



# High Holiday Companion



Beth Jacob  
CONGREGATION



# Faith Amidst Uncertainty

## Lessons Learned from Avraham

By Rabbi Kalman Topp

All four of the Biblical selections read over the course of the two days of Rosh Hashanah relate stories which involve human cries. Out in the wilderness and frightened that her child is going to die, Hagar cries out for the welfare of her son, Yishmael. After years of infertility, Chana cries to Hashem, praying from the depths of her soul for the blessing of a child. At the Akeidah, the Medrash relates that the angels shed tears which dropped into the eyes of Yitzchak, impairing his eyesight. Finally, our matriarch Rachel is “mevakah al baneha”- she cries for the Jewish People as they are led into exile, hoping for their eventual return.

This theme of crying is also reflected in the central mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah, the blowing of the Shofar. The broken sounds of the shevarim and truah, the Sages teach us, represent different types of cries. I believe the tears of the Shofar and of our Torah readings reflect the profound sense of vulnerability and uncertainty felt not only by these Biblical personalities but what we too are feeling as we begin a new year. Particularly on this Rosh Hashanah, which is different than all others we have observed in the past, we’re gripped by uncertainty. With many not in Shul and others in Minyanim with fewer people, hampered by facemasks and social distancing, we feel that sense of vulnerability, deeply concerned about our health and the health of our loved ones. Many of us are asking ourselves: how are we and our families going to emerge strong from this difficult period of time- physically, emotionally and financially? When will we be able to gather once again with family and friends? What does the future hold in store for us? As we grapple with these questions, the episode of Akeidat Yitzchak offers three instructive ideas that we hopefully can apply to our lives:

After G-d asks Avraham to be willing to make the ultimate

sacrifice, the verse says “Vayashkem Avraham Baboker”- Avraham awoke early in the morning and saddled his donkey for the journey. This is remarkable considering that Avraham was befuddled by the contradiction that G-d had previously promised Avraham a nation through Yitzchak and now wants him as a sacrifice. With his confusion and feeling of defeat that he must have felt, it would have made sense for Avraham to sleep in, to wake up late, as people do when they’re feeling down. Yet, Avraham arises early indicating that he was committed to moving forward despite the body blow. Like Avraham with his nisayon (trial), we too, in these challenging times, may have many questions and doubts, but our patriarch models for us the need to gather our energy despite the difficulty and “wake up early” with enthusiasm, with optimism, to move ahead with faith in Hashem and ourselves.

The Rabbis in the Medrash comment that as Avraham received reward for moving with his family from his hometown to Canaan, he also received reward for his three-day journey with Yitzchak to the Akeidah. They find an allusion to this idea from the call of “lech lecha” which introduces both journeys. While the move to Canaan was clearly an important step to achieve his purpose, his trek to bind Isaac could have easily been viewed as a detour, an unexpected route that may, in fact, prevent him from fulfilling his aspirations. Yet, Avraham understands that he’s on a Divine mission and recognizes there must be significant value to the journey even as he lacks full understanding. With our current journey through this pandemic, we may feel that this is wasted time and that we’re in a timeout from normal life. What Avraham’s journey teaches us is that wherever we are and whatever life’s circumstances, this is where we’re supposed to be, and the cameras are rolling. There’s so much not in our control but

that doesn't mean it's random. This idea that whatever detour I am forced to take is exactly where Hashem wants us to be, is empowering. If because of health reasons we are home alone davening on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem is with us just as if we're in Shul. We ought to view these high holidays and this entire stretch of time not as a wipeout or time off from our journey, our mission. Rather, this is our mission this year; this is the journey we've been asked to travel. As far as we know, this could be one of the most important time periods of our life. How we respond to COVID- the sacrifices we're willing to make, the strength and resilience we demonstrate, the things we're willing to do- will determine whether we, like Avraham, will make the most of this significant moment. These last six months, I have seen our community rise to the occasion and have witnessed the incredible acts of chesed- big and small. My blessing to all is that we keep up the good momentum.

After the angel tells Avraham to pull back from striking Yitzchak, suddenly "vayisa avraham et einav vayare, vhinei "ayil achar" neechaz besvach bkarnav" Avraham raises up his eyes, and sees a ram, whose horns are caught in the thicket. The commentaries are intrigued by the expression "ayil achar" since the verse could have simply said that he saw an ayil, a ram.

One explanation is that it's to be understood as "acher, another." There's another creature, the ram that can be a substitute for his son. I would like to suggest, however, that this mysterious "achar" can be understood if we recall what Mordechai says to Esther in the Purim story. When the fate of the Jewish people is on the line, Mordechai challenges Esther and says "if you are silent at this moment and don't act now, revach v'hatzalah yaamod layehudim mimakom acher," salvation will come to the nation from another place. Mordechai is pointedly conveying to Esther that "we need you to do this since it could be for this very moment that you have become Queen. But you must understand that even if you don't act, the salvation will happen mimakom acher--in another way." Acher is thus a reference to the other way, the unexpected way of redemption.

Avraham traveled for three days wondering how in the world is this going to play out. The action that God is asking him to do doesn't make any sense. Yet, through his righteous faith

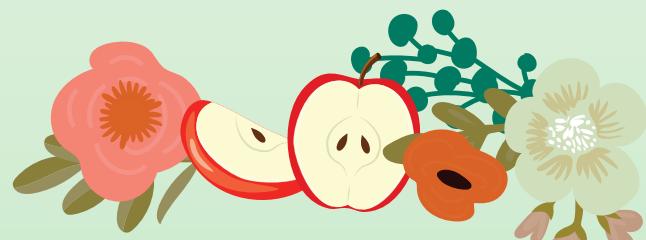
and commitment, with the odds against him, he merits the call from the angel and sees the "ayil acher" which becomes the other option. When all seemed to be coming to a dead end, it turned out that there was another way which saved the day.

In Daniel Gordis' book about PM Menachem Begin, he takes us inside the Camp David meetings with President Sadat and President Carter. At one point, they came back to PM Begin with the message "you better sign this deal because this is the last chance for peace." Begin responded "I'm willing to negotiate this deal, but don't tell me that it's the last chance. There's always another chance." The ayil acher.

The Jewish People have never been governed by statistics. After two millennia, we've come back against all odds to our homeland, created a country and revived the agriculture, the Hebrew language and developed one of the strongest armies in the world. With the intractable conflict with the Palestinians, it has been difficult to imagine how we can make progress in our peaceful relations with our Arab neighbors. This summer, the "ayil acher," the other way took the form of a surprise peace agreement between Israel and the U.A.E. Turning to our personal lives during these trying times, the Shofar of the "ayil acher" inspires us to act resolutely, with faith that HaShem will create that unexpected path forward for us.

During these Yomim Noraim, let us wipe away the tears and, like Avraham, resolve to move forward with enthusiasm while recognizing the significance of this moment. As we do so, we offer our sincere prayers to G-d that He responds by revealing that other path, enabling us to overcome our nisayon and emerge stronger together.

K'tivah V'chatimah Tovah,  
Rabbi Topp





# Inspiring Heroines

## A Rosh Hashanah Story

By Rabbi Adir Posy

The Gemara in Rosh Hashanah 11a tells us that there are three people who were remembered on Rosh Hashanah - Sarah, Rachel & Chana. We parallel these heroines in our Rosh Hashanah experience as well. The Rosh Hashanah Torah reading begins with Va'Hashem Pakad et Sarah ("And G-d Remembered Sarah). The Haftorah for the 2nd day, as well as the very structure of the Mussaf is patterned after Chana and we conclude the 2nd day's haftorah with the consolation that G-d gives to Rachel as she watches her children go into exile.

What is it about these three women, these three pillars of Jewish History that makes them the centerpiece of our Rosh Hashana service? What lesson are we to take from their experience that is supposed to enhance our experience of this Yom Hadin - the day of judgement? If we take a moment and look into their lives, a powerful message emerges.

We begin with the story of Sarah, after years of barrenness, her one hope and dream all but dashed, G-d blesses Sarah with a beautiful child. Those involved with the struggle of infertility can know a little bit of her pain and the rest of us can read and try to imagine what this must have meant to Sarah Imeinu. However, a deeper investigation reveals that this day was very long in coming. After years of struggle and tears, Sarah turns to her husband Avraham and asks him to take her maidservant Hagar, Ulay Ibaneh Mimenna loosely translated as maybe we will be perpetuated through her.

Now let's imagine for a moment what this meant to Sarah. She had stood by Avraham through all these years. She had heard all of the promises of becoming a great nation, she had shared the dream of becoming the beginning of the greatest story in human history. And she says those words - Ulay Ibaneh Mimenna - maybe it doesn't have to be me, maybe all my dreams weren't meant to be, maybe someone else will hold the mantle of the mother of this great nation. No one

asked her to do this, no one even suggested this, but Sarah gave up all of her personal dreams for what she knew was the greater good - That was Sarah.

Rachel also had dreams, she knew that she was supposed to be the mother of a great people and she also was willing to step aside. The difference between Rachel and Sarah was that Rachel gave up her chance even before it began. Sarah had lived a long life with Avraham already and had braved disappointment after disappointment. Rachel had not even gotten to that point, she had an entire future life ahead of her with Yaakov, and she was willing to say - no, my sister should go before me. That was Rachel.

And finally, we turn to Chana. Chana was also barren and longed for a child more than anything else in the world. The book of Shmuel describes her as she arrived at the Beit Hamikdash and without regard for how it looked to the outside world, she poured out her heart to Hashem. The haftorah details the agony and pain she felt until finally she was blessed with a child. Yet when she finally was blessed, she picked him up, patted him on the shoulder and sent him off to devote his life to the service of Hashem. Chana lived through ridicule and heartache to achieve her dream, and then when she had that which was most precious to her, she deferred to G-d. That was Chana.

Three great women, three different kinds of self-sacrifice. Sarah passed up her dreams of the past, Rachel gave up on her dreams of the future, and Chana was willing to sacrifice her dream that was already realized, her dream of the present.

But if it is true that this amazing selflessness, this capacity for self-sacrifice is the common denominator between these heroines, is that truly the theme of Rosh Hashanah?

In a certain sense, the answer is yes, indeed Rosh Hashanah is the day that we proclaim our allegiance to Hashem as our King. It's a day of coronation, and as such, we recognize individuals from our history who showed their ultimate submissiveness to Hashem and His master plan.

But this is only half of the story. For there is another common denominator between Chanah, Rachel & Sarah, that makes their sacrifice so much greater and also so much more relevant to us today.

If we return to the point from which we started the Talmud in Masechet Rosh Hashanah. Not only do we remember these women in our davening, but the Talmud tells us that they were remembered as well. All three of them were childless and it was today, on Rosh Hashanah, that they were blessed with the ability to conceive a child. After all of the heartache, after all of the sorrow and the difficulty of their self-sacrifice, in the end Hashem remembers them and in the end they get their wish.

If we put these in slightly different terms, Rosh Hashanah isn't just a day of sacrifice, it's a day of hope, and it's a day when our greatest heroes had their dreams fulfilled. As important as it is to recognize the amazing self-sacrifice that our foremothers displayed, it is equally important to take a step back and be inspired and hopeful that whether we see it or not, Hashem will ultimately fulfill our dreams.

These two themes, the importance of self-sacrifice along with the power of hope seem to be almost at odds. One seems to be saying I am willing to negate my ego with no hope of reward, to be like Sarah and give up our dreams and let someone else take our place; yet the other reminds us Min'i Kolech Mibechi, to dry our tears, Ki Yesh Sachar L'peulatech, there will be a happy ending.

But what is Rosh Hashana if not a day of contradictions? It's a day of Rachamim B'din, a day of mercy and strict judgment. It's a day we enter with trepidation knowing that the books of life and the books of death are open before Hashem, yet it's also a day of happiness a day we go home to a festive meal and say Yaaleh V'yavo. It's a day when we recognize the enormity of our challenge and the excitement that a new year can bring. Just like the stories of Rachel, Sarah & Chana, Rosh Hashana is a day of conflicting emotions.

This paradox is especially powerful this year. Our world is

almost unrecognizable compared to what it looked like last Rosh Hashana. Each in our own way, we have sacrificed a tremendous amount, whether it was our financial well-being, our desire to connect with one another or a loss of the sense of normalcy that seems so far from all of us.

Yet Rosh Hashana challenges us to navigate this paradox, to draw inspiration from the selflessness of our heroines while at the same time rejoice in the power of hope. Perhaps this is the role of the Shofar, the plaintive wail that rises to heavens not with a logical exposition but rather with the raw mix of complicated emotions that resonates with even greater power this year.

Perhaps that is the meaning of the passage a little bit later in Masechet Rosh Hashana where the Talmud explains Mussaf in exactly this vein. The Talmud recounts that G-d Says, "Recite the prayers of Kingship. Remembrance and Shofar (Malchuyot Zichronot & Shofarot)

Malchuyot, Kdei Shetamlichuni Aleichem - say the prayers of Kingship to proclaim Hashem as our king, for whom we will sacrifice anything and everything - that's self-sacrifice. Say Zichronot (Remembrances) so that we can merit that Hashem will remember us favorably, just like He remembered Sarah Rachel & Chana.

Uvameh? How do we navigate this maze of feelings that we can barely put into words - Bashofar, use the Shofar as your guide, use that pure internal voice that yearns to reconnect to G-d to bridge that chasm from justice to mercy - with the Shofar.

So when we read that Hashem remembered Sarah, and we think about the roller coaster life of Chanah, and we hear the bitter tears of Rachel, and then we hear Hashem's comfort, we too can be comforted, that our difficulty will also turn to happiness.

Shanah Tovah,  
Rabbi Posy



# *Vidui and the Power of Words*

By Cantor Rabbi Arik Wollheim

The Yom Kippur Vidui (confessional) is one of the central pieces in our liturgy and since we recite it at every Amidah, it has become so common (especially with the melody introducing it Ahay ya yay Ashamnu, Bagadnu etc) that we sometimes forget how radical an innovation it was when it began.

As we know both from the Torah reading on Yom Kippur morning and the Avodah service in Musaf, Yom Kippur in the Bible was a service of sacrifice, not of words. It consisted of the Kohen Gadol (high priest) transferring his sins, the ones of his household and of the entire Jewish nation onto a scapegoat which was then released into the wilderness. An additional goat was then sacrificed with modest verbal recitation alongside the sprinkling of its blood.

In the Torah, we find the service consisted of one individual who acts on behalf of himself and the entire Jewish nation. Everyone else, even if present, were silent spectators waiting for forgiveness to arrive, not active participants whose own process of Teshuvah influenced the outcome.

Unlike the Temple ritual which was based on sacrifice, today's ritual is based on words as a crucial step in the large process we call Teshuvah. This transformation from sacrificial service to Avodah Shebalev (service of the heart) remains one of the most radical innovations of Judaism.

While I'm aware of the circumstances, realizing that the future of Judaism depended on a transformation of rituals due to the destruction of the Temple, I often wonder how the Rabbis found within themselves the necessary creativity and courage to even suggest such a thing. Where did this inspiration come from?

The Talmud and Midrash are self-reflective in describing the process, but I remain in awe of the courage it took to make such a change; what a remarkable act of leadership! At a moment of crisis when the Temple was destroyed, the Rabbis dared to replace sacrifice with words. How could they have known that words would suffice when the Torah specifically talks of the animal sacrifice? In particular, what convinced them that the Avodah service of the Kohen Gadol alone could be replaced by the congregational recitation of a confessional made of a list of words structured in the Alef Beit order?

I would like to imagine that the Rabbis derived their confidence from the very first words of the Torah. These words demonstrate that words do indeed have immense power.

We learn that the world was created in 10 Ma'amarot (utterances of speech which means that 10 times it says "G-d said...") and surely if words can create the world then they can also recreate and even repair the world. I would like to think that the story of creation inspired the Rabbis to replace the ancient power of sacrifice with perhaps the even more ancient power of words.

Not only does the revolutionary text of Bereshit tells us of G-d who created the world out of "Tohu Vavohu" (unformed and void) using only words, G-d also stops to reflect on the moral nature of each creation (and G-d saw it was good).

Thus, from the first words of the Torah, speech is intertwined with creation and evaluation, the two central themes of the Yamim Noraim: Rosh Hashana focuses on the first and Yom Kippur on the second. I would like to suggest that the appearance of these two themes in both the creation story

and our Yamim Noraim liturgy is not coincidental, but that the Rabbis who wrote the liturgy purposefully utilized these themes.

In Genesis, language forms reality; at the High Holy Days it transforms it. In Genesis, language creates, in our liturgy it re-creates. Through divine words, Hashem reflects and evaluates divine behavior; through our human words of confession we reflect and evaluate our own human behavior. The story of creation therefore should give us confidence to declare that prayer in general and the Yom Kippur service in particular are adequate replacements for the sacrificial rituals of the Temple.

Genesis offers us additional reasons to trust the atoning power of words. In Chapter 1, almost every element of creation is described as "Tov" (good). However, in chapter 2, we see for the first time the term "Lo Tov" (not good). That something is loneliness: "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). All is good in the world until loneliness emerges. Loneliness is not good; it is painful; it is not the way things are supposed to be. Therefore, G-d and the Torah become "obsessed" with relationships. Relationship between human beings and G-d and relationships between human beings and each other are the focus of the rest of the Torah. Later on we learn of the relationship between man and nature or the Jewish people and the land of Israel. But all of the laws of the Torah deal with relationships and guard against the "Jewish sin" of isolation. The clear message of the Torah is that human beings are meant to seek and treasure relationships with each other and with G-d.

Writing this in 2020, while isolation is forced upon us, as the Pandemic changes the nature of our relationships and prevents us from fulfilling our most primal Jewish need, is surreal. Many of you are sitting at home alone and unable to join the community even for one day, the holiest on our calendar. Yet, I want to remind you and suggest that while a physical isolation is forced on us, a social and spiritual one is not. We live in an era when technology enables us to communicate and see our loved ones. We live in a time when one could be part of a community without compromising his/her safety. Yes, it is hard and different, but I would like to urge you all to reach out, to initiate a phone/ video call. To invest

in your relationships with others so when Covid 19 becomes a chapter in the history books, we still have our relationships. Use your words, they are powerful. Presence is important but your words can build worlds.

From Genesis 1, we get language as a tool for creation and evaluation and from Genesis 2, we get the imperative to restore relationships as the primary guard against loneliness and means to make the world good, not bad. Taken together, we get the philosophical groundwork for the Yom Kippur Vidui.

Even though words were sufficient to create the universe, they required actions as we read "Vaya'as" (and HaShem created, made) and the same goes for relationships. Language alone cannot repair relationships.

We can recite the entire list of sins, the entire Alphabet, and reflect on each sin, but until we actually act to repair what we have done to damage our relationships – with G-d, with others and with the world at large—we have not committed Teshuvah and have not fulfilled the requirements of Yom Kippur.

I guess we do not altogether depart from the Temple ritual of the high priest. He too took action: he released the scapegoat. We no longer have the scapegoat—we have words instead—but we still must take action to complete our work on restoration on Yom Kippur.

Perhaps the Rabbis were not as radical as they seem at first glance. All they did was return to the source of all inspiration, to the divine words and acts of Genesis. What an appropriate way to respond to the crisis of the destruction of the Temple—they did literal Teshuvah "returning" to the creation story to discover a new method for restoring and repairing our relationships with each other and with G-d.

The Yamim Noraim of 2020 will be remembered as a time of physical isolation, but it is up to us to remember them as the days of restoring relationships.

Ktivah V'chatimah Tovah,  
Chazan Arik



# Avinu Malkeinu

the Power of a Melody

By Cantor Rabbi Arik Wollheim

Often I am asked what is my favorite melody of the High Holidays' music. It's a tricky question, since while there are melodies I love dearly, others symbolize the High Holy days. When thinking which of the Yamim Noraim melodies represents the season, the answer is clear: "Avinu Malkeinu." We refer to G-d in many ways: for example, "Hashem" or "Harachaman" etc. Some of the names are mystical (like "Ein Sof") while others are aspirational (like "Shalom") but during the Yamim Noraim we often use the name "Avinu Malkeinu" (Our Father Our King). This name became not only the name we call G-d, but also a way we express our relationship with Him and it found its way into our High Holy days musical repertoire as well.

Many cantors and composers have set the Tefilah of Avinu Maleineu to music, but one melody is so popular that it is simply the default in most Ashkenazi synagogues around the world. Obviously, I am referring to the melody we, at Beth Jacob, sing every year for the last verse of Avinu Malkeinu. The origin of the melody is unknown; therefore, anthologies of Jewish music often list the melody as "Traditional" and a tradition it certainly is! I can only imagine what a revolt it would be, had I decided to replace this melody with another... There is a good reason for the melody's broad appeal. It is simple enough that even an "unmusical" person can catch on after a few repeats and the range is well within most people's capability.

Additionally, the significance of the prayer adds importance to the melody. Those of us who grew up hearing it consider the melody to have much personal meaning. The experience

of singing it surrounded by a congregation of voices blending together is a deeply moving event embodying the essence of the Yamim Noraim ethos and message. As we plea to our Father our King, it is only fitting that we join together and lift our voices as brothers and sisters, all joined together under the dominion of G-d whom the song acknowledges. The opportunity to be a part of a collective through song can be a powerful reminder of the connection shared by Jews and the unity towards which we strive.

Another reason I believe that the "traditional" melody is so well loved is that it simply sounds Jewish. Western music is largely built on one of two scales (major or minor) which differ in the intervals between the notes. Much music of our Tefilot works instead with modes different than the ones used in most western music. Avinu Malkeinu is composed in the mode we call Ahavah Rabah or Freigish, the same mode that gives Hava Nagilah its Jewishness. You can easily hear the scale by singing slowly the word "Nagila" or the word "Malkeinu" for the first time in Avinu Malkeinu song. While it is easy to describe the mode in musical terms, non-musicians might just call it "Jewish".

Thinking beyond the technical aspects, one notices that this melody so beautifully expresses the pleading nature of the Avinu Malkeinu text. This is more than a song; it is a prayer. It raises our words up to our Father who sits upon His throne and for many, this beautiful and moving melody captures the essence of the High Holy Days.

This call to a parent is universal—we all have or had parents

and know what it means to appeal to them. We may not have kings anymore, but the idea of monarchy is an aspect of the divine we can easily comprehend. Perhaps this is why so many musicians have chosen to record the piece. From cantors to jam bands, jazz musicians, classical composers, and popular recording artists, giving their own taste and personal interpretation. Barabara Streisand in 1997 included a moving rendition of Max Janowski's popular setting of Avinu Malkeinu which became a huge hit. Other musicians and singers, many of whom are not religious or even minimally engaged with Judaism, were inspired to record their own version of Avinu Malkeinu and for good reason - they saw this prayer as an ideal expression of Jewishness. It's beautiful simplicity is so easy to relate to; yet it is deep and a symbol to many. Musicians, some of whom have very little or even no apparent expression of their Jewish identity, have chosen Avinu Malkeinu to represent their spiritual and cultural heritage.

And yet, for many Jewish communities, Avinu Malkeinu is a time for pure recitation, not for singing. With the exception of Chabad, nearly all Chassidic sects recite it without a melody. Similarly, it is not sung in most Sephardi synagogues. Most "Yeshivish" shuls also daven Avinu Malkeinu with no musical component. Once I heard a Rabbi saying: "To sing this??? It just doesn't go..."

A Chassidic friend once told me it is considered inappropriate to sing during a section of the prayer where we beg Hashem to forgive all of the many sins that we have committed. However, he continued, if you happen to listen to a good Chazzan, someone who really knows how to pray, you'll hear the voice inflected a bit differently for each of the verses. So even though this is not a distinct melody, in such congregations, each verse is powerful enough in its own right as to cause the Chazzan to respond to it in a slightly different way. The text of Avinu Malkeinu is so powerful that it influences its own recitation. Notwithstanding, other communities insist on singing Avinu Malkeinu partly because of the "location" of the prayer in the service that makes it particularly fitting for a song.

We see that Avinu Malkeinu attracts not only musical composition but musical imagination as well. We project much onto the melodies which become symbols. In this way, the music of Avinu Malkeinu transcends the synagogue and even the Yamim Noraim themselves. It serves as an important connection to Jewish identity, to the Jewish community and to the Jewish religion itself.

Whether we see each other during these Yamim Noraion or not, I hope you'll raise your voice and sing the words of Avinu Malkeinu. This song alone, might be able to connect you with our Father, our King in a most profound way. None of us thought last year that specifically the line from the Avinu Malkeinu prayer "נַעֲמֵן הַפְּגִימָה עַתְּה לֹא תִּנְגַּנֵּם" (withhold the plague from Your inheritance) would be the one most relevant this year.

May we plead to G-d with all our strength every line of the Avinu Malkeinu and may He grant us those wishes and bless us with a good and healthy year.

Shana Tovah,  
Chazan Arik





# Déjà Vu All Over Again

By Rabbi Robbie Tombosky

In the words of the late great Yankee, Yogi Berra, many of us feel like our daily lives have become *déjà vu* all over again. While we have adapted to our new state of being safer at home, and are most grateful for the blessings that home affords, many of us currently find ourselves somewhere other than where we would like to be at this very moment. And with the High Holidays upon us, many of us find ourselves too emotionally overextended to connect with the liturgy while praying alone in our homes or even together in makeshift outdoor synagogues – six feet apart and in personal protective gear.

But what can we do? How can we properly pray while experiencing such feelings of frustration, disconnection and spiritual fatigue? How do we avoid falling prey to such cliché advice as just grin & bear it or fake it until you make it? What wisdom does Judaism have on the matter?

I'm a Rabbi, so here's a story.

Thirty years ago, as a student Rabbi, I had the privilege of traveling to the former Soviet Union to engage with Jewish families who had lived behind the opaque wall of the iron curtain for the majority, if not all, of their lives. In preparation for that mission, we were invited to meet with an elderly sage, fondly known as Reb Mendel, who grew up and served as a Rabbi in the former Soviet Union.

Reb Mendel shared nostalgic memories of his early years as a student, a Rabbi, and an advocate of the Jewish Community;

as well as his harrowing experience of being arrested and serving 14 years of hard labor in the Siberian Gulag and forced-labor camps for his high crime of teaching Torah and engaging the community in Jewish ritual.

The time faded away as Reb Mendel shared the vivid memories and tales of how his oppressors in the Gulag tried to break his spirit along with his body. Evening turned to night and then to early morning. At four in the morning, I finally blurted out the question that was on all of our minds, “Reb Mendel, how? How did you survive fourteen years in the Gulag? How did you not succumb to the feelings of despair, loss, uncertainty and loneliness?”

As if expecting the long awaited question, Reb Mendel smiled softly and said in his broken Yiddish English, “Ahh! Let me share the secret with you. No life is easy. We each experience some kind of loss. But here is something I want you to remember while you are in Russia and for the rest of your lives.” Then pausing for effect while leaning forward in his chair to signify the import of his next statement, Reb Mendel said, “If a person loses money, they have lost nothing. It can always be earned again. If a person loses health, they have lost part of something. Certainly history is replete with the great accomplishments of those who suffered significant health challenges. But if a person loses his Moot (Yiddish for Resolve) he has lost everything.”

Many of us have lost so much during these past months. We have dealt with tremendous financial setbacks and have faced

harrowing health challenges. We have lived with uncertainty and felt the pangs of quiet despair and desperation.

And yet, I invite you to dig in deep with me to find your own Moot (resolve). To take this moment to ask yourself the question: About what am I resolute? What are the values that I hold nearest and dearest to my heart? What are the things in life that can never be taken from me because they are a part of me? What will I do to be in alignment with that resolve in the coming days, weeks, and months?

Once we find our Moot, we can authentically engage in our prayers and the liturgy will take on a new depth of meaning. Whether we are praying at home alone, six feet apart and in personal protective gear, in a makeshift outdoor synagogue, or even in a Soviet Gulag.

Just as the broken Luchot (Tablets) permanently reside and coexist together with the complete Luchot in the Holy Ark - this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we offer our broken, frustrated, disconnected & spiritually fatigued selves together and in unison with our unbroken, resolute & eternally hopeful selves in prayer without contradiction. And with that we will find great blessing in the coming year, like déjà vu all over again.

Shana Tovah,  
Rabbi Robbie





# *Grand Opening Going Out Of Business*

By Rabbi Eli Broner

A story is told of a foreigner who came to America and wanted to open a department store. Not knowing their American lifestyle, he walked the streets to learn how business is done in America, and he noticed that a certain store was attracting a much larger crowd than all the others. When he inquired as to the reason, he was informed that there was a sign above the store which read "Grand Opening" and that this usually attracts many people. He continued on his stroll and noticed another store a few blocks away which was also attracting more customers than all the other stores. Again he inquired and he was told that above the store was a sign "Going Out Of Business" and that such a sign also tends to attract many inquisitive people.

Wanting his store to be a tremendous success, and unfamiliar with the English language, he hired a sign maker to copy both signs and place them above the entrance to his store. Business was terrible. People did not come in because they were convinced that the store was operated by a crazy person.

Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the year. It is like our own personal "Grand Opening." It is a time that we think about the past year and make resolutions for the future. We get excited about all the things that we will change. What we need to be careful of, is that once the excitement of the New Year wears off, we still remember all the things we planned to change. We have to be careful that we do not hang a "Going out of Business" sign on our year.

We have to take steps right after Rosh Hashanah to ensure that we make the changes we committed to. When we actually make the changes we committed to, it is a way to confirm that the sweet year we wished each other sticks with us for the whole year.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is something you would like to change this year?
2. What is something the whole family would like to change this year?
3. What steps will you take to make sure that you actually make these changes?

Shanah Tovah U' Metukah,  
Rabbi Broner



# Tefillah and High Holiday Tips

## Eight Steps to More Effective Prayer

By Rabbi Topp

1. **Ten Seconds:** Take time before beginning the Amidah to reflect upon who you are about to talk to.
2. **Divine Airspace:** When you take three steps forward for the Amidah, envision yourself leaving the mundane world and entering G-d's world.
3. **Understand Words:** By referencing the English translation and understanding the meaning of words, the power of your Tefillah will be unlocked.
4. **Less is More:** Davening is about the heart, not the mouth. It's preferable to say less with intensity, than to say it all with no feeling.
5. **Think of the Other:** We are one another's machzor and we don't even know it. Think about the struggles a friend is going through (eg: shidduchim, sick child, someone beginning to lose his cognitive faculties etc.) and daven for him/her.
6. **Humility:** While we take action to shape our destiny, we humbly recognize that Hashem runs the world and that our health, wealth and success are in His hands.
7. **Specify Gratitude:** In every Amidah, and certainly

in the 13 Amidot of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, in the blessing of Modim, express gratitude for a specific blessing in your life, each time thinking of a different item.

8. **Unity:** Draw strength from the powerful idea that Jews around the world- whether with a minyan or in their homes- are collectively praying essentially the same tefillot.

## How to Survive the High Holidays This Year

By Rabbi Yagil Tsaidi

1. Choose a few parts of Tefilah that are most meaningful to you, and focus on those Tefilot.
2. Bring some Besamim or Snuff as a refresher.
3. Read Lonely Man of Faith, even if it's your 15th time reading it.
4. Get 2-5 names of people that could use our Tefilot, and make them part of your Tefilah.
5. Sing Ishay Ribo songs to yourself.

## Top 5 Rabbinic Hints On How to Make The Most of the High Holidays This Year

By Rabbi Robbie Tombosky

1. **Let Go:** This year, the High Holidays will be very different from the way they might have been in the past. Once we let go of past expectations, we can begin to open ourselves to the new present.

HINT: Ask yourself, “What expectation am I holding onto that no longer serves this new moment?”

2. **Lean In:** Once we are free from expectations, we can truly begin to recognize the unexpected beauty of the moment in which we now find ourselves. I suggest literally closing your eyes for a moment and then opening them with the intention of seeing your surroundings anew, as if for the first time.

HINT: Ask yourself, “What beauty do I now see in this moment that I was unable to see before?”

3. **Live Large:** Unfulfilled expectations and disappointments bring us down. We may be present but may not be fully “showing up”. Now that we’ve Let Go and Leaned In, we are ready to live large. Living large is the Captain letting you know he has turned off the “fasten seat-belt sign” and that you are now free to get up and move freely around the cabin!

HINT: Ask yourself, “What action can I take right now to share my most magnificent self with the world around me?”

4. **Love Big:** In Letting Go, Leaning In, and Living Large something magical happens - we increase our capacity to connect with those in our lives without judgement or fear. We suddenly find that we can love

bigger and more selflessly.

HINT: Ask yourself, “Who is in need of my love right now and what small action can I take to connect with them in a BIG way?”

5. **Leave a Legacy:** Our most precious memories are not created during moments of ease and comfort but rather during moments of great personal challenge. The greater the challenge the more deeply we experience the triumph. In Letting Go, Leaning In, Living Large and Loving Big, we experience the personal triumph of clarity, meaning, and connection.

HINT: Ask yourself, “What triumphs will I fondly reflect upon from these High Holidays as part of my legacy in this world?”



# Vignettes and Reflections

## Crowning Hashem- from the Alter of Kelm

Every year, before Rosh Hashanah, The Alter of Kelm, who was a disciple of Rav Yisrael Salanter had a poster hung in the Beit Medrash of Kelm, which concluded with the following words: "We are called upon to crown Hashem as King. With what shall we crown Him? With love for others and charitable acts."

### Using the Skill of a Wrestler

by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (Pebbles of Wisdom p.94)

When one has extraneous thoughts, instead of feeling despair, one has to resort to a certain wrestler's skill, using the weight of the opponent to topple him and then slipping from under his grip by an ingenious clarity of purpose and will.

As Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Baal HaTanya, says, there are two souls waging war against each other in a person's mind. And the prize for which they are fighting is the individual's progress toward G-d.



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