

# High Holy Days

Enrichment  
Booklet

2021|5782

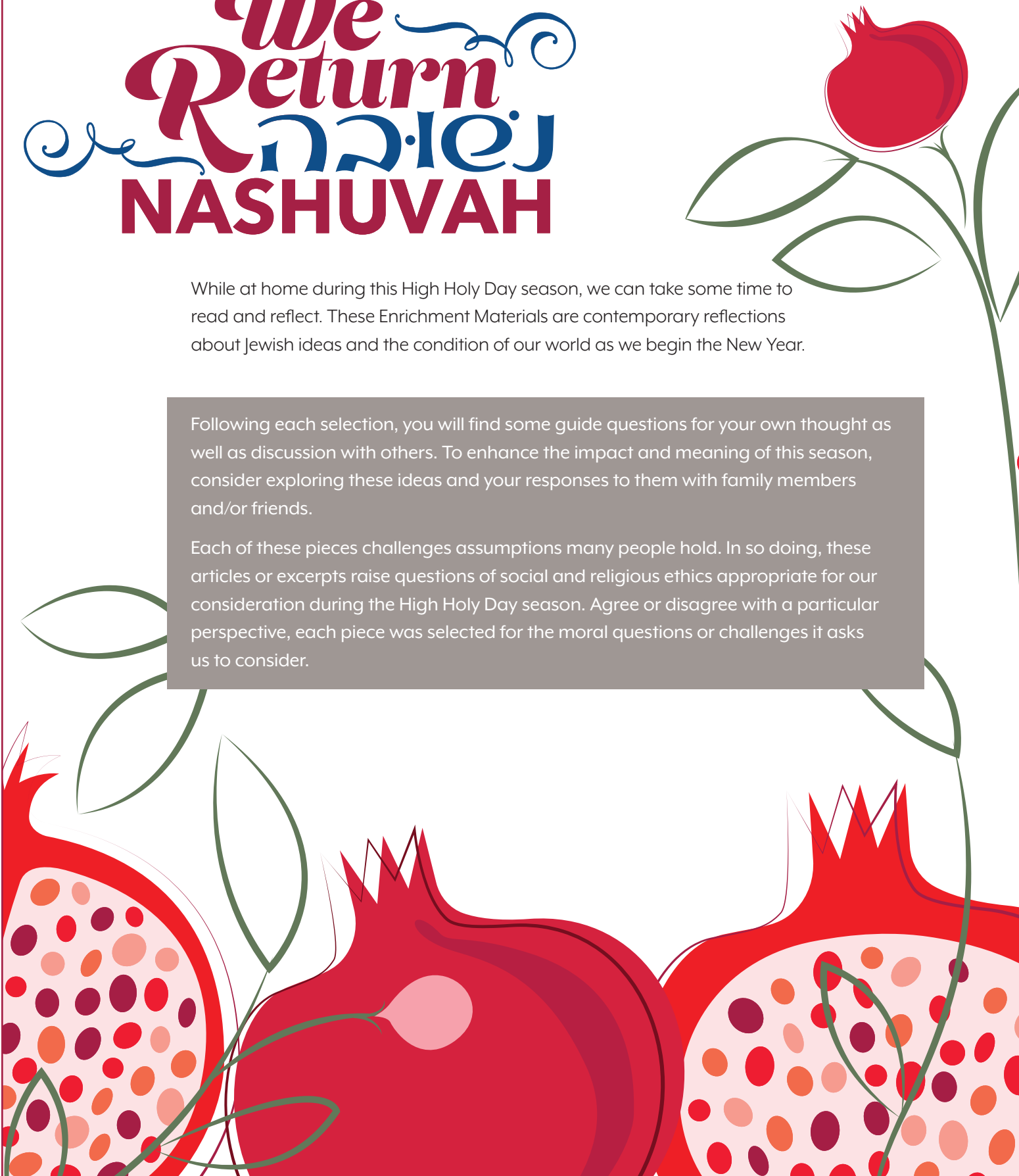


# We Return נשחבה NASHUVAH

While at home during this High Holy Day season, we can take some time to read and reflect. These Enrichment Materials are contemporary reflections about Jewish ideas and the condition of our world as we begin the New Year.

Following each selection, you will find some guide questions for your own thought as well as discussion with others. To enhance the impact and meaning of this season, consider exploring these ideas and your responses to them with family members and/or friends.

Each of these pieces challenges assumptions many people hold. In so doing, these articles or excerpts raise questions of social and religious ethics appropriate for our consideration during the High Holy Day season. Agree or disagree with a particular perspective, each piece was selected for the moral questions or challenges it asks us to consider.



# Israel in Perspective



## ***An Insider's Guide to the Most Important Story on Earth***

Matti Friedman

*Tablet Magazine*

### **The Israel Story**

Is there anything left to say about Israel and Gaza? Newspapers this summer have been full of little else. Television viewers see heaps of rubble and plumes of smoke in their sleep. A representative article from a recent issue of *The New Yorker* described the summer's events by dedicating one sentence each to the horrors in Nigeria and Ukraine, four sentences to the crazed *génocidaires* of ISIS, and the rest of the article—30 sentences—to Israel and Gaza.

When the hysteria abates, I believe the events in Gaza will not be remembered by the world as particularly important. People were killed, most of them Palestinians, including many unarmed innocents. I wish I could say the tragedy of their deaths, or the deaths of Israel's soldiers, will change something, that they mark a turning point. But they don't. This round was not the first in the Arab wars with Israel and will not be the last. The Israeli campaign was little different in its execution from any other waged by a Western army against a similar enemy in recent years, except for the more immediate nature of the threat to a country's own population, and the greater exertions, however futile, to avoid civilian deaths.

The lasting importance of this summer's war, I believe, doesn't lie in the war itself. It lies instead in the way the war has been described and responded to abroad, and the way this has laid bare the resurgence of an old, twisted pattern of thought and its migration from the margins to the mainstream of Western discourse—namely, a hostile obsession with Jews. The key to understanding this resurgence is not to be found among jihadi webmasters, basement conspiracy theorists, or radical activists. It is instead to be found first among the educated and respectable people who populate the international news industry; decent people, many of them, and some of them my former colleagues.

While global mania about Israeli actions has come to be taken for granted, it is actually the result of decisions made by individual human beings in positions of responsibility—in this case, journalists and editors. The world is not responding to events in this country, but rather to the description of these events by news organizations. The key to understanding the strange nature of the response is thus to be found in the practice of journalism, and specifically in a

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severe malfunction that is occurring in that profession—my profession—here in Israel.

In this essay I will try to provide a few tools to make sense of the news from Israel. I acquired these tools as an insider: Between 2006 and the end of 2011 I was a reporter and editor in the Jerusalem bureau of the Associated Press, one of the world's two biggest news providers. I have lived in Israel since 1995 and have been reporting on it since 1997.

This essay is not an exhaustive survey of the sins of the international media, a conservative polemic, or a defense of Israeli policies. (I am a believer in the importance of the “mainstream” media, a liberal, and a critic of many of my country's policies.) It necessarily involves some generalizations. I will first outline the central tropes of the international media's Israel story—a story on which there is surprisingly little variation among mainstream outlets, and one which is, as the word “story” suggests, a narrative construct that is largely fiction. I will then note the broader historical context of the way Israel has come to be discussed and explain why I believe it to be a matter of concern not only for people preoccupied with Jewish affairs. I will try to keep it brief.

### **How Important Is the Israel Story?**

Staffing is the best measure of the importance of a story to a particular news organization. When I was a correspondent at the AP, the agency had more than 40 staffers covering Israel and the Palestinian territories. That was significantly more news staff than the AP had in China, Russia, or India,

or in all of the 50 countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined. It was higher than the total number of news-gathering employees in all the countries where the uprisings of the “Arab Spring” eventually erupted.

To offer a sense of scale: Before the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the permanent AP presence in that country consisted of a single regime-approved stringer. The AP's editors believed, that is, that Syria's importance was less than one-40th that of Israel. I don't mean to pick on the AP—the agency is wholly average, which makes it useful as an example. The big players in the news business practice groupthink, and these staffing arrangements were reflected across the herd. Staffing levels in Israel have decreased somewhat since the Arab uprisings began but remain high. And when Israel flares up, as it did this summer, reporters are often moved from deadlier conflicts. Israel still trumps nearly everything else.

The volume of press coverage that results, even when little is going on, gives this conflict a prominence compared to which its actual human toll is absurdly small. In all of 2013, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict claimed 42 lives—that is, roughly the monthly homicide rate in the city of Chicago. Jerusalem, internationally renowned as a city of conflict, had slightly fewer violent deaths per capita last year than Portland, Ore., one of America's safer cities. In contrast, in three years the Syrian conflict has claimed an estimated 190,000 lives, or about 70,000 more than the number of people who have

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ever died in the Arab-Israeli conflict since it began a century ago.

News organizations have nonetheless decided that this conflict is more important than, for example, the more than 1,600 women murdered in Pakistan last year (271 after being raped and 193 of them burned alive), the ongoing erasure of Tibet by the Chinese Communist Party, the carnage in Congo (more than 5 million dead as of 2012) or the Central African Republic, and the drug wars in Mexico (death toll between 2006 and 2012: 60,000), let alone conflicts no one has ever heard of in obscure corners of India or Thailand. They believe Israel to be the most important story on earth, or very close.

### **What Is Important About the Israel Story, and What Is Not**

A reporter working in the international press corps here understands quickly that what is important in the Israel-Palestinian story is Israel. If you follow mainstream coverage, you will find nearly no real analysis of Palestinian society or ideologies, profiles of armed Palestinian groups, or investigation of Palestinian government. Palestinians are not taken seriously as agents of their own fate. The West has decided that Palestinians should want a state alongside Israel, so that opinion is attributed to them as fact, though anyone who has spent time with actual Palestinians understands that things are (understandably, in my opinion) more complicated. Who they are and what they want is not important: The story mandates that they exist as passive victims of the party that matters.

Corruption, for example, is a pressing concern for many Palestinians under the rule of the Palestinian Authority, but when I and another reporter once suggested an article on the subject, we were informed by the bureau chief that Palestinian corruption was “not the story.” (Israeli corruption was, and we covered it at length.)

Israeli actions are analyzed and criticized, and every flaw in Israeli society is aggressively reported. In one seven-week period, from Nov. 8 to Dec. 16, 2011, I decided to count the stories coming out of our bureau on the various moral failings of Israeli society—proposed legislation meant to suppress the media, the rising influence of Orthodox Jews, unauthorized settlement outposts, gender segregation, and so forth. I counted 27 separate articles, an average of a story every two days. In a very conservative estimate, this seven-week tally was higher than the total number of significantly critical stories about Palestinian government and society, including the totalitarian Islamists of Hamas, that our bureau had published in the preceding three years.

The Hamas charter, for example, calls not just for Israel’s destruction but for the murder of Jews and blames Jews for engineering the French and Russian revolutions and both world wars; the charter was never mentioned in print when I was at the AP, though Hamas won a Palestinian national election and had become one of the region’s most important players. To draw the link with this summer’s events: An observer might think Hamas’ decision in recent years to construct a

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military infrastructure beneath Gaza's civilian infrastructure would be deemed newsworthy, if only because of what it meant about the way the next conflict would be fought and the cost to innocent people. But that is not the case. The Hamas emplacements were not important in themselves, and were therefore ignored. What was important was the Israeli decision to attack them.

There has been much discussion recently of Hamas attempts to intimidate reporters. Any veteran of the press corps here knows the intimidation is real, and I saw it in action myself as an editor on the AP news desk. During the 2008-2009 Gaza fighting I personally erased a key detail—that Hamas fighters were dressed as civilians and being counted as civilians in the death toll—because of a threat to our reporter in Gaza. (The policy was then, and remains, not to inform readers that the story is censored unless the censorship is Israeli. Earlier this month, the AP's Jerusalem news editor reported and submitted a story on Hamas intimidation; the story was shunted into deep freeze by his superiors and has not been published.)

But if critics imagine that journalists are clamoring to cover Hamas and are stymied by thugs and threats, it is generally not so. There are many low-risk ways to report Hamas actions, if the will is there: under bylines from Israel, under no byline, by citing Israeli sources. Reporters are resourceful when they want to be.

The fact is that Hamas' intimidation is largely beside the point because the actions

of Palestinians are beside the point: Most reporters in Gaza believe their job is to document violence directed by Israel at Palestinian civilians. That is the essence of the Israel story. In addition, reporters are under deadline and often at risk, and many don't speak the language and have only the most tenuous grip on what is going on. They are dependent on Palestinian colleagues and fixers who either fear Hamas, support Hamas, or both. Reporters don't need Hamas enforcers to shoo them away from facts that muddy the simple story they have been sent to tell.

It is not coincidence that the few journalists who have documented Hamas fighters and rocket launches in civilian areas this summer were generally not, as you might expect, from the large news organizations with big and permanent Gaza operations. They were mostly scrappy, peripheral, and newly arrived players - a Finn, an Indian crew, a few others. These poor souls didn't get the memo.

### **What Else Isn't Important?**

The fact that Israelis quite recently elected moderate governments that sought reconciliation with the Palestinians, and which were undermined by the Palestinians, is considered unimportant and rarely mentioned. These lacunae are often not oversights but a matter of policy. In early 2009, for example, two colleagues of mine obtained information that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had made a significant peace offer to the Palestinian Authority several months earlier, and that the Palestinians had deemed it insufficient.



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This had not been reported yet and it was—or should have been—one of the biggest stories of the year. The reporters obtained confirmation from both sides and one even saw a map, but the top editors at the bureau decided that they would not publish the story.

Some staffers were furious, but it didn't help. Our narrative was that the Palestinians were moderate and the Israelis recalcitrant and increasingly extreme. Reporting the Olmert offer—like delving too deeply into the subject of Hamas—would make that narrative look like nonsense. And so we were instructed to ignore it, and did, for more than a year and a half.

This decision taught me a lesson that should be clear to consumers of the Israel story: Many of the people deciding what you will read and see from here view their role not as explanatory but as political. Coverage is a weapon to be placed at the disposal of the side they like.

### **How Is the Israel Story Framed?**

The Israel story is framed in the same terms that have been in use since the early 1990s—the quest for a “two-state solution.” It is accepted that the conflict is “Israeli-Palestinian,” meaning that it is a conflict taking place on land that Israel controls—0.2 percent of the Arab world—in which Jews are a majority and Arabs a minority. The conflict is more accurately described as “Israel-Arab,” or “Jewish-Arab”—that is, a conflict between the 6 million Jews of Israel and 300 million Arabs in surrounding countries. (Perhaps “Israel-Muslim” would be more accurate, to

take into account the enmity of non-Arab states like Iran and Turkey, and, more broadly, 1 billion Muslims worldwide.) This is the conflict that has been playing out in different forms for a century, before Israel existed, before Israel captured the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, and before the term “Palestinian” was in use.

The “Israeli-Palestinian” framing allows the Jews, a tiny minority in the Middle East, to be depicted as the stronger party. It also includes the implicit assumption that if the Palestinian problem is somehow solved the conflict will be over, though no informed person today believes this to be true. This definition also allows the Israeli settlement project, which I believe is a serious moral and strategic error on Israel's part, to be described not as what it is—one more destructive symptom of the conflict—but rather as its cause.

A knowledgeable observer of the Middle East cannot avoid the impression that the region is a volcano, and that the lava is radical Islam, an ideology whose various incarnations are now shaping this part of the world. Israel is a tiny village on the slopes of the volcano. Hamas is the local representative of radical Islam and is openly dedicated to the eradication of the Jewish minority enclave in Israel, just as Hezbollah is the dominant representative of radical Islam in Lebanon, the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and so forth.

Hamas is not, as it freely admits, party to the effort to create a Palestinian state alongside

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Israel. It has different goals about which it is quite open and that are similar to those of the groups listed above. Since the mid 1990s, more than any other player, Hamas has destroyed the Israeli left, swayed moderate Israelis against territorial withdrawals, and buried the chances of a two-state compromise. That's one accurate way to frame the story.

An observer might also legitimately frame the story through the lens of minorities in the Middle East, all of which are under intense pressure from Islam: When minorities are helpless, their fate is that of the Yazidis or Christians of northern Iraq, as we have just seen, and when they are armed and organized they can fight back and survive, as in the case of the Jews and (we must hope) the Kurds.

There are, in other words, many different ways to see what is happening here. Jerusalem is less than a day's drive from Aleppo or Baghdad, and it should be clear to everyone that peace is pretty elusive in the Middle East even in places where Jews are absent. But reporters generally cannot see the Israel story in relation to anything else. Instead of describing Israel as one of the villages abutting the volcano, they describe Israel as the volcano

The Israel story is framed to seem as if it has nothing to do with events nearby because the "Israel" of international journalism does not exist in the same geo-political universe as Iraq, Syria, or Egypt. The Israel story is

not a story about current events. It is about something else.

### **The Old Blank Screen**

For centuries, stateless Jews played the role of a lightning rod for ill will among the majority population. They were a symbol of things that were wrong. Did you want to make the point that greed was bad? Jews were greedy. Cowardice? Jews were cowardly. Were you a Communist? Jews were capitalists. Were you a capitalist? In that case, Jews were Communists. Moral failure was the essential trait of the Jew. It was their role in Christian tradition—the only reason European society knew or cared about them in the first place.

Like many Jews who grew up late in the 20th century in friendly Western cities, I dismissed such ideas as the feverish memories of my grandparents. One thing I have learned—and I'm not alone this summer—is that I was foolish to have done so. Today, people in the West tend to believe the ills of the age are racism, colonialism, and militarism. The world's only Jewish country has done less harm than most countries on earth, and more good—and yet when people went looking for a country that would symbolize the sins of our new post-colonial, post-militaristic, post-ethnic dream-world, the country they chose was this one.

When the people responsible for explaining the world to the world, journalists, cover the Jews' war as more worthy of attention than any other, when they portray the Jews of Israel as the party obviously in the wrong, when they omit all possible justifications



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for the Jews' actions and obscure the true face of their enemies, what they are saying to their readers—whether they intend to or not—is that Jews are the worst people on earth. The Jews are a symbol of the evils that civilized people are taught from an early age to abhor. International press coverage has become a morality play starring a familiar villain.

Some readers might remember that Britain participated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the fallout from which has now killed more than three times the number of people ever killed in the Israel-Arab conflict; yet in Britain, protesters furiously condemn Jewish militarism. White people in London and Paris whose parents not long ago had themselves been fanned by dark people in the sitting rooms of Rangoon or Algiers condemn Jewish “colonialism.” Americans who live in places called “Manhattan” or “Seattle” condemn Jews for displacing the native people of Palestine. Russian reporters condemn Israel’s brutal military tactics. Belgian reporters condemn Israel’s treatment of Africans. When Israel opened a transportation service for Palestinian workers in the occupied West Bank a few years ago, American news consumers could read about Israel “segregating buses.” And there are a lot of people in Europe, and not just in Germany, who enjoy hearing the Jews accused of genocide.

You don’t need to be a history professor, or a psychiatrist, to understand what’s going on. Having rehabilitated themselves against considerable odds in a minute corner of the

earth, the descendants of powerless people who were pushed out of Europe and the Islamic Middle East have become what their grandparents were—the pool into which the world spits. The Jews of Israel are the screen onto which it has become socially acceptable to project the things you hate about yourself and your own country. The tool through which this psychological projection is executed is the international press.

### **Who Cares If the World Gets the Israel Story Wrong?**

Because a gap has opened here between the way things are and the way they are described, opinions are wrong and policies are wrong, and observers are regularly blindsided by events. Such things have happened before. In the years leading to the breakdown of Soviet Communism in 1991, as the Russia expert Leon Aron wrote in a 2011 essay for *Foreign Policy*, “virtually no Western expert, scholar, official, or politician foresaw the impending collapse of the Soviet Union.” The empire had been rotting for years and the signs were there, but the people who were supposed to be seeing and reporting them failed and when the superpower imploded everyone was surprised.

And there was the Spanish civil war: “Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which do not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. ... I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what had happened but of what ought to have

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happened according to various ‘party lines.’” That was George Orwell, writing in 1942.

Orwell did not step off an airplane in Catalonia, stand next to a Republican cannon, and have himself filmed while confidently repeating what everyone else was saying or describing what any fool could see: weaponry, rubble, bodies. He looked beyond the ideological fantasies of his peers and knew that what was important was not necessarily visible. Spain, he understood, was not really about Spain at all—it was about a clash of totalitarian systems, German and Russian. He knew he was witnessing a threat to European civilization, and he wrote that, and he was right.

Understanding what happened in Gaza this summer means understanding Hezbollah in Lebanon, the rise of the Sunni jihadis in Syria and Iraq, and the long tentacles of Iran. It requires figuring out why countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia now see themselves as closer to Israel than to Hamas. Above all, it requires us to understand what is clear to nearly everyone in the Middle East: The ascendant force in our part of the world is not democracy or modernity. It is rather an empowered strain of Islam that assumes different and sometimes conflicting forms, and that is willing to employ extreme violence

in a quest to unite the region under its control and confront the West. Those who grasp this fact will be able to look around and connect the dots.

Israel is not an idea, a symbol of good or evil, or a litmus test for liberal opinion at dinner parties. It is a small country in a scary part of the world that is getting scarier. It should be reported as critically as any other place, and understood in context and in proportion. Israel is not one of the most important stories in the world, or even in the Middle East; whatever the outcome in this region in the next decade, it will have as much to do with Israel as World War II had to do with Spain. Israel is a speck on the map—a sideshow that happens to carry an unusual emotional charge.

Many in the West clearly prefer the old comfort of parsing the moral failings of Jews, and the familiar feeling of superiority this brings them, to confronting an unhappy and confusing reality. They may convince themselves that all of this is the Jews’ problem, and indeed the Jews’ fault. But journalists engage in these fantasies at the cost of their credibility and that of their profession. And, as Orwell would tell us, the world entertains fantasies at its peril. ■



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### Rabbi Ron Shulman comments:

Last spring, the headlines erupted in response to the conflict between Hamas and Israel. Our individual opinions were strongly held, and for many, uncomfortable. At the time,

I observed, “I don’t want to be in the news because defending Israel and celebrating Zionism is somehow controversial.” Agree or disagree with the conduct of that conflict, I found this article by Matt Friedman most insightful. It helped me understand something more about the “news” and raised important questions.

1. Is my opinion based in facts or the way others want me to interpret events?
2. When is it right for me to be objective, and when does my bias – in whatever direction – guide me?
3. What is my responsibility to know the past in order to understand the present?
4. What is my responsibility to know others’ perspectives in addition to my own?

## ***The Wondering Jew***

Dr. Micah Goodman

The Ancient Near East was a diverse patchwork of ancient nations. Each had its own gods, rituals, language, and political system. But they had one thing in common -they all eventually disappeared. In time, the kingdoms collapsed and their peoples were exiled or vanquished. The national identities of the ancient Near East were wiped out. No one today speaks the Gurgashite language or thinks of his or her nationality as Jebusite. Out of all of these peoples, virtually only the Hebrews survived. Like other nations, the Hebrews were exiled and scattered; unlike them, they did not disappear. The Hebrews are not only part of history, they are part of the present. Thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Oswald Spengler have pondered the Jewish people’s ability to defy the laws of history, which is widely considered an

unresolved riddle: How did the Jews survive the Exile?

At least one of the reasons for the Jews’ survival is Judaism. The Jews did not preserve the Torah so much as it preserved them and safeguarded their identity. And this did not happen by accident. The Jewish sages reshaped Judaism as a religion as a way to improve the Jewish people’s chances of survival. Throughout the Exile, new elements were added to the Jewish religion that functioned as protective mechanisms for Jewish identity. Some pertained to religious faith, others to religious law.

But the success of exilic, diasporic Judaism has also been its greatest problem. It turns the preservation of Judaism into Judaism’s central goal - and so slips into circular logic.

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If Judaism's reason for being is greater than Judaism itself, what is that reason? This puzzle has stood at the foundation of Jewish thought throughout the generations. Maimonides, for example, declared that the purpose of Judaism was the full actualization of our humanity. The eighteenth-century founder of Hasidic Judaism, the Baal Shem Tov, believed that the purpose of Judaism was devotion to God. The twentieth-century American theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel believed that the purpose of Judaism was tikkun olam, "repairing the world." These thinkers were many and varied, but they all agreed that the mere preservation of Judaism was not its *raison d'être*.

But the threats to Jewish identity in the Diaspora put Jews on the defensive and pushed them to focus on building protective mechanisms into their Judaism. The greater the dangers to Jewish identity, the greater the centrality of these mechanisms as a feature of the Jewish drama, and the more the preservation of Judaism seemed to become the central purpose of Judaism. And so, the Diaspora disrupted Judaism.

The establishment of the State of Israel marked a major shift in the history of the Jews, and it also provoked a major change in the history of Judaism. The state was founded to protect Jews from persecution, but it also protects them from assimilation. It is not merely a refuge for Jews from places and people that reject them; it is also a refuge for Jews from places and people that accept them and thereby threaten to undermine their Jewish identity.

Outside Israel, many of the Jews who do not make use of Diaspora Judaism's defense mechanisms assimilate into their wider societies, but in Israel Jews who make no use of these mechanisms do not assimilate. Thanks to Zionism, Jews can begin to carefully peel away from their Judaism the mechanisms that have burdened and beleaguered it. In Israel, Jews can worry less about how to preserve Judaism and wonder more about what its purpose should be. If the Diaspora burdened Judaism, Zionism might be a way to unburden it. ■

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#### Rabbi Ron Shulman asks and comments:

1. Would you describe the Jewish experiences of your life as burdens, pleasures, or what?
2. Can you identify the purpose of Judaism? Or at least purposes that animate your Jewish life and identity?
3. What is the enduring trait and vision of Judaism from ancient times until today – interpreted from your own personal experiences?

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### Rabbi Ron Shulman asks and comments (cont'd):

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A book I recently read, very rich and deep with ideas about secular and religious Jewish identity, impresses me. Written for an Israeli audience, and beautifully translated into English, Dr. Micah Goodman's *The Wondering Jew* discusses Judaism in Israel and the Israeli cultural conflict between religion and secularism.

Though written for Israelis, I find the ideas Goodman explores completely relevant and resonant for us in the American Jewish Diaspora. We, too, live in a secular culture. We also live out our Jewish lives with a secular lens attached to religious practice.

One of the questions Goodman asks is this. What connects all Jews together through the generations? Our history and heritage are replete with Jews who represent a variety of circumstances, cultural contexts, world views, ethnic backgrounds, religious orientations, persecutions, and freedoms.

Goodman asks a good question. A question we've all asked, or been asked, at some point in our Jewish family or personal journeys. What binds us together as Jews from different places and perspectives, unique thoughts and temperaments?

To answer his question, he quotes this perspective: "What connects all Jews is the Jewish conversation; an intergenerational dialogue based on holy texts and concerned with interpreting them, arguing about them and with them, and even rebelling against them."

Here's the key insight. "The conversation about Judaism is the essence of Judaism." Goodman paraphrases this thought. "The conversation about Judaism *is* Judaism. The way Jews become connected to Judaism is by joining the Jewish conversation."

Our pandemic experience made this harder and easier to do. On the one hand, we spoke by Zoom or on other virtual platforms. On the other hand, the learning and cultural resources of contemporary Jewish life were all accessible to us online.

This New Year let's keep ourselves engaged in the conversation about our Jewish heritage and its ideas. Online, in books, with family and friends. Through art, music, theater, literature, or traditional texts. If you're looking for a place to begin again or start something new, I'll be happy to offer some guidance. Even these days, maybe especially these days, it's good to be one wondering Jew connected to all of the other wondering Jews from times of old until today.

# Antisemitism



## ***Antisemitism Here & Now***

Professor Deborah E. Lipstadt

And most important, we must make people aware that antisemitism is not solely a problem of the Right or the Left, but that it exists in both arenas. It might be more institutionalized on the left, but we are also seeing it as an element in the rise of right-wing nationalism both in the United States and abroad. We cannot let those on the left - progressive people who are dedicated to righting long-standing wrongs - blind themselves to the antisemitism that has tragically insinuated itself into some areas of the political Left.

[Asking which is worse is a useless enterprise. Usually, people say when I write about the right, the left is worse. When I write about the left, the right is worse. That debate is camouflage. It means you're not dealing forthrightly with the antisemitism that's right next to you.]

Similarly, we must forthrightly acknowledge those on the right who say they are merely trying to protect "European culture" as the antisemites and racists that they are. It was not by chance that those who gathered in Charlottesville in 2017 to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee also chanted "Jews will not replace us."

[From the right, consider "replacement." The theory goes course that these certain groups of people are not talented enough, they're not capable enough, to make be

making all these gains in society. There has to be someone behind them. They are the puppets. There has to be a puppeteer, and who is smart enough, wealthy enough, powerful enough, conniving enough, to be that puppeteer? To be using these people for their own advantage. The Jew. That's what it means when they say, "the Jews will not replace us." It's that we Jews are using our money and manipulating other minorities to destroy Western Christian culture. That's the right.

What about the left? In the antisemitism that comes from the left you see something different. You see people saying well, Jews are white, which of course ignores all those Jews who are not white, and Jews are rich, which of course ignores all Jews who are not financially secure. Then they say Jews have the option of passing for white, again ignoring Jews of color. Therefore, Jews can't be victims of discrimination say some on the left. I am a heartfelt liberal person. I could never be guilty of discrimination. If you the Jew can be a victim and I, the person of the left couldn't possibly be a purveyor of hatred, then you must be making this up. Then this one must be a false front.]

There are Jewish leaders on both the right and the left who have argued that in the realm of public advocacy you cannot agree with your allies on everything. I concede that



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this is a reality and that politics does, indeed, sometimes make for strange bedfellows. But, I cannot make common cause with putative allies who, deep down, harbor contempt for me and my group-or for any other racial, religious, or identity group, for that matter. My self-respect, my abhorrence of prejudice, and my recognition of their attempts to dismantle the democratic institutions that I love preclude any alliances with them.

This will be a lonely and unpleasant fight, especially when it entails taking issue with those whom we have long called allies. But if we continue to speak the truth, not just to those with whom we disagree, but to our compatriots as well, we will emerge with our values and our self-respect intact, our voices heard, and - we must continue to hope - our goals achieved.

What is necessary for Jews to survive and flourish as a people is neither dark pessimism nor cockeyed optimism, but realism. It would be ludicrous to dismiss as paranoid the concerns of those who react strongly to the escalating acts of antisemitism in recent times. In countries throughout the world, armed guards are now regularly stationed in front of synagogues, and Jewish communal organizations have had to institute tight security measures. In some parts of the world, Jews intentionally avoid carrying or wearing

anything that identifies them as Jews. But at the same time, it would be folly for Jews to make this the organizing principle of their lives.

Although I have devoted most of my professional life to the study of the persecution of the Jews, that has never been what has driven me personally as a Jew. I value and celebrate my tradition and its teachings. My awareness of the many grievous wrongs that have been perpetrated against Jews throughout history is not the foundation of my Jewish identity. Jewish culture and Jewish history constitute the foundation of who I am.

Should you choose to, you can participate in a vibrant Jewish future. You will encounter antisemitism along the way, but I entreat you to avoid letting this “longest hatred” become the linchpin of your identity. Jewish tradition in all its manifestations - religious, secular, intellectual, communal, artistic, and so much more - is far too valuable to be tossed aside and replaced with a singular concentration on the fight against hatred.

[The need is] for Jews to balance the “oy” with the “joy.” I say, in the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, “be strong and of good courage.” Never stop fighting the good fight, even as you rejoice in who you are. ■



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### Rabbi Ron Shulman comments:

How are we to respond to antisemitism? With “pro-semitism.” We need to be publicly proud and practicing Jews. We need to be “pro-semites” in our families, in our community, and in the eyes of the world. We need to reassure those who may be afraid and join with those who are angry about what is currently happening. We all want it to cease. We all know antisemitism is resurgent right now. We also know it’s not new.

A step further. I want to witness the “pro-semitism” I encourage for all of us from those who protest all other hate and prejudice too pronounced in our society. I want those who protest for their own safety and their own dignity to protest on our behalf, as well.

As a Jewish community, remarkably, we are so often sensitive to others, as we should be, and too often disappointed that such caring is not reciprocated, as it should be. Somehow, as history and experience teach us, hating us is different. Too harshly these days, it seems support for other peoples’ aspirations expresses itself as hatred of Jews. We cannot let that vitriol impact our values and ideals even as it does temper our mood.

I await the day that just as within the Jewish community we debate and argue about our, and Israel’s, responsibilities toward others, our detractors might discover the moral courage to demonstrate that same respect toward us.

1. Has an antisemitic act been directed toward you or anyone you know?
2. If so, what was your or their response? Effective? Useful? Would you advise someone else to respond differently?
3. Can you be honest enough with yourself to see antisemitism not only in those with whom you disagree, but in those with whom you feel aligned?



# Religion & Science



## ***Pandemic Theology***

Rabbi Ron Shulman

24% of adult Americans say their religious faith grew stronger during the pandemic. Only 2% say their faith became weaker. The majority, 47% say their belief systems didn't change or like 26%, they're not religious to begin with.

That said, I want to touch on the theological side of our experience. I reject attitudes like this one. A gentleman who wove his way through a crowd gathered outside whispering, "remove your masks, take them off. The virus is punishment from God, retribution for not obeying God's law."

As Rabbi Irving Greenberg writes, "Some religious leaders speak of accepting that suffering is inexplicable and death inescapable. All we can do, they say, is respond with care and love for our fellows."

These responses build on the inherited trope that religion is the consolation of those who can't help themselves. But we all need a guide right now, and religion should show us how to act and use power for good.

Religious authorities should lead in proclaiming that coronavirus isn't willed or inflicted by God. The virus is a natural phenomenon. The focus on divine punishment distracts in this case from human responsibility."

In my view, events such as this pandemic evoke many thoughts and feelings. We all experienced angst and different types of suffering. We are all concerned for humanity's welfare and our futures.

We may ask why something of this magnitude happens, but the answer to that question lies in the patterns and amoral forces of nature. Natural disasters are not Divine acts, but natural occurrences that have no internal evil agenda. They become "natural evil" only as a result of the intersection of human strivings and nature's pattern.

Since religious people believe that God is the Creator, they often associate God's involvement with events of nature that are beyond our control. Instead, I believe we ought to appreciate creation's process as vast and awesome, on-going, and powerful. We each stand equally vulnerable before it. God, too, must respect our equality.

For those who may seek God in their pandemic experience, to my mind and belief, God is found within the workings of the world, innate to our experiences, not beyond them. God is intrinsic to our being, within our lives and not external to them, God grants our world and each one of us the resources,

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talents, and gifts to survive and, hopefully, to thrive.

God is present through us when we experience life, through us when we respond to life. God is present through us when we meet, through us when we respond to one another. When we are loving, healing, and giving. When we strive to redeem others from the struggles of their lives.

I do not find God in either the cause or the cure of this pandemic. I find God in the efforts of the scientists to whom we owe our profound gratitude for achieving the scientific wonder of vaccines.

However, as Dr. Andres Spokoyny points out, “few individuals emerge from a brush with death unaffected. It changes you, makes you question values and attitudes, alters your views on the meaning of life, and subjects your religious beliefs to a grueling stress test.

The same is true for societies and communities, and that’s why almost every plague or pandemic has been followed by powerful movements of spiritual, religious, and philosophical transformation.

In the religious upheaval that followed the Black Death of the 14th century, Europe witnessed the Reformation, multiple heretic movements and finally the Renaissance. More recently, the Spanish flu of 1918-19 contributed to the growth of anti-religious movements like fascism and communism.

Naturally, spiritual movements can’t be attributed only to plagues, but epidemics have been major catalysts of religious transformation, spurring new theologies, new understandings of life and death, new concepts of fate, and new forms of seeing the human soul and its relationship with the metaphysical.”

He believes “it is all but certain that COVID-19 will also contribute to a reevaluation of our theology and our philosophy. For the first time ever, the whole of humanity is experiencing a brush with death at the same time, and we feel the limitations and inadequacies as a species. It is certain that we will come out of this crisis with many unanswered questions and with a heavy load of existential doubt.” I’m not so sure, we’ll see.

What I think we do know is that coming out of this past year, Jewish communal organizations and synagogues will exist in four spaces: at their facilities, in folks’ homes, out in the community, and online.

After a global pandemic that knew no borders, our communal lives will adjust to accommodate our needs for intimate community and personal closeness alongside our desires for access to a whole world of information and virtual experiences. God is present through and for our lives whenever and wherever we so choose. ■

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## ***What Is Life?***

Paul Nurse, winner of the Nobel Prize

We have barely scratched the surface of understanding how the interactions between billions of individual neurons can combine to generate abstract thought, self-consciousness, and our apparent free will. Finding satisfactory answers to these questions will probably occupy the twenty-first century and likely beyond.

The universe is unimaginably vast. By the laws of probability it seems very unlikely that across all that time and space life – let alone sentient life – has only ever blossomed once, right here on Earth. Whether or not we will ever meet alien life forms is a different issue. But if we ever do, I am confident they, like us, will be self-sustaining chemical and physical machines, built around information-encoding polymers that have been produced through evolution by natural selection.

Our planet is the only corner of the universe where we know for certain life exists. The

life that we are part of here on Earth is extraordinary. It constantly surprises us but, in spite of its bewildering diversity, scientists are making sense of it, and that understanding makes a fundamental contribution to our culture and our civilization. Our growing understanding of what life is has great potential to improve the lot of humankind. But this knowledge goes even further. Biology shows us that all the living organisms we know of are related and closely interacting. We are bound by a deep connectedness to all other life...

As far as we know, we humans are the only life forms who can see this deep connectivity and reflect on what it might all mean. That gives us a special responsibility for life on this planet, made up as it is by our relatives, some close, some more distant. We need to care about it, we need to care for it. And to do that we need to understand it. ■

### **Consider this:**

Rosh HaShanah celebrates the world's creation. It is a time to glory in the gift of our lives and existence. As a result, we ask:

1. Is the special responsibility humans have for life on this planet a religious or scientific imperative? Can it be both?
2. What does life mean if we human beings are unique? If we are not?

# ***Biblical Texts*** for Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur



## Consider this:

Both of these selections focus on our potential for improving how we behave and treat one another. Themes universally relevant, but no more so than today. What is it about human nature that we too easily harm others? What is it about religious ritual and ideals that speaks to our goal of being and doing better?

## ***Rosh HaShanah***

Rabbi Judith Plaskow

In Genesis 21 we meet a form of violence, Sarah's violence against Hagar. After Sarah bears Isaac in her old age, she tells Abraham to throw the slave girl Hagar and her son Ishmael out of the house, so that Ishmael will not share in his father's inheritance along with Isaac. The violence that is practiced by Abraham against Sarah, she now recapitulates in relation to the most vulnerable person in her own household. Thus, the cycle of abuse goes on. In this context, not only does the text not judge Sarah, but God is explicitly on her side, telling Abraham to listen to Sarah because her son Isaac will be the bearer of the covenantal line.

This Torah portion makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society. It provides us with

opportunities to look honestly at ourselves and at the world we have created, to reflect on destructive patterns of human relating and to ask how we might address and change them.

In Abraham's seeming lack of concern about the fate of Sarah, can we see the ways in which marginalized peoples are all too liable to duplicate patterns of subordination from which they themselves have suffered? In Sarah's banishment of Hagar, can we see the horizontal violence that oppressed people visit on each other as they jockey for what seems to them limited resources, rather than making common cause against the forces that suppress them? And what do we do when we see ourselves enacting these patterns in our own personal and political lives? How do we respond to and interrupt them?



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It is striking that throughout the portion, God is implicated in the violence in the text. There is no cosmic relief, so to speak, from the reality of violence. Abraham's challenge to God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah can thus be seen as a question to both God and ourselves. "Must not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" Abraham asks God. "Will You indeed sweep away the innocent along with the wicked?" The implication of these questions is that it is the judge of all the earth who creates the ethical

## **Yom Kippur**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Yom Kippur is the holy of holies of Jewish time. Observed with immense ceremony in the Temple; sustained ever since with unparalleled awe, it is Judaism's answer to one of the most haunting of human questions: How is it possible to live the ethical life without an overwhelming sense of guilt, inadequacy and failure?

The distance between who we are and who we ought to be is, for most of us, vast. We fail. We fall. We give in to temptation. We drift into bad habits. We say or do things in anger we later deeply regret. We disappoint those who had faith in us. We betray those who trusted us. We lose friends. Sometimes our deepest relationships can fall apart. We experience frustration, shame, humiliation, remorse. We let others down. We let ourselves down. These things are not rare. They happen to all of us, even the greatest. One of the most powerful features of biblical narrative is that its portraits are not idealized. Its heroes are

norms that Abraham reflects back to God and to which he holds God answerable. But the moral voice in this passage is Abraham's voice. What happens to that moral vision two chapters later [in our Rosh HaShanah Torah reading] when Abraham betrays his wife, Sarah? Can we read these narratives in ways that strengthen our resolve to hold both ourselves and God accountable to standards of justice that we recognize and value and yet continually violate? ■

human. They too have their moments of self-doubt. They too sin.

Judaism sets the bar high, expecting great things of us in word and deed. So demanding are the Torah's commandments that we cannot but fall short some, even much, of the time. Better to fail while striving greatly than not to strive at all.

Judaism transformed the moral horizons of humankind. It says that the God of love and forgiveness created us in love and forgiveness, asking that we love and forgive others. God does not ask us not to fail. Rather, God asks us to acknowledge our failures, repair what we have harmed, and love on, learning from our errors and growing thereby. Human life, thus conceived, is neither tragic nor mired in sin. But it is demanding, intensely so.

Therefore, there had to be an institution capable of transmuting guilt into moral

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growth, and estrangement from God or our fellow humans into reconciliation. That institution is Yom Kippur, when in total honesty we fast and afflict ourselves, confessing our failures and immersing ourselves, mystically and metaphorically, in the purifying waters of God's forgiving love.

I want in this introduction to tell the story of the day and the ideas it embodies, for it is one of the most fascinating narratives in the history of ethics and spirituality. In ancient times the day was celebrated in the form of a massive public ceremony set in the Temple in Jerusalem. The holiest man in Israel, the High Priest, entered the most sacred space, the Holy of Holies, confessed the sins of the nation using the holiest name of God, and secured atonement for all Israel. It was a moment of intense drama in the life of a people who believed, however fitfully, that their fate depended on their relationship with God, who knew that there is no life, let alone a nation, without sin, and who knew from their history that sin could be punished by catastrophe.

Crowds of people thronged the Temple in Jerusalem, hoping to catch a glimpse of the High Priest as he fulfilled his ministrations. The service itself was long and elaborate. The High Priest would be rehearsed in his rituals for seven days beforehand. Five times on the day itself he would have to immerse himself in a mikveh and change his robes: gold for his public appearances, plain white for his ministrations within the Holy of Holies. Three times he would make confession, first

for himself and his family, then for his fellow priests, and finally for the people as a whole. Each time he used the holy name of God, the watching crowd would prostrate themselves, falling on their faces.

The confession involved a strange and unique ceremony. Two goats, identical in size, height and appearance, would be brought before the High Priest, and with them a box containing two plaques, one inscribed, "To the Lord," the other "To Azazel." Over the goat on which the lot "To Azazel" had fallen, he would confess the sins of the nation, and the goat would then be led by a special person selected for the task into the desert hills outside Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Second Temple there would be no more such scenes. Now there was no High Priest, no sacrifice, no divine fire, no Levites singing praises or crowds thronging the precincts of Jerusalem and filling the Temple Mount. Above all there was no Yom Kippur ritual through which the people could find forgiveness.

The drama that once took place in the Temple could now take place in the human heart. Every synagogue became a fragment of the Temple. Every prayer became a sacrifice. Every Jew became a kind of priest, offering God not an animal but instead the gathered shards of a broken heart.

Fasting and repenting, I stand between two selves, as the High Priest once stood facing two goats, symbolic of the duality of human nature. There is the self I see in the mirror and

know in my darkest hours. Yet there is a second self, the one I see in the reflection of God's love.

The history of Yom Kippur stands in sharp contrast to that of Rosh HaShanah. About the New Year, the biblical sources are sparse and enigmatic, but to the Day of Atonement the Torah devotes an entire and detailed chapter, Leviticus 16.



CONGREGATION



Beth El