the first three of these stories, setting them down, as did the editors of the Talmud, one after another.

R. Jeremiah injured R. Abba. R. Jeremiah went and sat at R. Abba's doorstep. When R. Abba's maidservant poured out wastewater, some drops sprayed on R. Jeremiah's head. He said, "they have made me into a trash heap," and he recited, the verse "[God] lifts up the needy from the trash heap," (Psalms 113:7) as being about himself. R. Abba heard him and went out to him. He said to him, "Now it is I who must appease you, as it is said, 'Go abase yourself; and importune your fellow'" (Proverbs 6:3).

When a certain person injured R. Zera, he would repeatedly pass before him and invite himself into his presence, so that the injurer would come and appease him.

A certain butcher injured Rav, and he did not come before him [to seek forgiveness]. On the day before Yom Kippur, [Rav] said, "I will go and appease him." R. Huna met him. He asked, "Where is my master going?" He said, "To appease so-and-so." [R. Huna] said [to himself] "Abba [i.e., Rav] is going to kill a man!" Rav went and stood over him. The butcher was seated, cleaning the head [of an animal]. He raised his eyes and saw him [Rav]. He said to him, "Abba, go; I have nothing to do with you." While he was still cleaning the animal's head, a bone shot out, struck the butcher's neck, and killed him.

A simple historical observation will help us to see the issues that the editors of the Talmud were exploring in these anecdotes: Rav lived before R. Zera. The ordering of these stories is not chronological; it's conceptual.

In the first incident, R. Jeremiah, who has come to ask forgiveness from R. Abba, is seated at the threshold, probably finding it difficult to enter, fearing that R. Abba will rebuff him, or worse, that his appearance will renew the injury. The humiliation he suffers at the hands of the maidservant suddenly reverses the situation; now, having been sprayed with dirty water, he is R. Abba's victim. His ironic recitation of the verse brought R. Abba out to ask *his* pardon, and the threshold (literal and figurative) was crossed.

The story seems intended to point out a serious problem with institutionalizing the requirement that forgiveness be requested. One can formulate rules that dictate how to ask for forgiveness, but these rules can only come into play when an encounter between the injurer and injured is possible. This requires a kind of preliminary appeasement. The narrative thus demonstrates the limitations of the law as it appears before us. One might say it places the law itself at the threshold. Every request for forgiveness is preceded by some forgiveness that makes the request possible. But how does the Talmud deal with the forgiveness that must precede forgiveness?

The next story, which follows immediately after that of R. Jeremiah, suggests an answer to this question. R. Zera used to indirectly invite himself into the presence of one who had injured him, providing an occasion for the injurer to reconcile with him. His action, which is presented as worthy of emulation, creates the conditions in which it will be possible for the injurer to approach him. The injured party extends the forgiveness that precedes forgiveness without any assurance that the injurer will in fact be remorseful and request his pardon. But this act of grace does not obviate the remorse that must precede full reconciliation; it only makes it possible. Nor is it, apparently, legally required. The passage presents us with an exemplary story that expresses the greatness of grace without making it a binding norm.

The third story shows why R. Zera's practice was an act of pure grace that cannot be turned into law. The story tells of Rav, who, on the eve of Yom Kippur, was awaiting the arrival of the butcher who had injured him. When the butcher does not come, Rav decides to go to him. At first blush, Rav's action seems quite similar to R. Zera's. Knowing that Yom Kippur will not expiate the butcher's sin unless he appeases his fellow, Rav decides to waive his honor and go to the butcher himself. In fact, he does more than cross the threshold from the

injured party's side to that of the injurer; he also crosses class lines. There is a vast class divide between Rav, the leading scholar of his generation, and the lowly butcher. Moreover, the timing of the story—the eve of Yom Kippur, the last minute for doing what needs to be done to make atonement possible—marks a threshold in time.

The reader's first impression of Rav's action as a model of generosity is undermined by the reaction of R. Huna, Rav's greatest student. Instead of seeing the initiative as an act of great generosity, R. Huna sees it as an act of violence. He says to himself that his master is going to kill the butcher, and events bear him out. This fact compels us to see that the key to interpreting this subtle little story lies in the reaction of R. Huna, who understood exactly what was going to happen.

Perhaps Rav had been waiting all day for the butcher to come to him. Perhaps he had been waiting all year. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the affront remains intense, but the hour grows late, and he decides to go to him. Something about Rav's demeanor or his pace or the very hour, coupled with the disparity in status between Rav and the butcher, suggested to Rav Huna that this was an act of aggression.

The story of Rav and the butcher forces us to confront the ambivalence between sanctity and narcissism that inheres in any act of grace. Rav's appearance before the butcher turns out to be quite different from R. Zera's sensitive and indirect approach. Instead of giving the slaughterer an opportunity to request forgiveness, Rav backed him into a corner and brought about a terrifying opportunity for reciprocal injury. Knowing of Rav's closeness to God, R. Huna knew where this could lead, though he was apparently incapable or unwilling to stop him. The combination of Rav's aggressiveness and Rav Huna's apparent passivity sealed the fate of the stubborn butcher who was not inspired to repent by the appearance of the eminent man in the doorway of his shop.

Jewish law and narrative have been joined since the Bible, and one can identify three paradigms for the relationship between them. The first and simplest is when the narrative provides a basis for the law. The story of the exodus from Egypt, for example, explains the meaning of the paschal sacrifice and the various rules of the seder. The second paradigm emphasizes the way in which the story permits a transition to a different sort of legal knowledge. A story allows us

to see how the law must be followed; we move from "knowing that" to "knowing how." More than a few talmudic stories play that role, showing that it is sometimes no simple matter to move from text to action. The third paradigm is the most delicate. Here, the story actually has a subversive role, pointing out the law's substantive limitations. That is the paradigm for our series of stories of encounter and forgiveness.

The first story, as noted, shows the way in which there has to be a partial reconciliation before the full reconciliation, a forgiveness before the forgiveness. As a result of that limitation, the second story suggests a secondary, even saintly, norm, in which the injured person makes an effort to enable the crossing of the threshold by insinuating himself into the presence of the injurer. The third story then shows that solution to be limited, since the outcome of the intrusion could be a further injury. It may not be as drastic or seemingly supernatural as the butcher's tragic end, but a request for forgiveness can turn into a further insult all too easily.

The Talmud pointedly does not go on to formulate further legislation to resolve this issue. Would it be possible to use a further norm to structure the question of how to make the first step? Can one mark with any degree of generality the distinction between a delicate or indirect meeting and an accusatory intrusion? The law as a process of generalized rulemaking here reaches its limit. Requesting forgiveness ultimately requires tact, sound judgment, and a profound and precise analysis of one's own motives.

In Moses Maimonides' great medieval codification of the laws of repentance in the *Mishneh Torah*, the rules of requesting forgiveness are further formalized, while the stories of R. Jeremiah, R. Abba, R. Zera, Rav, R. Huna, and the butcher are left aside. Separating law and narrative in that way removes a layer of meaning, and flattens our understanding of the process of reconciliation. The Talmud's frequent joining of the two genres embodies a profound expression of humility, for the law thereby acknowledges its own limits. This is especially true in the case of forgiveness, which is a part of the complex and delicate fabric of interpersonal relationships.

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Is Repentance Possible?

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

The other day YouTube decided that I ought to watch a strangely mesmerizing psychologist from Canada named Jordan B. Peterson berate me over my failure to follow his 10 rules for success. His first rule was to “stop doing the things that you know are wrong” when you *know* that they are wrong.

This is a good, straightforward rule. It’s also a pretty easy one to follow if you are a robot or an angel. I don’t think that Dr. Peterson mentioned that it was Aristotle who first tried to seriously work through the question of how it is that we frequently seem to do things that we know to be against our better judgment. Socrates had said that, although a person may be wrong about what is good for him, “No one goes willingly toward the bad,” which seems obviously true until one remembers that, in fact, one does so fairly often. After all, I ought to have tied myself to the mast of Microsoft Word and resisted the siren call of YouTube whose window I had ostensibly opened in order to . . . well, I am not quite sure what I opened it for anymore, but there must have been a good reason, and it had nothing to do with Jordan B. Peterson or ad words or Google’s super-secret distractibility algorithm for middle-aged men. (I’ve been wondering if this Yom Kippur I should add a line to the *Al Chet* litany of confession: “And for the sin of opening browser windows of distraction,” though perhaps someone has already done it . . . how would I Google that?)

Akrasia, which is often translated as weakness of the will, is, as Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a puzzle: If I think that, all things considered, it would be better for me to do Y than X, and I want to do Y more than X, then I will do Y, not X. But sometimes I don’t, and you don’t; we go on X-ing when our practical reason clearly tells us that we should Y. It is, one might almost say, our natural state to frequently and incontinently X.

In his deep, densely argued new book *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, Alasdair MacIntyre discusses such an akratic person “who strongly desires something

that, so she judges, she has excellent reason not to desire.” Perhaps she is tempted to stream a self-help video, which though potentially useful will, nonetheless, derail her from a more important task; but perhaps the stakes are higher, and she is avoiding, say, a difficult but

How likely is it, really, that in the middle of the journey she or any of us, can change these habits, turn vice into virtue?

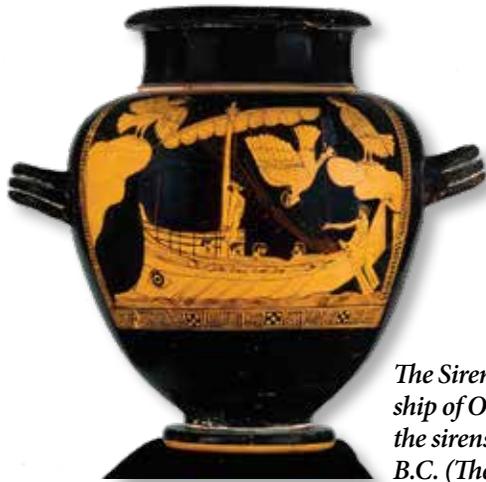
necessary conversation, or choosing a fun but frivolous relationship over a deep one. If she understands her predicament correctly, according to MacIntyre, then she will see that “her predicament is one of desiring a lesser and inappropriate good over a greater and appropriate good.” Consequently, MacIntyre writes, “she has every *reason* to redirect” her desires, but reasons alone are not quite enough. Somehow, she must “draw upon the resources provided by her earlier moral training and education and by her present social relationships if she is to act rightly.” In short, she must repent, or, as the Jewish tradition has it, “return” to the priorities that she knows are right. MacIntyre writes:

Aristotle provided an outline account of her situation, partly in what he said about *akrasia* . . . and partly elsewhere. Later Aristotelians, most notably Aquinas, have provided further resources, but the NeoAristotelian account of such conflicts needs further development and rendering into contemporary terms. Until these have been provided, there is a psychological lacuna in NeoAristotelian theory . . . [but] I see no reason to believe that what is needed cannot be provided.

One wishes that he had given us the full theory in this book rather than a suggestive promissory note. But this would be a churlish demand to make of an 88-year-old philosopher who has helped to reframe the questions of ethics as

much as anybody in the last half-century.

Thirty-six years ago, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre famously argued that modern moral thinking was a mess, a rubble heap of incompatible theories leaving us with an incoherent moral vocabulary in which we appeal to the greatest good for the greatest number at one moment, to rights and duties at another,



The Siren Vase depicts the ship of Odysseus passing the sirens, ca. 480 B.C.–470 B.C. (The British Museum.)

and to something like transcendent moral law at a third. This left MacIntyre with his famous challenge: Nietzsche or Aristotle? Either morality as we know it should be razed to the ground, or we should junk the implausible systems of what he called “the Enlightenment project” and attempt a qualified return to Aristotle’s naturalistic, character-based virtue ethics.

A quarter-century earlier the Cambridge philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe had suggested that we simply drop “the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is *morally* right and wrong,” and MacIntyre’s argument can be taken as filling out Anscombe’s suggestion. As Anscombe wrote:

[T]he *moral* sense of “ought,” ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it.

Anscombe herself was a Catholic, but with the modern eclipse of what she called Judaism and Christianity’s “law conception of ethics,” she had also recommended a return to Aristotle.

As is partly evident from his reference to St. Thomas

Aquinas in the quote above, MacIntyre himself ended up converting to Catholicism shortly after publishing *After Virtue* (one can see the signs of it already in that book). These are mere biographical facts, but they may make one wonder just how possible it is to do without that moral “ought,” and in particular whether precisely that sense of obligation might be one of the necessary resources for the kind of character reform, or repentance, that MacIntyre describes.

On the Aristotelian view, morality is internal to human life rather than a matter of obedience to a set of abstract rules or an external authority. Briefly, we have dispositions to act or react in certain ways, and these dispositions are shaped by education, admonition, example, and habit. The best of these traits will fall between the extremes of behavior: It is bad, for instance, to be either timid or foolhardy, but it is good to follow the “middle path” and be courageous. So, courage is a virtue, and timidity and foolhardiness are vices (though far from the worst ones).

What makes courage and the other virtues—for instance, generosity, truthfulness, and temperance—good is the natural fact that they help a human being to thrive and be happy, in the widest and highest possible sense of that word. Therefore, one ought to develop the virtues because they are, as we now say, “life skills” which will help us succeed, not because we *morally* ought to, in the sense of which Anscombe disapproved. How, exactly, such a system can be, or rather was, adapted to a religion based on divine authority is a question to which I shall return.

In the meantime, however, it’s worth noting just how hard a task MacIntyre’s akratic woman faces. Her character has been formed by relationships and incidents since birth, many of them forgotten, not to speak of brain chemistry and the blind impress of events. Her actions and desires are, by now, governed by stable habits of action, which have been with her since childhood. How likely is it, really, that in the middle of the journey she, or any of us, can change these habits, turn vice into virtue? Perhaps this puts the question too strongly, since MacIntyre describes her as a person who is merely tempted by a “lesser and inappropriate good,” rather than what is actually bad (the distracting YouTube video or the frivolous friend, not the stiff drink in the afternoon). But, after all, bad desires do happen to good people, even those who have been fortunate enough to grow up with a loving family, good

friends, and a well-ordered community.

Aristotle argues that weakness of the will is not quite a vice; it's more, he says, like epilepsy, and after the temptation has passed the weak-willed person regrets his actions. But he does not tell us how such regret can be transformed into repentance. As MacIntyre frankly admits, there is a gap, "a psychological lacuna," in the theory, for Aristotle, for his medieval Christian commentator Aquinas, and for us.

As it happens, the Jewish approach to repentance was authoritatively codified by Thomas's great Aristotelian predecessor Moses Maimonides, and his approach demonstrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of virtue ethics, as well, perhaps, as the extent to which moral thinking was messy even before the modern world.

Maimonides once posed an interesting question which had never occurred to Aristotle (in fact, it wouldn't have made any sense to him), though the Muslim philosopher Alfarabi had earlier asked a similar question for similar reasons. The question is: Who is better, "the man of self-restraint [who] performs moral and praiseworthy deeds," but does so only by struggling with his desires and dispositions, or the man who "acts morally from innate longing and desire" because he has a virtuous character? In this early essay, Maimonides says that philosophers "unanimously agree that [the virtuous man] is superior to, and more perfect than, the one who has to curb his passions," even if they are behaviorally indistinguishable. But, he says, the rabbinic tradition regards the person who must work to subdue his temptation and do the right thing—or stop doing the wrong ones—as better. Among the famous rabbinic sayings he quotes are "the greater the man, the greater his evil inclination," and "according to the difficulty is the reward."

In the end, Maimonides explains away the rabbinic statements that seem to prefer the conflicted man who wrestles with his desires to the virtuous one, but he cheats a little in order to get his rabbinic and philosophical authorities on the same page. The details of how he cheats—some of his prooftexts are straw men, and he ends up invoking a distinction between rational and irrational laws that he doesn't really believe—are less important than the fact that he feels compelled to do so. For the tension he identified is a genuine one.

If ethical action is a consequence of accepting "the

yoke of the law," and the primary object of evaluation is the individual act, then the person who, against his own inclinations, bends himself to the commanded task is heroic. If ethical action is a matter of one's character, then that very same person will be just barely passable, like an alcoholic who is "on the wagon," at least for now.

One can see this tension still at work near the outset of Maimonides's great code of law, the *Mishneh Torah*. In its first volume, he codifies both *Hilchot De'ot*, "Laws of Moral Traits," and *Hilchot Teshuvah*, "Laws of Repentance." In *Hilchot De'ot* he briskly sketches an Aristotelian account of the virtues as a set of acquired habits whose ideal lies between two extremes. One case in which he unambiguously endorses straying from the middle path of classic virtue is instructive:

There are some dispositions in regard to which it is forbidden merely to keep to the middle path. . . . Such a disposition is pride. The right way in this regard is not to be merely meek, but to be humble-minded and lowly of spirit to the utmost. And therefore was it said of Moses that he was "exceedingly meek," (Num. 12:3), not merely that he was "meek." Hence, our sages exhorted us, "Be exceedingly, exceedingly lowly of spirit" (Ethics of the Fathers 4:4). They also said that anyone who permits his heart to swell with haughtiness has denied the essential principal of our religion, as it is said, "And your heart will be proud, and you will forget the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:14).

This is very far from the virtuous person Aristotle called the "great-souled man" who thinks himself worthy of great things because he really is worthy of them. For Maimonides, it would seem impossible for such a man to understand that he is obliged to bow to the law and its giver, hence the deviation from the golden mean even by that greatest-souled of prophets, Moses.

Nonetheless, although the shadings are different, the overall picture of moral life given in *Hilchot De'ot* is an Aristotelian one. A good and happy human life is the natural result of the cultivation and exercise of the virtues, which is, more or less, equivalent to following the commandments of the Torah. Indeed, even the afterlife is a natural result of the highest of these virtues, those of the intellect. On such a picture, it is almost as impossible to have a good, flourishing life without a good upbringing, parents, and education as it would be to cultivate a vegetable garden in

permafrost. This makes the religious obligation to repent a bit of a problem. “Ought,” as they say, “implies can.”

In *Hilchot Teshuvah*, Maimonides famously defines complete repentance as having been demonstrated when a person is faced with an opportunity to commit



Undated portrait of Michel de Montaigne by Thomas de Leu.

the same offense and refrains from doing so “because of his repentance rather than fear or failure.” Since it is a commandment to repent, this is incumbent upon all Jews, but what if some of them lack the resources to pull this off?

In his discussion of repentance, Maimonides devotes an entire chapter to insisting that we have free will, but that really sidesteps the problem. Aristotle had argued that choosing virtue or vice was up to us. But he also thought such choices had a shelf life; there is a time when it is unfortunately too late to become a courageous or truthful person, just as it can be too late to begin training as a triathlete or a poet. How in such a system can repentance be obligatory? Yom Kippur, for instance, might seem like a good tool to rethink one’s habits and reprioritize one’s desires, but focusing on particular sins is really secondary to the vices that gave rise to them, and vices cannot be erased in a day.

One moment when one sees the strain between Maimonides’s commitments to an ethics of character, on the one hand, and an ethics of obligation, on the other, is in what he writes about repentance in old age:

If, however, a person only repented in old age, at a time when he is no longer capable of doing what he had done, even though this is not an excellent form of repentance, he is counted as a penitent. Even if he transgressed his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died as a penitent all of his sins are forgiven.

One can, just barely, reconcile such a statement with the virtue ethics that are laid out in *Hilchot De’ot*, but it is also clear here that Maimonides has reservations about someone whose repentance consists largely or entirely of regret. Indeed, what can such a verbal repentance even mean if it does not draw upon the kind of moral resources that MacIntyre enumerated and does not issue in the kind of behavioral change that Maimonides set out as a criterion of success? One suspects that Maimonides would have been tempted to agree with Montaigne, who said that he saw “nothing of conscience” in deathbed repentance: “[C]hagrin and febleness imprint on us a lax and snotty virtue.”

But is this really fair? And would one want to live in a moral culture in which repentance was no longer a possibility for those who were badly raised, or fully formed, or near death? Perhaps what Maimonides and the Jewish tradition he is summarizing are suggesting is that if one does not have the resources to change one’s desires, then God will provide them. Or, alternatively, that in insisting that repentance is always both obligatory and possible, that “the gates of repentance” reopen every year, the tradition itself provides the resources to “stop doing the things that [one] know[s] are wrong,” though it does not guarantee that one will.

What then of Maimonides’s virtue ethics? Perhaps his inconsistent—or at least tension-ridden—system in which our moral lives are described in terms of both virtues to cultivate and commandments to be obeyed is closer to our felt experience than either is alone. Moral thinking, it turns out, was always messy.

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Upon Such Sacrifices: King Lear and the Binding of Isaac

BY NOAH MILLMAN

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” Is it ironic that the tragedy of *King Lear*, perhaps the most devastating in the English language, begins with a father’s plea for love? The question certainly surprises his court, which is anxious over the disposition of the kingdom.

Here is the situation: Lear, feeling his decline, looks to prevent future strife by settling his succession now. But he does not simply settle. He doesn’t incline to Albany, as his faithful vassal Kent tells us he thought he had and which would have been seen as only right and natural since Goneril, Albany’s wife, is Lear’s firstborn. Nor does he directly vest all in his youngest and dearest, Cordelia, which, had he done so, would have left her sisters gnashing their teeth while France and Burgundy overleaped each other in striving for her hand. Instead, he poses a test:

Tell me, my daughters—
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.

His favor will incline toward love. But first, that love must be manifested. How can love be demonstrated to a father’s—and a monarch’s—satisfaction? His older daughters offer Lear the cloying words they think he wants. “Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter”; “No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour”; “I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys”; and so on. Cordelia wonders how to follow these extraordinary exhalations and counsels herself to “Love, and be silent.” And when it is her turn to speak, the words she makes of silence are:

CORDELIA
Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR
Nothing!

CORDELIA
Nothing.

KING LEAR
Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.

CORDELIA
Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.

Far from being rewarded for her truth, her spoken silence unleashes a howling void that, by the end of the play, has swallowed nearly all the world, leaving only a wasteland of wolves for the righteous Edgar to rule and the loyal Kent to wander.

It seems an extravagant consequence, even for the legend of an ancient king. Why should the very fate of the world depend on the outcome of such a silly test? Why should one foolish, fond old man’s feeling of rejection threaten to dissolve creation into chaos? I’ve seen at least a dozen productions of the play, but this central question has remained a puzzle to me. Until I reflected that, once upon a time, another, greater king posed an even more terrible love test for a father and his child.

The first instance of the verb for love in the Hebrew Bible is in Genesis 22:

And it came to pass after these things, that God did

prove Abraham, and said unto him: “Abraham”; and he said: “Here am I.” And He said: “Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” (Gen. 22:1–2)

Why should one foolish, fond old man’s feeling of rejection threaten to dissolve creation into chaos?

Thus begins the story of the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac. It’s a story that has harrowed both Jewish and Christian commentators for more than two thousand years. And before it is anything else, it is a story of love, of the sacrifice of love, and of the sacrificial nature of love. And, as the story has it, the fate of God’s kingdom, the world, hinged on whether it was passed.

The *akedah* prompts different questions than *King Lear* does, not of how so much tragedy could have sprung from a foolish love test, but how the God of all creation could have put his faithful servant to such an unconscionable test in the first place. And so there is a long interpretive tradition that labors to elide that fact in increasingly creative ways. Surely God never intended Isaac to be a sacrifice—the boy was merely to be present at the sacrifice! How could Abraham have thought otherwise, when God had already sworn that it was through Isaac that his promise to Abraham would be fulfilled? Or, alternatively, surely Abraham never doubted that God was merely testing him—after all, Abraham tells Isaac himself that God would provide a lamb to substitute!

By such means, commentators have sought to relieve the unbearable tension the story reveals at the heart of our relationship with God. Perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental unpersuasiveness of such readings is in the role the *akedah* plays in the traditional liturgy. Thus in the daily morning prayers, the story is read to remind God of Abraham’s unfathomable faithfulness: “Just as our forefather suppressed his mercy for his only son and wished to slaughter him in order to do Your will, so may your mercy suppress your [justifiable] anger . . .” What merit would there have been if Abraham had merely misunderstood God’s command—or understood it correctly but knew that he didn’t really have to fulfill it?

The *akedah* is also read from the Torah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Thus, as we prepare to face God in judgment, we read the primal story of parental and divine love in its most terrifying and all-devouring form. And yet, in one of the most moving prayers of the day, *Ha-yom Harat Olam* (Today Is the Birthday of the World), we pray:

Today all creatures stand in judgment, whether as children or as servants. If we merit consideration as children, have mercy on us as a father has mercy on his children. If as servants, our eyes beseech You to be gracious unto us in judgment, O revered and holy One.

And we close the service with *Avinu Malkeinu*—a plea for mercy not only from our king but from our father.

This is the way we approach God when we want to emphasize the most fundamental level of our relationship. We ask God to consider us as children and be merciful as a father is, not a master: with partiality toward the unique value of our own selves. But this is the love that Abraham had for Isaac and that he believed God had for both of them as His chosen servants. And it is this, even this, that God demanded Abraham sacrifice to prove his total love for Him, when He commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son.

That is the central, unresolvable tension of the *akedah* when I read it by the light of Shakespeare’s tragedy, as if Shakespeare were a writer of midrash. Can we merit God’s consideration as children only if we give God that which *Lear* demanded of Cordelia—love Him with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our means, reserving nothing for ourselves, for others, or for the world? And if so, then what is left of us to receive that consideration?

William Shakespeare was certainly familiar with the story of the binding of Isaac, and not only because of his deep cultural familiarity with the Bible and access to the Geneva translation. Medieval dramatists had repeatedly depicted Abraham’s trial on stage; the typical version explicitly brought out the understanding of Isaac as the great typological forerunner of Christ and the substitution of the ram as prefiguring God’s substitution of His own son for humanity.

But the *akedah* also had particular resonance in early modern England. Hampton Court, where Henry VIII

resided, included a magisterial tapestry depicting Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, and this was not happenstance. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved was the paradigmatic instance of the subject's total obedience, the complete subordination of his will and his interests to those of his sovereign. Moreover, in a country where the king not only ruled by asserted divine right but had made himself the head of the church, the space between royal and divine command had shrunk almost to nonexistence.

Shakespeare actually alluded to the *akedah* in a scene in *Richard II*, as Ken Jackson demonstrates in his recent book *Shakespeare and Abraham*. It is a comic scene in which the Duke of York denounces his own son, Aumerle, before the newly crowned King Henry IV, demanding that Aumerle be put to death for treason even as the king offers him mercy. What is being satirized here is precisely the psychological situation created by the demands of absolute fealty to the monarch. In a sense, York is testing whether Henry Bolingbroke *is* the king, whether he *will* demand loyalty in the most absolute terms, because this is what royal authority *means*. This is reminiscent of the

scenario described in a midrash on the *akedah*. The angel has stayed Abraham's hand, and Abraham has seen the ram and sacrificed it. But now Abraham turns to heaven and protests that he *still* needs to sacrifice Isaac, else his intention will not have been fulfilled, and it might have been thought that he never intended to fulfill it. For the command to be withdrawn is to put into question either the authority of the one who commands or the loyalty of the one who obeys. Our sympathies in Aumerle's scene are unequivocally with the natural bond between father and son. But what happens when the sovereign and the father are one and the same, as is the case in *King Lear*?

King Lear is not usually thought of as having a relationship with the story of Abraham, though a suggestive connection was made by King James I himself. Before ascending to the English throne, James VI of Scotland wrote a political guide, *Basilikon Doron*, for his eldest son, advising him never to divide his kingdom (as Lear does) but "make your eldest son Isaac, leaving him all your kingdoms." Instead, the most common point of biblical reference for *King Lear* is Job—because of his extravagant suffering, his demands for justice, the



Tapestry depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, the King's Great Bedchamber, Hampton Court Palace. (Courtesy of the Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2017.)

storm against which he rages, and, not incidentally, his trio of daughters (though Job was happier there than Lear was). But just as Richard II and King Lear have a clear kinship—two kings who abdicate, suffer, discover their humanity thereby, and come to wonder how political authority can survive the knowledge that the king is but a man—Job himself, though not an Israelite, is a version of Abraham.

Job's story begins as Abraham's climaxes: with a test. Will he remain righteous when God punishes him for no reason? There is even a midrash in which Abraham's test originates in an argument with Satan that mirrors the frame story of Job. Job, like Abraham, passes his test. He does not follow his wife's advice to "curse God and die," nor does he succumb to the false comforts of his friends, who urge him to blame his own sinfulness for his suffering. Instead, he suffers for his fidelity. This is very close to Abraham's own agony, but Job did not have to wield the knife. Similarly, Lear's suffering in abdication is akin to Richard's, but, unlike Lear, Richard did not decide upon his own destruction.

Why does Lear need to prove his daughters' love? He knows his youngest daughter's devotion. I have never seen a production in which Lear is in any way fooled by his two older daughters' false comforts. He already knows that Cordelia loves him truly and that Goneril and Regan exaggerate their affection. What, then, is the purpose of the trial?

Well, what is the purpose of Abraham's trial? God, even more than Lear, surely knows the depth of Abraham's devotion. From God's perspective, the command cannot be posed in order to see whether Abraham will be willing to perform the terrible deed. Rather, the purpose can only be to teach Abraham something by going through the experience of preparing for sacrifice, right up to the point the knife is raised, and to teach succeeding generations through the story of his deed.

So, too, I would suggest, with Lear. The love test is almost always staged as a bit of theater: Lear knows

what he is going to do, and he thinks he knows what Cordelia is going to do. He has orchestrated this as a teachable moment for his daughters and for his court, a lesson in what love looks and sounds like—love for a father and love for a king, which are, in Lear's case, one and the same. He would give her all, and he expects that she will demonstrate a love commensurate with that gift: a love that matches all with all. But Cordelia refuses to follow the script. "Love, and be silent," she tells herself—what is the salience of this silence? I cannot help but hear an echo of Abraham's own silence in the face of the divine command, a terrible silence that



Cordelia Comforting her Father, King Lear, in Prison, by George William Joy, 1886. (Courtesy of the Leeds Museums and Galleries, U.K./Bridgeman Images.)

envelops the crisis within which Abraham is caught.

Midrash fills up Abraham's silences—for example, by way of explaining the prolixity of God's original command. "Take your son," God commands, and Abraham, in the famous midrash quoted by Rashi, replies, "I have two sons." "Your only son" is elicited in reply, "each is the only son of his mother [Sarah and Hagar]." "The one you love"—"but I love both of them." Only with the name "Isaac" does Abraham run out of ways to escape. But all of this midrashic elaboration only underlines what is missing from the original biblical text: any sign of what Abraham is feeling.

Although Cordelia begins her speech with a literal “nothing,” she does not stand upon that silence, but interprets it for her father and his court:

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
 carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

For this, Cordelia is banished and disowned—and we, like the loyal Kent, are appalled. But in this reaction, we are reading Lear as something less than what he knows himself to be, that is, as less than a king. We should take the moment, and Lear’s intentions, more seriously. And reading Lear by the light of the *akedah* is a way in.

What has God asked Abraham to sacrifice when He calls for Isaac to be set forth as a burnt offering? Remember the three ways God describes him: your son, your only one, whom you love. Isaac is Abraham’s son, the continuance of his own name. Isaac is unique, the vessel through which the entire world is promised blessing and redemption. And Isaac is Abraham’s beloved. Isaac is the child of Abraham and Sarah’s old age, the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to Abraham since He took him out of Ur of the Chaldees. And this—all that God has given him—is what God demands Abraham surrender, to prove his obedience—his love—for God, his ultimate father.

The principle here is terribly simple, and one that Satan’s cynical argument about Job makes explicit. If we obey God in expectation of reward, then our love of God is not pure. So to prove that our love is pure, and not transactional, we must be willing to sacrifice everything—indeed, everything that God Himself promised us—on the altar of our devotion. If we do less than this—if we reserve anything for ourselves, for our own futures, for our destinies on earth—then we have proved ourselves unworthy of those very blessings that were promised.

Cordelia’s response to her father turns this equation

on its head. She is to be wedded to a great prince and will inherit the choicest portion of her father’s kingdom—if she demonstrates total and complete love. This is the transactional love that the *akedah* rejects, a prize for a price. Her response is that if she demonstrates that total love—and implicitly values that inheritance and that marriage at nothing—then the entire ceremony of

It is precisely God’s absence in *King Lear* that sheds clarifying light on Abraham’s trial.

king and court and of her courtship is pointless. It is not her love that must be total, but his, her father’s—total enough to give her a kingdom knowing she will not return it.

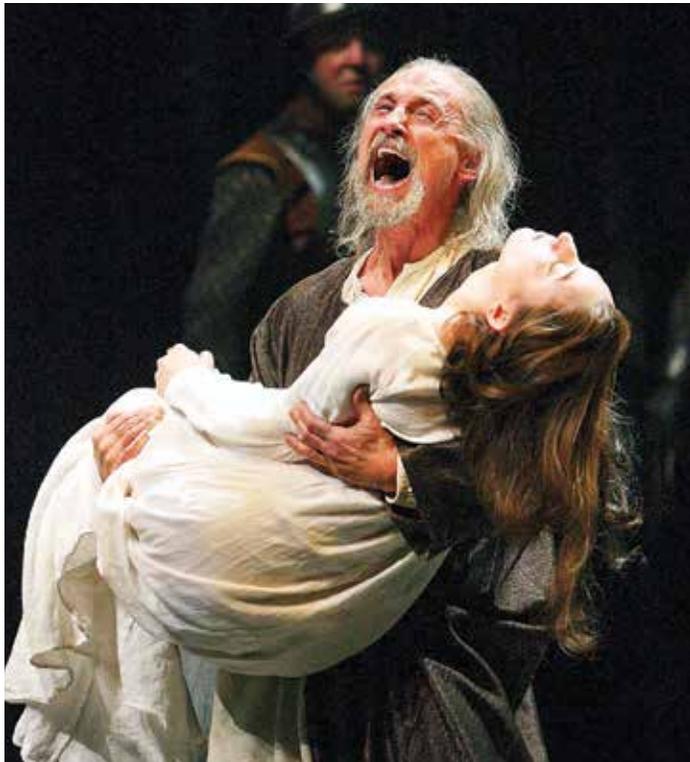
But if we empathize unequivocally with Cordelia’s resistance, what do we make of Abraham’s obedience? And more troubling still, what do we make of Cordelia’s own tragic end?

I have been very free in my associations until now, moving fluidly between apparently competing identifications. If *King Lear* can be read as a version of the *akedah*, then where is God and who is Abraham? *Meshalim*, allegorical stories that elucidate a biblical text, generally follow a one-to-one correspondence, and where “a king of flesh and blood” is posited, he is usually a stand-in for God. Following that allegorical logic, Lear, who poses the test, is God. But then, who is Abraham? A child or a father?

There is no way to perfectly match up a story with three parties—God, Abraham, and Isaac—and one with two—Lear and Cordelia. But consider the story instead from Isaac’s perspective. God does not speak to him but to his father. And he is tested as surely as Abraham is. A wide variety of *midrashim* fill in the voids of Isaac’s own silence, but the biblical text gives us only the one question: Where is the lamb? From Isaac’s perspective, God and his father are as one in this moment of trial, and he must have either faith in the rightness of his own slaughter or faith that God will not demand what He appears to be demanding. Is this not similar to Cordelia’s own dilemma when faced with her father’s love test?

Moreover, from both a medieval and an early modern perspective, the line between the monarch and

the divinity was blurry. The medieval Christian ideology of the king's two bodies held that while the king was in one sense just a man, he was also, numinously, the kingdom in himself. This idea clearly informs Shakespeare's play; much of Lear's physical suffering can be read as the king experiencing in his actual body the afflictions of the body of state. He grows most God-like on stage precisely when he is powerless in exile from his kingdom and from his children.



Colm Feore as King Lear and Sara Farb as Cordelia at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, 2014. (Photo by David Hou.)

But it is precisely God's absence in *King Lear* that sheds clarifying light on Abraham's trial. Where, after all, does the impulse to sacrifice the firstborn originate but in a sense of primal gratitude? The womb is open, but we cannot take credit for opening it. Who, then, deserves the first fruit? And with promises as extravagant as those embodied in Isaac, how could anyone accept them without first offering to give them back? For Abraham, Isaac is his relationship with God—the living embodiment of all of God's promises. Even if Abraham had not heard God's command, he would have known the awesome implications of having been granted Isaac in the first place.

And so *King Lear*, in which God's presence is oc-

cluded and the monarch stands alone with a test of his own devising, is a useful lens through which to see Abraham's crisis. Lear is a king, God's regent on earth. Like Abraham, he is a legendary patriarchal figure. Finally, he is a father, and it is not so simple to divorce from fatherhood that illusion of true continuity, that one's living legacy owes total obedience in gratitude for their very life, because only in this fashion does one's own life continue beyond one's death.

This is the burden that both Isaac and Cordelia bear. Isaac's own willingness to be sacrificed is a frequent theme of midrash and commentary, from an interpolated dialogue with his half-brother Ishmael that fills in the backstory to the opening words of the *akeidah*, "after these things" (Ishmael brags of how much blood he shed when he was circumcised as a teenager, and Isaac retorts that he will shed far more blood on Mount Moriah), to exhortations by Isaac to his father to bind him fast so that any involuntary struggle on his part does not result in a less-than-perfect cut with the knife, invalidating the sacrifice.

And by the play's end, Cordelia also shows her love to be absolute. That husband for whom she reserved half of her love she leaves behind in France, returning armed to rescue her father from her cruel sisters. When they meet again, and Lear says he knows she does not love him, but that she has cause not to, she replies—in a line that can fail to make you weep only if you have no heart at all—"No cause, no cause." And when their arms do not avail, and Lear and Cordelia are captured, Lear tells her not to despair, because now they truly have all that they need, which is each other. In describing their future life together in prison, he uses the language of human sacrifice:

KING LEAR

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
 And take upon's the mystery of things,
 As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
 In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
 That ebb and flow by the moon.

EDMUND

Take them away.

KING LEAR

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense.

Lear and Cordelia go together to their doom as Abraham and Isaac climbed up Mount Moriah side by side.

But only Cordelia dies. God's angel stays Abraham's hand at the final moment, while Edmund's reprieve comes too late for Lear's poor fool. Cordelia's death came as a shock to Shakespeare's first audiences. All the signs pointed to *King Lear* as a romance rather than a tragedy, situated somewhere between *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, a story of sundering and reconciliation, turning the father's heart to the children and the children's hearts to the father.

King Lear does contain something like that romance in the story of Gloucester and his sons Edgar and Edmund. There are biblical echoes here as well: Gloucester's coming to sight through blindness and illegitimate Edmund's trickery employed to win an inheritance over his brother darkly recall the aged Isaac's deception by Jacob. Shakespeare gave us all the romance one might want in the good Edgar's slow succoring of Gloucester away from self-destruction, even to a final reconciliation that kills the father with joy.

Audiences had every reason to expect to see that mood continue to the finale, with Lear restored to the throne with Cordelia by his side. In fact, that was, quite literally, the promised end. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's primary source for the story, Lear's wicked daughters are vanquished by Cordelia, who restores her father to the throne and succeeds him as queen. Shakespeare's other major source, a play from the 1590s called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*—first published in 1605, just in time to inspire Shakespeare's own effort—ended on a similarly happy note.

Most of Shakespeare's plays are revisions of older works by other writers (the Gloucester-Edgar subplot came from Sidney's *Arcadia*), but in this case he radically revised the ending, swerving suddenly from romance into the bleakest tragedy. Edgar's triumph butting up so directly against Cordelia's murder only

sharpens the narrative cruelty of the latter. All our expectations, like those of the characters left alive onstage, are crushed. One feels that this isn't how it's supposed to end.

Why make this change? It is tempting to conclude that this is of a piece with God's absence from Shakespeare's story, that in a world ruled by the biblical God, the blessing of life does not, finally, require a commensurate sacrifice. In a deep sense, to accept the death of Cordelia is to accept an utterly bleak universe. Perhaps that is why the story was revised yet again. For more than a century and a half the English stage never saw Cordelia's death, since Shakespeare's play was performed only in the 1681 adaptation by Nahum Tate in which Cordelia lives and marries Edgar. If Cordelia is an Isaac figure, of course she must live and testify to the presence of God in the world.

But did Isaac live? If some biblical critics are correct, the *akedah* narrative as we find it may itself be decomposed into two strands, one for Elokim, who demanded the sacrifice of the firstborn male child as of the first fruits, and one for the God of the Tetragrammaton in the "J" strand, who sent the angel and substituted the ram. On this theory, something older, and darker, was revised out of our *akedah* story.

And though the biblical text as it has come down to us clearly states that Abraham's hand was stayed in time, the question nagged at the ancient midrashists. Small gaps in the biblical narrative—why, for instance, doesn't the text say that Isaac went down the mountain together with his father just as they had gone up together?—support a shocking countertradition: Isaac was indeed sacrificed. In his classic book *The Last Trial*, Shalom Spiegel explored these *midrashim*, in which Isaac spilled a quart of blood on the altar, was reduced to ashes, and spent three years in paradise before being restored to life on earth.

Whatever theological significance one imputes to such stories, what they demonstrate first and foremost is a basic narrative dissatisfaction with the *akedah*. Expectations are raised by the terms of the test: Will Abraham truly grasp the nettle of his terrible position and sacrifice the life of the blessing itself to show his gratitude for that life and that blessing? His last-minute reprieve is a let-down. The story as we have it also poses a problem for anyone facing a situation of terrible, unavoidable sacrifice. As Jews have

asked in terrible historical moments (the Crusades, the Holocaust), why is God demanding more of me than He demanded of Abraham? Where is my reprieve? The midrashic tradition of an Isaac who was not merely bound upon the altar but sacrificed responds to that gnawing demand for an ending that completes the awesome task and closes the terrible circle.

But set Shakespeare's play beside the *akedah*, with its own history of changes and reverses, and the multiply revised revisions double back upon themselves. There is the potential for tragedy here, and there is the potential for romance here, but we cannot choose; no ending can satisfy. Why should that be?

I read these texts not only as a critic, but as a father. And as a father, I cannot help but be attuned to the central paradox of parenthood. Children are the way in which we continue in the world beyond our lives, and so we want them to carry us with them, as fully and completely as possible. But to continue in the world, they must differentiate themselves, must become less us and more them. And the less us they are, the more we feel a promise unfulfilled: We will not continue beyond our lives.

God's first command to Abraham was *lech lecha*—take yourself out, exile yourself, differentiate yourself as radically as possible from the place and people that you came from. Then He promised him Isaac for continuity.

This boy would be the fulfillment of the covenant, the means by which God's name, and Abraham's, would be known throughout the world. And His last command was to surrender all this, and give it back, with Isaac's life.

Reading Cordelia as a revision of Isaac, the revision says: I must also go out; I must also differentiate myself. I cannot love you all, not even for the best of the kingdom, because the kingdom is worthless if I cannot inherit it, because there is no "I" to do so. And if I do not go out, there will be no "I," for to love you all is as much as to die.

If Cordelia's death is unbearable, it is because we want to believe in reconciliation on those terms. But if Isaac's survival is also unsatisfying, perhaps it is because we cannot believe in reconciliation after his binding, not because he would not love his father after such an experience, but because the binding was itself a kind of death, a complete submission. Lear's test, like Abraham's, cannot be satisfied any other way but by total love, which, it turns out, is death.

And so we turn, and turn again, revise and revise again, finding no ending satisfying. Because the point is, we do not want to end.

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Temporary Measures: Sukkah City

BY SHARI SAIMAN

The history of architecture has its origins in religious structures. Temples and places of worship were among the first great buildings. In contrast, modern architecture has tended to focus on minimal dwellings and innovations of form. Meanwhile, today's working architects are often occupied with the design of prefabricated dwellings. The sukkah, a sacred space that is nonetheless minimal, temporary, and often built from a kit, would seem a natural subject for serious architectural thought. But that has rarely been the case. So, Joshua Foer and Roger Bennett's idea to create an architectural competition that challenged designers to create *sukkot* was a bold and brilliant move that makes the belated introduction between the two.

The project, which was underwritten by Project Reboot, an organization dedicated to exploring and reinvigorating Jewish ritual, is called *Sukkah City* and was announced this spring. The designs of 12 finalists were chosen in August by an extraordinary panel of architects, graphic designers, and critics, including Thom Mayne of Morphosis Architects and Maira Kalman and Paul Goldberger of *The New York Times*. The *sukkot* was displayed in Union Square before the holiday.

The competition poster—itsself an elegant piece of design work—offered 32 traditional rabbinic rules, or 32 *halakhot*, for building the sukkah, from its minimal dimensions requirements (in terms of *amot* or hand-breadths) to materials and more intriguing possibilities for where a sukkah can be built (on the back of a camel, for example, or on a boat). One additional rule was from the New York City building code; it stipulates that any building larger than 8' x 19' is not considered temporary, regardless of rabbinic tradition, which envisions *sukkot* of any size.

The poster gave a hint of the ritual logic and metaphysics of the holiday: “the sukkah must have a roof made of *skhakh*: the leaves and/or branches of a tree or

plant; at night one must be able to see the stars from within the sukkah, through the roof,” but did not elaborate much beyond such cryptic formulations. The architects were told that “the sukkah exists as an ancient archetype . . . recalling the homeless exodus through the desert and festival of harvest and homecoming: a place

The simultaneous demand for sophistication on the halakhic end and the design end is true *hiddur mitzvah*, “glorification of the mitzvah.”

to eat, sleep, study, think, feel and be,” and that “the sukkah exists as a parametric network of design constraints and possibilities: of musts and mays and maybes,” and little else.

The field for such a competition is comprised of the kind of elite architects who might compete in the MoMA-P.S.1 Young Architects Program competition, where entrants are challenged to create an experimental and temporary structure for the museum's courtyard for the summer. Few of the sukkah designers seem to have had a deep knowledge of the holiday or its vernacular architecture, beyond what was conveyed on the poster. Bennett and Foer seem to have intended this, challenging the Jewish community to think about what a sukkah might be as much as they were challenging the designers to think through the possibilities of these “radically temporary structures.” That description is the real hook for the design culture, which is uncomfortable around the language and emotions of religion but charmed by the impermanent and ephemeral.

The first biblical description of the sukkah is brief:

Live in *sukkot* for seven days, so your descendants will remember that I [the Lord] had the Israelites live

in wilderness shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. (Lev. 23: 42-43)

The Rabbis of the Talmud debate whether Scripture's sukkah is a physical entity or a metaphor for God's protective Clouds of Glory, but the structure we know of today takes on its built form in rabbinic literature. In its classic dialectical style, the Talmud debates the sukkah's minimum requirements in terms of both surface and measurement. But it also engages in thought-experiments: Must a sukkah be stationary? Can the wall of an existing building count as one of its three required walls? What about an animal, say an elephant? Can it have two stories? And so on. Foer describes this as "the oldest ongoing conversation about architecture in the world." From the first discussions in the Talmud to the fiberglass panels in a suburban backyard, the sukkah's form has evolved over time. But Foer is engaging in a bit of hyperbole here. Truly imaginative design discussion seems to have stopped with the Talmud. Most Jews observing this ritual to-

day resort to the familiar metal pole frame and canvas walls, or prefabricated panels. This is often topped off with some kind of manufactured bamboo mat. Unlike our rabbinic forebears, we have ceased to explore the sukkah's potential form, which is precisely what makes *Sukkah City* such an intriguing project.

Architects do not always take their clients' dictates as seriously as they do those of their own imagination, and at first glance some of the designs appear less than kosher. However, Foer and Bennett engaged Dani Passow, an advanced rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as well as a Cooper Union-trained engineer, as a halakhic consultant. Passow serves as the expert on the sukkah's peculiar building codes, researching the rabbinic responsa literature while helping the architects to tweak their designs so that they conform to halakha. In recent weeks, his entire yeshiva has become engrossed in the process, provoked into a return to the kind of creative architectural thinking presented in the discussions of the Talmud.

Foer and Bennett's insistence that each design



"Sukkah of the Signs" by Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael. (Photo by William Meyers.)

abide by halakha makes *Sukkah City* a uniquely Jewish project and not just an architectural competition with a yarmulke. The simultaneous demand for sophistication on the halakhic end and the design end is true *hiddur mitzvah*, “glorification of the mitzvah.” The project brings not just cool and cachet

during the day, while in the night it can be more open to a view of the stars.

One entry entitled “The Gathering” by Dale Suttle, So Sugita, and Ginna Nguyen has the energy and form of a windswept structure, offering intimate enclosure in the middle of a busy urban space. Its design also recalls the themes of harvest and gathering associated with the holiday.

“Sukkah of the Signs” by Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael, a particularly poignant design that is more political statement than architecture, shows a dwelling made of the petitionary cardboard signs often held by homeless people seeking food or money. This design provokes the viewer by recalling the customary hospitality connected with the sukkah. It is the only design to address its context directly: Union Square may now be a neighborhood of upscale residences and retail venues, but it was home to the homeless and addicts in the late 1970s and 1980s. The design recalls the cardboard box, New York’s classic temporary shelter, and is a sad reminder of the tem-



“Star Cocoon” by Volkan Alkanoglu. (Photo by William Meyers.)

porary dwellings and dwellers who are not a short-term installation in Union Square but a permanent fixture of the city. The winning design, a grassy spherical dwelling called “Fractured Bubble” by Henry Grosman and Babak Bryan, blurs the distinction between floor and roof (but still keeps them officially separate) and considers whether rectilinear geometry is necessary for a kosher sukkah.

but real depth and inquiry to the ancient practice of sukkah-building in such a modern and public forum.

The best of *Sukkah City*’s designs achieve the shock of the familiar: the halakha dressed in new clothes but still halakhic. The orb-like form of a “Star Cocoon” by Volkan Alkanoglu emphasizes the mandate that the sukkah’s *skhakh* not obstruct a view of the stars. Its complex skin, composed of primary and secondary frames of bamboo with an exterior covering of rattan, makes a creative attempt at layering wall and roof elements. Its curvilinear shape also does not privilege any particular positioning; there are many ways to orient this sukkah and still be underneath its *skhakh*. The designer’s entry rendering (not shown) demonstrates how it may offer shade from the sun

The competition entries are visually impressive, and the most successful grasp and highlight some important aspect of the holiday. Others fail to understand that the sukkah, like all other aspects of Jewish observance, is not so much about the “laws” but about their lived interpretation. The *halakhot* were presented to the registrants as any other constraint in a construction project. But, to take just one instance, the Talmud’s minimum requirement of “two walls and part of a third” is to be

taken more than just literally. It is actually a consideration of what offers shelter, a visceral sense of comfort and protection, to the individual. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, compares this to the



“The Gathering” by Dale Suttle, So Sugita, and Ginna Nguyen. (Photo by William Meyers.)

Song of Songs description of a hug: “His left arm lay under my head and His right arm embraces me” (8:3).

Though clearly designed as temporary structures, some

of the designs are almost too simplistic and spare. Others are so outlandish in their posturing forms that they read as extroverted gestures rather than introverted dwellings. The action of the sukkah is on the inside. Such designs lack Schneur Zalman’s sense of embrace, as well as the humility encoded in the rabbinic concept of a temporary dwelling. A pile of spiked ringed structures may meet the legal requirements, but its imbalanced and aggressive form defeats the spirit of the sukkah.

For the architect, enamored of themes like deconstruction, rupture, and disjunction, the ideas of temporality and transience are alluring because they relate to our fragmented cultural moment. But the sukkah dweller, sitting beneath the *skhakh*, contemplates how, for only a few days, we are displaced from our homes and rooted in the ground, enclosed from around but open to the infinite expanse of the sky. This is not a fractured experience but an ennobling one. In the chill of early autumn, often huddled in our coats eating dinner beneath the night sky, a deep sense of peace and enclosure sets in that is almost impossible to articulate. Inhabiting the sukkah animates it more than any gesture of design can. Nonetheless, the best designs in *Sukkah City* return us to just this sense of fragility, intimacy, and awe.

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When Eve Ate the Etrog: A Passage from Tsena-Urena

BY JACOB BEN ISAAC ASHKENAZI, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MORRIS M. FAIERSTEIN

The commandment to recite the blessing over the lulav and the etrog on Sukkot can only be fulfilled with a fully intact fruit. If the etrog's stem is broken off or missing, it is unfit for ritual use. But as soon as the holiday is over, the etrog is superfluous. It was once the custom for a pregnant woman to bite off the tip of the etrog after services on Hoshanah Rabbah. This strange action is an outgrowth of an early-modern Ashkenazic tradition about the pangs of childbirth. The earliest known source for both the tradition and the custom is in the popular *Tsena-Urena*, the famous Yiddish biblical commentary by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Janov, which was especially popular among women and, as some title pages had it, "men who are like women," in that they read Yiddish instead of Hebrew. The brief passage below includes the text of a Yiddish

prayer, or *tkhine*, that the pregnant woman is instructed to recite based on Bahya ben Asher's commentary to Genesis 3:6. Strikingly, it also describes the forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve ate as an apple, a medieval Christian notion with no source in rabbinic interpretation.

Rather than being a Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch, as is commonly assumed, *Tsena-Urena* is a commentary on the Pentateuch, the *Haftarot*, and the Five Scrolls. First published at the beginning of the 17th century, it has appeared in more than 225 editions and is still in print. Unfortunately, 19th-century publishers abbreviated and sometimes censored the text, and more recent publishers have followed in their footsteps. The following passage is among those that were deleted in the later editions.

This excerpt is taken from what will be, when it is finished, the first complete and annotated English



Beholding the etrog, from Ushpizin, 2005. (Ushpizin © New Line Productions, Inc. Licensed By Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.)

translation of the Tsena-Urena. It is based on the earliest extant edition (Basel/Hanau, 1622).

The tree was good for eating (Gen. 3:6). The tree was good to eat. Some sages say that it was a fig tree and therefore they ripped off leaves from a fig tree to cover their shame after they ate from the tree of knowledge. Their eyes were opened and they were ashamed to go naked. Others say that it was a grape vine and that she squeezed some grapes and gave him wine, red as blood, to drink. That is why the commandment of *niddah* was given to the women, from whom red blood flows (Genesis Rabbah 15:7). Others say that it was an *etrog* tree and that is why it is the custom for women to tear out the tip of the *etrog* on Hoshanah Rabbah. That is to say, they give money to charity because “charity saves from death” (Proverbs 10:2) and

so that God should protect the child she is pregnant with. Since she did not eat from the apple, may the woman give birth to her child as easily as a hen lays an egg, without pain. The woman should say, “Lord of the universe, because Eve ate the apple, we women must suffer the terrible fate to die in childbirth. Had I been present there, I would not have derived any benefit from it, just as now I did not want to make the *etrog* ritually unfit. It was used for the fulfillment of a commandment for seven days, but now on Hoshanah Rabbah, the commandment is ended. I am not quick to eat it, and just as I have little benefit from the tip, so did I have little benefit from the apple that you forbade.”

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A Tale of Two Night Vigils

BY ELLIOTT HOROWITZ

Although the so-called *tikkun* observed by many Jews on the first night of Shavuot is by far the best known today of the various all-night vigils that have emerged since the 16th century, it was long paired with a now almost-forgotten nocturnal study session observed on the night before Hoshana Rabbah, the seventh (and final) day of Sukkot. Samuel Spiro, who was born in 1885 in the Hessian village of Schenklengsfeld, described his “vivid memories”

A heavenly voice interrupted, speaking through Karo, who was then presumably in a trance, identifying itself alternately as the *Shekhina* and as the personification of the Mishnah itself.

of accompanying his father, the community’s rabbi, to the various study sessions on those nights. Although the community numbered no more than 50 families, its adult males were divided into *chevrot*, or pious societies, and each society met in the home of one of its members. As Spiro wrote in his 1948 memoir:

The tables were festively set and covered with all sorts of fruits and baked goods. At midnight there was coffee and cake . . . Every family in whose house the learning took place sought to offer its best in the way of food and drink, and on the next day their hospitality was compared in the synagogue courtyard.

That coffee was served was hardly coincidental. As I showed in a 1989 article, both these study vigils began to spread through the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century, the same century in which coffee (*kahwa* in Arabic) first arrived, changing the possibili-

ties, both sacred and profane, of nightlife in such cities as Cairo, Damascus, and even Safed. (I had come to the subject after reading the formidable French historian Fernand Braudel on coffee’s spread and cultural influence; when my first public lecture on Shavuot and coffee was announced, a colleague unfamiliar with Braudel’s work asked if it was a joke.)

A revealing picture of the sort of learning undertaken at these vigils emerges from the 18th-century statutes of a Jewish burial society (*chevra kadi-sha*) in Worms, in Germany’s Rhineland, which was evidently the first pious society to require its members to attend both the Shavuot and Hoshana Rabbah rites. The society’s 1723 rules required its members to study either Mishnah, with the (relatively undemanding) commentary of Obadiah of Bertinoro for half an hour each day, or something simpler for those who found this material too difficult. This suggests that the society’s all-night study sessions were not particularly demanding. Members probably recited from the standard printed liturgy, which had first appeared in Venice in 1648. Those who failed to attend were fined a quarter of a gold florin, though they were exempted from the fine if they belonged to another charitable society that met on those nights.

No mention was made in the 1723 statutes of studying the entire night or of refreshments that might fuel such study. One might think that the Jews of Worms had not yet heard of tea or coffee, which were still new to Europe, or had not yet learned of their efficacy as stimulants. As we shall see, however, both beverages appear in the burial society’s statutes of 1731, though in a perhaps surprising connection.

The first documented instance of a *tikkun* vigil, more or less as we now know it, took place in the early 16th century. In a well-known letter, the kabbalist Solomon Alkabetz, now mostly remembered as the author of *Lekha Dodi*, recounts the mind-bending experience

of spending Shavuot night with the great halakhist Joseph Karo. Both men were later to become key figures in the kabbalistic circles of Safed, but Karo was then living in Nicopolis, in present-day Bulgaria, where his father had preceded him as chief rabbi. Although the *Zohar*, the major work of medieval Kabbalah, had not yet been published, Karo was strongly influenced by its teachings, as the great historian Jacob Katz deftly demonstrated. Karo must, therefore, have been familiar with the passage in the *Zohar* that describes its mystical hero Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai engaged in Torah study “all night when the bride was about to be united with her husband.” As the scholar Isaiah Tishby explained, this referred to the night of Shavuot, when the *Shekhina*, which is the tenth *sephira* (a divine emanation, power, or rung), often symbolized as a bride, was to be united with the higher *sephira* of *Tiferet*, her husband. Rabbi Simeon explained to his disciples that those studying Torah on the night of Shavuot, proceeding from biblical texts to rabbinic and mystical ones, were like friends of the bride stay-

ing up with her on the eve of her wedding, adorning her with ornaments so that the groom would find her attractive. When the groom saw his beautifully adorned bride at the ceremony, accompanied by her bridesmaids (the Torah scholars), he would inquire after them and bless them.

In Nicopolis, sometime in the 1530s, Rabbis Alkabetz and Karo decided to reenact that allegedly ancient Zoharic scene. Karo, the senior of the two, asked Alkabetz to prepare an order of study—or rather, recitation—for the occasion. The order of texts followed by the two scholars seems to have been improvised and was somewhat haphazard, a characteristic sign of a tradition being “invented.” They read the opening passages of Genesis, then two from Exodus that recounted the giving of the Torah at Sinai, but skipped Leviticus and Numbers on the way to Deuteronomy, from which they recited both an early passage and the book’s final chapter on the death of Moses, which also concluded the Pentateuch. From the Prophets they read only the two passages that served as *haftarot* on each of the two days of Shavuot—



Hoshana Rabbah procession, the seventh day of Sukkot, Amsterdam Synagogue. Etching by Bernard Picart from Cérémonies, ca. 1772.

from Ezekiel and Habakkuk. Alkabetz's choices from "the Writings" were even more erratic: some psalms followed by the books of Ruth and Song of Songs in their entirety, and then "the final verses of Chronicles," which conclude the Hebrew Bible.

According to Alkabetz, when they turned from Bible to Mishnah, a heavenly voice interrupted, speaking through Karo, who was then presumably in a trance. The voice identified itself alternately as the *Shekhina* and as the personification of the Mishnah itself, and congratulated the two scholars for having "resolved to adorn Me on this night." That was the soft voice of the *Shekhina*, but then, according to Alkabetz, the Mishnah appeared, speaking more shrilly as a difficult-to-please Jewish mother:

I am the Mishnah, the mother who chastises her children and I have come to converse with you. Had you been ten in number you would have ascended even higher, but you have reached a great height nevertheless.

Ten men is, of course, a minyan, and what the personified Mishnah was probably pointing out is that a minyan is required to recite the seven benedictions at a wedding, in this case between the *sephiroth Shekhina* and *Tiferet*.

There is no evidence of Karo and Alkabetz having performed a similar rite on Hoshana Rabbah, but by the late 16th century scholars in Safed were staying up on that night too reciting "psalms and penitential prayers," as reported by their colleague Abraham Galante. Galante described the eve of Shavuot as a night in which "every congregation assembles in its own synagogue and those present do not sleep the whole night long."

Just as Shavuot had been transformed in rabbinic times from a Temple-oriented summer harvest festival to one in which the giving of the Torah was celebrated, so too had Hoshana Rabbah been transformed from the festive march of willow branches to the day of repentance and final judgement, at least for those who felt that they needed a post-Yom Kippur extension. In that spirit, the custom emerged, in medieval Spain, of examining one's shadow on the night of Hoshana Rabbah to discern one's fate during the coming year. Having no shadow meant that one would die; the absence of various limbs from the

shadow meant that family members would die. It is understandable, then, that the Hoshana Rabbah *tikkun*, as observed in Safed, included penitential prayers.

Even earlier than the custom of examining one's shadow on Hoshana Rabbah, a custom emerged of staying up all night to read through the entire Pentateuch, from Genesis through Deuteronomy, to

In 1763 the society decided that both coffee and wine would be served at the study sessions on Shavuot and Hoshana Rabbah. Brandy was also permissible.

make sure that one had finished the Torah before Simchat Torah commenced on the next day. The custom is first mentioned by the 13th-century Italian scholar Zedekiah Anav in his *Shibbolei ha-leket*. From Italy the custom spread to Spain, where it is first mentioned in the 14th century, but this was not yet the mystical night vigil as magical *tikkun*.

In contrast to their rapid reception in Ottoman Jewish communities after the Spanish Expulsion, the Shavuot and the Hoshana Rabbah vigils spread more slowly to the Jewish communities of northern Europe, where coffee arrived considerably later as well. This can be seen in the comments of Isaiah Horowitz, whose book *Shne luchos ha-brit* was completed in Jerusalem during the 1620s and published posthumously in Amsterdam in 1648–1649. Horowitz, who had served as a rabbi both in Frankfurt and his native Prague, had clearly not encountered the Shavuot vigil in either of those cities, for he described it in his wide-ranging work only as having "spread throughout the land of Israel and the [Ottoman] Empire." The Hoshana Rabbah rite was described there similarly as "practiced in the land of Israel, like the night of Shavuot," but including both study and prayer. Although Horowitz, who stressed that it was best to perform these rites with a minyan, had not encountered either vigil in his native northern Europe, his enormously influential work—the fourth edition of which was published in Frankfurt in 1717, after having already appeared in several abridged editions—was instrumental in their spread from the elite circles of Safed kabbalists to the ordinary Jews of the Worms burial society.

Although the Worms statutes of 1723 had made no mention of coffee or tea, four decades

later things had changed dramatically. By 1763 the member who hosted the study sessions was required to provide “two measures of old wine,” but coffee would be paid for by the society itself. Wine, in fact, had long played a central role in the soci-

on the occasion of the annual banquet. Two and a half centuries before college students and clubbers began mixing vodka with Red Bull, the burial society stipulated that henceforth at its annual banquet “only wine, brandy, and coffee” could be served at the society’s ex-



Coffee Time by Eduard Gustav Seydel, mid-1800s. (©Roy Miles Fine Paintings/Bridgeman Images.)

ety’s (non-burial) activities, as one might expect in the Rhineland. The inaugural statutes of 1716 stipulated that at the biannual officers meeting no more than two measures of wine were to be consumed. Those of 1731 stated that at the annual banquet only wine and brandy could be served at the society’s expense, although members could bring their own beer. Coffee and tea with sugar, however, were explicitly and strictly banned as contrary to the banquet spirit and were as strenuously forbidden as if, the statutes read, they were “heathen wine.”

By 1763, however, the status of coffee had clearly changed among Rhineland Jews. It was no longer seen as interfering with the spirit of pious festivity aimed for

pense. In 1763 the society decided that both coffee and wine would be served at the study sessions on Shavuot and Hoshana Rabbah. Brandy, it may be added, was also permissible, but was not necessarily provided either by the host (like wine) or the society (like coffee).

Late in the 18th century the statutes of London’s *Chebra Rodphea Sholom*, or Pursuers of Peace, required its rabbi not only “to expound on every Sabbath day” concerning that week’s “portion of the Law or the Prophets,” but also to attend their study sessions “on the First Night of Pentecost and Hoshana Rabbah . . . for which he shall be allowed Five Shillings each time,” but only “on condition that he at-

tends the full time of the meeting.”

Although there is no reason to believe that the great London Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore ever became a member of *Rodphea Sholom*, he did come to care a great deal about the Hoshana Rabbah vigil. Montefiore’s secretary Louis Loewe, who accompanied him on his 1840 trip on behalf of the Jews imprisoned in Damascus as a consequence of an infamous



Sir Moses Montefiore with coffee by an unknown artist, ca. mid-1800s. (Ramsgate Library, UK.)

blood libel, reported in his diary that they arrived in Constantinople (now Istanbul) just before Yom Kippur. Montefiore and his entourage, which included his wife, Judith, were staying at the home of the noted philanthropist Abraham de Camondo. In the Ottoman capital at the same time were several Eastern European rabbis, among them Samuel Salant, later to become chief rabbi of Jerusalem, on their way to the land of Israel.

In his memoirs, the Jerusalem educator Ephraim Cohen-Reiss wrote that Montefiore and Salant, who were later to become friends, first met when Montefiore requested of Camondo that he invite Salant and his colleagues for the first night of Shavuot, so that a proper *tikkun* could be recited with a minyan. Late that evening, according to Cohen-Reiss, Montefiore, who was more than three decades older than Salant, began dropping off to sleep, but was reluc-

tant to go to bed and miss the great mitzvah of staying up all night. The European rabbis asked Salant to intervene, at which point he told Montefiore that he himself would be sleeping had the visiting Englishman not organized the *tikkun*. Having done so, Montefiore had already garnered the reward for the rite being performed in the presence of 10 and could thus go to sleep. From then on, Salant had supposedly told Cohen-Reiss, “we were close friends.”

It is indeed true that Montefiore and the future chief rabbi met in Constantinople and that they became good friends, but they did not recite the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* liturgy together in 1840. They did, however, perform the parallel rite for Hoshana Rabbah, from which Montefiore (and Judith) retired early. As Loewe wrote in his diary:

About ten o'clock the [local] gentlemen came to read prayers with us all night, in consequence of Hoshana Rabbah. We invited the Hakham, Rabbi Jacob Dayan . . . We have also the gentlemen who were to proceed to the Holy Land. We passed the night very comfortably
Sir M. and Lady Montefiore staying with us
till 3 o'clock.

Rabbi Salant must have confused the nights of Shavuot and Hoshana Rabbah in his memory, especially since he told Cohen-Reiss the story several decades after it took place. Whether or not he truly told Montefiore that he himself would have been in bed had not the latter organized a *tikkun* is less certain. Readers who find themselves in the future nodding off on either of those nights are welcome to recall whichever version of the story suits them. They might also try another cup of coffee.

Elliott Horowitz was a distinguished historian who held positions at Ben-Gurion University and Bar-Ilan University, and was a frequent visitor to leading institutions in America and England. He was the co-editor of the Jewish Quarterly Review, the author of Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence (Princeton University Press) and many other influential studies, and a valued contributor to the Jewish Review of Books. He was a deeply erudite man with a quirky sense of humor; the line below his email signature invariably identified him as a member of the “Molkho Institute for Absurdly Abstruse Research.”

Black Fire on White Fire

BY ADAM KIRSCH

The Jewish Bible: A Material History

by David Stern

University of Washington Press, 320 pp., \$50

What is a Torah, exactly? If you were trying to explain it to a visitor from Mars, the easiest way might be to lead him to a synagogue, open the ark, and point: This scroll of parchment covered with ink is what Jews call a Torah. But of course such a response would not come close to exhausting the meaning of Torah for Judaism. After all, the ancient rabbis believed that it preexisted the created world, which obviously cannot be true of any physical object. Unlike every other book, which comes into existence only in the act of writing, the text of the Torah is prior to its script. When the Talmud says that the Torah given to Moses was written “in black fire on white fire,” it again emphasizes the distinction between the language of the Torah, which exists eternally (or, as we now say, virtually), and its physical medium.

It is a kind of paradox then that the Torah scroll is the most changeless of Jewish objects. If the original Torah was made of fire, why should it matter whether we read it as a parchment scroll or a printed codex, or for that matter on an iPhone screen? Why do Jews reading Torah in a synagogue today use exactly the same technology as their ancestors two thousand years ago? In the first chapter of *The Jewish Bible: A Material History*, his brilliant and fascinating new book, David Stern makes the point with a pair of images. One illustration depicts the oldest surviving complete Torah scroll, a product of Babylonia in the 12th century; the other shows a Torah scroll written in the United States in the 20th century (actually, a Torah in use at Harvard Hillel). Both are open to the same passage, the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, which is written in a distinctive pattern known as “a small brick atop a full brick.” The text and its layout are identical in both scrolls; the passage of eight hundred years has changed the physical

appearance of the Torah not at all.

As Stern points out, the highly conservative nature of the Torah scroll makes it difficult to study its history as an object. “Because these scrolls cannot contain any extratextual notes or features, it is very difficult to date or localize Torah scrolls with certainty or to trace their his-

The scroll, which was originally a secular technology, became closely associated with Judaism at a time when Christians were adopting the codex for their holy books.

tories,” he writes. Yet in the last half-century, the scholarly turn toward “the history of the book”—to study books as the material objects that actual readers encountered rather than disembodied texts—has affected Jewish studies no less than other fields in the humanities. In *The Jewish Bible*, Stern masterfully synthesizes this scholarship, offering a chronological history of Jewish sacred books from Qumran to the JPS Tanakh. For if the Sefer Torah itself hasn’t changed, other ways Jews encounter their scripture definitely have. Indeed, as Stern shows, the Jewish book serves as a lens through which we can study central themes of Jewish history and thought.

The book itself—that is, the codex, whose pages are folded in half and bound with a cover—came relatively late to Judaism. Rabbinic tradition fixed the form of the Sefer Torah as a scroll; in tractate Bava Batra, the rabbis specify that the scroll’s height should ideally be equal to its circumference (though they acknowledge that in practice an exact ratio is very difficult to achieve). Thus, the scroll, which was originally a secular technology, became closely associated with Judaism at a time when Christians were adopting the codex for their holy books. Indeed, Stern writes, “Early Christians . . . may initially have seized upon the codex precisely to distinguish their scriptural texts from the rabbis’ Sefer Torah.”

Before long, Torah scrolls became cult objects—even,

Stern argues, embodiments of the divine. To this day, they are decorated with crowns and kissed by worshippers. In the Middle Ages, folk tradition attributed magical powers to the Torah scroll: German Jews would bring one into a room where a woman was giving birth, while North African Jews would leave the ark open after prayers ended so that women “could approach it and address the Torah scrolls with special petitions and prayers for healing, fertility, livelihood, matchmaking, and the like.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that these traditions involved Jewish women, who were excluded from the reading of the Torah. If they could not use it as a text, at least they could interact with it as an object.

When the manuscript codex was finally adopted by Judaism—the earliest surviving examples date from around the year 1000—it brought with it a new kind of

freedom. A Torah scroll could be written only one way, but a Bible—which Jews referred to not by that Greek word, but as *mikra*, “that which is read aloud,” or “the twenty-four books”—could be annotated, illustrated, and combined with translation or commentary. It was not that Jewish books used unique techniques of production or design. On the contrary, one of Stern’s central arguments is that the Jewish book always reflected the conventions of the Gentile culture in which Jews lived, whether Christian or Islamic. He compares, for instance, the famous Leningrad Codex—the oldest complete Hebrew Bible, produced in Muslim Cairo in 1008—with a Bible produced some two centuries later in Christian Berlin. The former is decorated with “carpet pages,” whose intricate pattern of lines and shapes (and complete lack of representative images) resembles those found in contemporary Qur’ans. The latter, by contrast, features illustrated capitals and marginal drawings of fantastic beasts, of the kind found in Christian illuminated manuscripts.

Yet in both cases, the style is given a decisively Jewish twist through the incorporation of micrography. Look closely at the dragon swallowing a snake in the Berlin Bible, and you will see that the lines are made up of tiny Hebrew letters, as are the lines delineating squares and circles in the Cairo Bible. In both cases, this comprises the text of the Masorah, the annotations developed by Jewish grammarians between the 7th and 11th centuries, which indicate the way the words should be pronounced and chanted—and thereby help to determine the text’s actual meaning.

As Stern shows in a concise introduction to the subject, the Masorah also functioned as an index or concordance,

a record of unusual words, and a fence against scribal errors. In standard form, this material was incorporated in the top, bottom, and side margins of the biblical text. But in time, Jewish scribes began to use the text of the Masorah as a design element in and of itself. This transforma-



Top: An interior page of the Leningrad Codex, Cairo, 1008 C.E. (Courtesy of the National Library of Russia.) Bottom: A page from a Jewish Bible, Berlin, ca. late 13th century. (Courtesy of bpk, Berlin/Staatsbibliothek/Art Resource, New York.)



Left to right: Tikkum (Torah cases), Yemen, ca. 1900; China, 1882, in Baghdadi-Iranian style; British Palestine, 1924, in Syrian style. (Photos by Tomer Appelbaum, courtesy of the Gross Family Collection.)

tion of word into image is one of the ways a book could be marked as distinctively Jewish: “Masoretic micrography came to play a prominent role . . . giving expression to that Jewishness.”

When the Jewish Bible entered the age of print, a host of new possibilities emerged. It was difficult for a manuscript to incorporate commentaries, since the scribe would have to estimate in advance the correct proportion of text and annotation on a page. Print technology did away with this obstacle, and the result was the creation in 1517 of the *Mikraot gedolot*, “the Large Scripture,” also known as the rabbinic Bible. It was followed by an improved edition in 1524, which became the standard Jewish text of the Bible for the next four centuries. Published in Venice by the Christian printer Daniel Bomberg, who recruited converted Jews as editors, each page of the rabbinic Bible featured the original Hebrew, the Aramaic translation or Targum, the Masorah, the commentary of Rashi, and further commentary by Ibn Ezra and others.

It was in this book that the archetypal Jewish page of print—later to be adopted by and associated with the Talmud—first made its appearance. Where early Christian editions of the Bible featured translations running down the page in parallel columns, the Jewish page created a kind of hypertext, with each biblical word keyed to a host of other sources. So influential was this layout that Moses Mendelssohn adopted it for his own translation of the Bible into German, *Sefer netivot ha-shalom*: Stern reproduces the first page of this book, in which the Targum has been replaced by Mendelssohn’s elegant German (written in Hebrew characters) and the traditional commentaries by Mendelssohn’s own. By contrast, when Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig wanted to produce an ultramodern, 20th-century German Bible, they made their intentions clear by abolishing the crowded traditional page, instead printing the German text in columns that look like free verse.

The big question that looms over the conclusion of *The Jewish Bible* is whether we are on the verge of another paradigm shift in the way we interact with the sacred text. The changes from scroll to codex and from manuscript to print each changed the way Jews read and thought about the Bible; surely the shift from print to digital will do the same? Surprisingly, however, Stern tends to downplay the significance of the post-Gutenberg age. While the Internet has drastically expanded the reach of scholarship, putting many far-flung editions and texts at the researcher’s fingertips, Stern does not believe it will fundamentally change what we know as the Bible. “[T]he most dramatic transformations that the new technology can effect will,” he argues, “likely be in the study of the Bible rather than in the text itself.”

Stern foresees Jews continuing to read from parchment scrolls, as they surely will. More important, he implies that we will continue to think of the Bible as a book, sequentially divided into chapters and verses. But if a hundred or a thousand years from now books themselves no longer exist except in museums, why would the Bible be an exception? More likely, we can’t even guess at the form that the Bible will take in the consciousness of the future. Maybe Torah will return to its origin as something virtual, text without script—black fire on white fire.

Adam Kirsch is the author of The People and the Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature (W. W. Norton & Company), among other books.

Containing God's Presence

BY ILANA KURSHAN

The Heart of Torah, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus

by Rabbi Shai Held, foreword by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
The Jewish Publication Society, 400 pp., \$24.95

The Heart of Torah, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

by Rabbi Shai Held, foreword by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
The Jewish Publication Society, 496 pp., \$24.95

Over the course of a year, the Jewish calendar bends to the arc of the Torah reading cycle and assumes its shades. With the end of summer and the start of the Jewish new year, the world is created anew in Genesis and nearly destroyed by flood in the story of Noah, a parsha (portion) which coincides with the start of the rainy season in Israel. As the autumn chill sets in and the nights grow longer, we follow the story of the patriarchs and matriarchs, who look up at the stars and journey through the desert guided by divine promise and by visions of God in the darkness of night. On the coldest and darkest days of the year, we read of Joseph's descent into the pit, cast down by his jealous brothers, only to rise to prominence in Egypt as the winter days begin to grow longer and more hopeful. Wells and wombs give way to politics and persuasion, and sometime around the start of the secular new year we begin Exodus, the narrative of our deliverance from Egyptian bondage, as part of our spiritual preparation in the months before Passover. Then we immerse ourselves in the details of sacrificial worship as spring sets in, reading of sin and purification as the first flowers break through the softening soil. Just when it starts to get warmer after Passover we trek with the Israelites through the desert, and then, when it's too hot to move forward anymore, we stop to hear Moses recount it all over again in Deuteronomy during the dog days of summer.

The Torah reading cycle provides the structure not just for the Jewish year but also for countless volumes of

commentary on the biblical text, including Rabbi Shai Held's brilliant new two-volume collection *The Heart of Torah, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion*. Held offers two discussions of each parsha, perhaps a reminder that there is never just one way to interpret Torah. He

Wells and wombs give way to politics and persuasion, and sometime around the start of the secular new year we begin Exodus.

describes these discussions as essays rather than sermons, which is the more common rendering of the Hebrew term "*drashot*." This is apt, since both "essays" and "*drashot*" have the sense of a search or attempt rather than the statement of a settled position; Held is deeply serious but never sermonic. Interestingly, Held notes that the meaning of the term "*drash*" evolves over the course of the Bible: In Genesis and Exodus, it is used to refer to seeking out God's will, whereas in later books, such as Ezra, the object of this inquiry is not God but the Torah: "Instead of inquiring of God directly, people now seek guidance through studying God's Torah." This is essentially Held's project, seeking guidance—especially moral instruction—by inquiring of the text in order to get at its heart.

The "heart of Torah," for Held, is *chesed*, which he translates as "love and kindness." As he writes, "[w]hen all is said and done, religion is, in large part, about softening our hearts and learning to care." Most of his essays begin with a close reading of the biblical text, which in turn leads him to a claim about God and then to an ethical message for his contemporary readers. In "People Have Names: The Torah's Takedown of Totalitarianism," he rejects the conventional interpretations of the Tower of Babel story:

Genesis 11 is not a simple morality tale about a human attempt to storm the heavens and displace

God. Nor, conversely, is it a primitive allegory about an insecure deity who is so threatened by human achievement that God needs to wreak havoc on the best-laid human plans. The narrative is also not placed where it is in the Torah in order to explain the vast multiplicity of human languages. Nor is it a lament about some lost primeval unity.

Having toppled these readings, Held then proceeds to construct his own.

Through a close reading of the nine biblical verses that comprise the Tower of Babel story, Held demonstrates that it is really the city and not the tower as such that is the focus of biblical condemnation. This is why it is the city which is described as being punished at the end of the story. (Held might have added that whenever both city and tower are mentioned, the city is always mentioned first.) In short, something is rotten in Babel, and the tower is merely an expression of this deeper ethical taint.

Held considers the punishment that God metes out to the builders—scattering them “over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:8)—in light of the blessing He gives to Adam and Eve and then to Noah to “Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28, 9:1). How, Held asks, can the Bible describe human dispersion as both a blessing and a curse? His elegant solution is that the builders are being punished because what they most fervently desire—to build a city and tower lest they be scattered—is the opposite of what God most desires for humanity. “God’s ‘punishment,’ then, may not ultimately be a punishment at all, but a reaffirmation of the initial divine blessing in the face of human refusal and obstruction.”

But why is God so intent that people disperse? Here, Held turns to a classic 19th-century commentator known by the acronym Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin) for a suggestive reading. The Netziv reads the Bible’s description of the people as having had “the same language and the same words” (Gen. 11:1) as meaning that “their



The Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563. (Courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.)

words . . . were all the same.” Held takes this one step further, explaining that “total uniformity is necessarily a sign of totalitarian control.” The problem with the Babel builders, then, was their intolerance of independent thought. “If everyone says the same words and thinks the same thoughts, then a society emerges in which there is

Central to Held’s theology is the notion that God’s actions are a model for ours.

no room for individual tastes, thoughts, and aspirations, or for individual projects and creativity.”

Held grounds this reading in both the text and its context: No names are mentioned in the verses about Babel, and the story follows on the heels of a long genealogy of Noah’s children. He buttresses this claim by invoking the contemporary Israeli American commentator Judy Klitsner, who points out that the Babel story is followed by a story about a man literally named Name—Noah’s son Shem—as if to emphasize the namelessness that precedes his mention. Held goes on to cite a midrash from *Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer* which describes the builders as caring more about bricks than people; the collective project was more important than the individuals making up the collective. And so uniformity entails anonymity, and anonymity implies insignificance.

What of Babel’s assault on heaven as an attack on God? Though he had previously rejected this reading as too simplistic, he now returns to it through the back door. Yes, Babel is an attack on God, but it is an attack on God because it is an attack on human uniqueness.

An attempt to root out human individuality is an assault on God. Jewish theology affirms that each and every human being is created in the image of God, and that our uniqueness and individuality are a large part of what God treasures about us.

The story of Babel is mythic in its universalism, describing a time before the world was divided into languages, religions, or nationalities, so it is not surprising that the message Held draws from this story is also universal. But this is true of the majority of the essays in this collection. Held explores how the Bible calls upon us to conduct ourselves in the world, beyond, or perhaps even prior to, Jewish law. Even his essays that are ostensibly

about what it means to be Jewish are also about what it means to excel at being human. In his essay on Vayetze, for instance, Held explores the meaning of the term “*Yehudi*” (Jew), which comes from Leah and Jacob’s son Yehudah. Held traces the evolution of Leah’s emotional state over the course of their marriage, paying close attention to the names she chooses for each of her first four children. He notes that in naming her fourth child Yehudah, from “I will praise,” Leah manages to turn her unfulfilled longing into gratitude.

Leah has somehow found the courage to accept that her life is not going to turn out as she had hoped. She has spent years aching for the love of her husband . . . But now, suddenly, she sees that this constant yearning will only generate more fantasy and illusion.

Held draws on a talmudic passage in which Leah is identified as the first person in the world to express gratitude to God. He is quick to note that this is clearly not the case. Rather, what sets Leah apart is her ability to be grateful in the midst of sorrow. Given that Yehudah’s name becomes the name for the entire Jewish people, Held writes that “a Jew is, ideally, a human being who, like Leah, can find her way to gratitude without having everything she wants or even needs.”

In his essay on the first parsha in Deuteronomy, Held argues that God’s love for Israel is not on account of Israel’s merits but is “pure grace,” as he proves from the story of God’s choice of Abraham. Drawing on the prophet Amos’s criticism of Israelite complacency, he shows how biblical chosenness requires a higher degree of accountability and moral responsibility. Held reads the verses in Deuteronomy that describe the provision of land to Israel and God’s instructions concerning how the Israelites should pass through the land of other nations as showing that God cares about the welfare of other nations and charges Israel to do so as well. He insists that “[a] careful reading of Tanakh thus demonstrates that election, or chosenness, is not a function of merit; it does not give the people a moral blank check; nor does it suggest that Israel is God’s only concern.”

Held’s ecumenicism is also evident in the range of sources he cites. He quotes liberally from the Talmud and midrash, as well as from medieval

commentators, Hasidic masters, and contemporary interpreters (including Israelis, such as Shmuel Faust and Rav Shagar, who are largely unknown to American readers). He is receptive both to traditional exegesis and to modern scholarship, often showing how the Torah's theological and ethical claims are all the more radical given the contrast with the ancient Near Eastern context from which they emerged. Moreover, he incorporates non-Jewish insights and contributions from early Christian sources to works by contemporary Protestant scholars.



Three Strangers by Richard McBee, 1995. (Courtesy of Richard McBee.)

Of course, the majority of commentators Held draws upon are from within the rabbinic tradition. Occasionally we hear women's voices, particularly Nechama Leibowitz or contributors to the anthology *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, but Held's egalitarianism is most pronounced when he discusses the lives of biblical women as human actors on the scriptural stage, each with her own feelings and dreams. For instance, he considers Sarah's barrenness from her perspective—how she

must have felt when Abraham prayed for Avimelech to have children but not for his own wife, and what it would have been like when Abraham laughed at God's promise of a child for her and responded with a prayer for Ishmael, Hagar's son.

For Held, biblical women and men are judged by the same ethical standards. He regards Jacob's lack of compassion and hospitality in Parshat Vayishlach as standing in stark contrast not just to that of his grandfather Abraham but also to that of his mother, Rebekah. In his essay on Miketz, he traces the moral evolution of what it means to be one's brother's keeper, a lesson that Cain spurns, Yehudah struggles to learn, and Miriam seems intuitively to grasp. For Held, gender is not a barrier to comparison; these characters are far more united by their common humanity than they are divided along gender lines. In this sense, Held's commentary is more radically egalitarian than any book expressly about biblical women could ever be.

In his most sanguine essays, on the second half of Exodus and on Leviticus, Held argues that the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary which the Israelites carried with them in the desert, was, like Shabbat, modeled after Eden. The Torah's description of its construction offers a picture of what the ideal communal project would be like—motivated by genuine generosity and a respect for the sanctity of the cause.

As Held contends in his essay on Parshat Teruma, the Mishkan offers a glimpse of a reality in which the world is a temple for God's presence and in

which God's presence serves as a model for how we can best be present for one another. This conception of the Mishkan emerges from his analysis of *tzimtzum*, a notion that is understood in opposite ways by the talmudic sages and by the kabbalists. As the essay unfolds, Held provides an ingenious synthesis of these two understandings which he characteristically transposes from the theological to the ethical plane.

The great 16th-century kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria

taught that God made space for the world to exist by contracting or withdrawing the divine presence into itself, a process he referred to as *tzimtzum*. And yet, as Held notes, *tzimtzum* was originally a rabbinic term, and “for the Talmudic sages it means something very different . . . than it meant for Luria.” To explain this meaning of the term, Held cites a midrash from *Pesikta*



Rabbi Shai Held.

d’Rav Kahana, a collection of homilies that predates Luria by about a millennium. The midrash relates that Moses was incredulous when God instructed him to build a tabernacle for God. How could any structure possibly contain the omnipresent? God responded to Moses that He would “descend and contract” His presence on earth. Thus, the kabbalistic *tzimtzum* is about a divine withdrawal to make space, whereas the rabbinic *tzimtzum* is about “intensified presence.” Held quotes Gershom Scholem’s remark that Luria inherited the rabbinic term and “stood it on its head,” but Held is really interested in how these two meanings of the term can coexist: “Taken together these Rabbinic and Lurianic notions of *tzimtzum* convey the importance of being present while making space.”

Central to Held’s theology is the notion that God’s

actions are a model for ours. To follow the ethical charges of the Torah—to visit the sick; to be kind to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; to judge poor and rich alike; to cherish human uniqueness—is to walk in God’s ways. Held’s synthesis of both meanings of *tzimtzum*—Lurianic withdrawal and rabbinic intensified presence—is not just about how God is present in the world but also about how we should be present for one another in our human relationships. Held finds intimations of this idea in an essay by Martin Buber called “Distance and Relation.” Buber argued that what he called a “primal setting at a distance,” a recognition that the other is independent of oneself, must precede any “entering into relation.” As Held writes, translating this insight into everyday human terms:

One of the core challenges of loving a friend or a spouse is to learn to be completely present . . . while also making space for our partner to be who he or she is, independent of us. . . . Too much presence suffocates our partner . . . Too little presence constitutes abandonment.

Held’s commentary ends where the Torah ends, leaving us all still in the wilderness—but also sending us back to creation to begin the Torah reading cycle anew each fall, trying once again to draw out the Torah’s enduring meaning. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, what lingers and resonates most upon reading through these volumes is the message Held was offered as a teenager, at the beginning of his own spiritual journey. In one of the rare personal moments in these essays, he writes that he spent his teens preoccupied with questions of faith and once wrote a 15-page handwritten letter—“[a]s only an angst-ridden adolescent could”—confessing his struggles to the late Rabbi Louis Jacobs, whose open-minded traditionalism had inspired him. Jacobs wrote back to Held: “Remember always . . . that the search for Torah is itself Torah and that in the very search you have already found.”

Ilana Kurshan is the author of If All the Seas Were Ink: A Memoir (St. Martin’s Press).

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