

Hillel
International

HIGHER HOLIDAYS READER

edited by Sofia Freudenstein

A dark silhouette of a mountain range with a small figure of a person standing on the right side, looking out over the landscape.

HIGHER HOLIDAYS

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FRAMING THE HILLEL INTERNATIONAL HIGH HOLIDAY SUPPLEMENT

In *Parshat Vayelech*, one of the last portions we read before renewing the cycle of Torah reading at the beginning of the Jewish New Year, God commands Moses but also all of Israel to write:

וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלַמָּדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמָּה בְּפִיהֶם
לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה־לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִנְיֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:19)

Why does God instruct for a poem to be written? Why are commandments not enough? It seems that God is telling us that sometimes, different modes of communication help messages resonate more, and in fact can help us connect to ourselves, our tradition, and what it means to be Jewish more so than the usual prayers read by our cantors in synagogue. There is something powerful about writing or expressing one's religious or spiritual connection themselves, making it one's own.

This is the goal of the High Holiday Reader. In a world that is often nowadays "zoomed-out" and is not necessarily gathering all together physically like usual during the High Holidays, maybe we can take an opportunity to reflect and find ways to connect to ourselves and others through song, poetry, words of Torah, and images. We hope that this supplement can help you connect not just electronically but be something meaningful to read and reflect on in the coming days.

Sofia, Hillel International Student Cabinet Member 2020-2021

A HOLIDAY SEASON OF OYS AND JOYS

Tamar Lilienthal

Tamar Lilienthal is a Cinema and Media Studies student at the University of Pennsylvania. When she's not writing her scripts, she loves to dance, and she's trained in tap, ballet, jazz, and contemporary. Tamar is also passionate about pluralistic Jewish life at Penn Hillel, and she currently serves as the Education Chair of Shira Chadasha.

When I walked into my first day of teaching Hebrew School, I was repeatedly bombarded with the same question from students:

“Can we pleeeeeeease do Oy and Joy?”

I quickly learned that Oy and Joy was the Jewish equivalent of Roses and Thorns. At the beginning of every class, I let students take turns sharing a positive and negative part of their day. It breaks the ice and lets kids feel personally involved in the lesson.

I've been thinking a lot about the dichotomy between Oy and Joy as it relates to the High Holidays. Traditionally, we're taught that Rosh Hashanah is a day of celebration, where we eat festive meals with our families and wish each other a sweet new year – the embodiment of “Joy,” you could say. Yom Kippur, on the other hand, is as “Oy” as they come. It's a serious day on which we fast, refrain from any kind of pleasure, and spend our waking hours begging God for forgiveness.

But if we look at Jewish texts and traditions, we can spin both of these prescribed demeanors on their heads. For starters, there's room to say that Rosh Hashanah is the most serious day of them all. One of the holiday's alternate names is *Yom Ha'Din*, the Day of Judgment, and indeed, it is on Rosh Hashanah that God judges the actions of every human being and decides their fate for the coming year. We read the eerie Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which specifies the punishments available to humankind in incredible—and sometimes disturbing—detail.

And as much as Yom Kippur is to be treated seriously and solemnly, there's also tremendous joy to be had at the realization that our God is a forgiving one, who gives us the opportunity to repent year after year (when, let's face it, our transgressions are often the same). In the Mishna in Tractate Yoma, Rabbi Akiva capitalizes on this joy by saying “Happy are you, Israel! Who is it before whom you become pure? And who is it that purifies you? Your Father who is in heaven!”

I think the mix of emotions during the High Holidays is especially relevant this year. To be fair, I've never been one for prescribed emotion to begin with. But as we navigate what is undoubtedly going to be a challenging holiday season, it's important to legitimize the feelings that arise, both for ourselves and those around us. While some may be excited at the prospect of Rosh Hashanah in pajamas, others might be lonely, craving communal interaction, or missing family members they may only see once a year. We're each coming into the High Holidays with a pile of "Oys," and it'll be especially important to create spaces where we can share them with each other – and express these frustrations to God.

With that said, I'll venture to say there are "Joys" to celebrate as well. As the pandemic has unfolded, I've been in constant awe of the resilience of the global Jewish community. We have adapted, we have reshaped many norms, but we continue to stay tied to our tradition and our history. Though we will each celebrate the High Holidays differently this year, we'll still all be *celebrating*. And that alone brings a smile to my face.

Here's to a High Holiday season where we make space for Oys and Joys of all kinds, and where, no matter our individual circumstances, we succeed in finding meaning.

ROSH HASHANAH REFLECTION

Ohad Klopman

Ohad is a junior in the GS/JTS List College joint program studying Political Science-Statistics and Jewish History. Outside of class, Ohad works as a nonprofit consultant and devotes his free time to photography. You can find more of his work at www.ohadklopman.com

Hone in. Life's sweetest successes come from small moments of focus, attention, and dedication. Find that which you love and recommit to it. Let everything else fall away.

This photo was never meant to exist. I was doing a portrait shoot for clients using flowers as props, setting the vivid colors of the petals against the dark, gray-brown setting as our background. The subjects would exist somewhere in the middle. But I soon turned my camera away from my subject's face, and I focused. I let everything else fall away.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for us to pick the moments we want to celebrate, to disperse small droplets of beauty into the new year. It is a time to cancel what doesn't work, and to reinvest in what does. Rosh Hashanah is by no means a chore. But to do it right, we must back our celebration with effort and focus.



A DIFFERENT WAY TO UNDERSTAND ASHAMNU

Orly Aziza is a 2nd year student at York University and is involved in Hillel York as well as helping to run Toronto's Women's Beit Midrash. She is studying Psychology and is looking forward to a productive year, no matter the circumstances.

Rabbi Binyamin Holtzman, of Kibbutz Ma'ale Gilboa, Israel wrote this inspired by Rav A. Kook, who emphasized the importance of confessing the good we have done in the past year. It's important when trying to improve for the next year to not only remove the objectionable, but to acknowledge our good and try to amplify the next year. Realizing the best in ourselves helps bring us to our best selves.

הודוי המשלבים

אָהַבְנוּ, בְּכִינוּ, גָּמַלְנוּ, דִּבַּרְנוּ יָפִי. הֵאֱמַנּוּ,
וְהִשְׁתַּדַּלְנוּ, זָכַרְנוּ, חִבְּקָנוּ, טָעַמְנוּ סֵפֶר. יִצְרָנוּ,
כִּמְהַנּוּ, לְחַמְנוּ עֲבוּר הַצְדָקָה, כּוֹצִינוּ אֶת הַטּוֹב,
נִסִּינוּ, סָרְנוּ לְרָאוֹת, עָשִׂינוּ אֲשֶׁר צוֹיֵתָנוּ. פָּרְשָׁנוּ,
צִדְקָנוּ לְפַעֲמִים, קָרָאנוּ בְּשִׂמְחָה. רָצִינוּ, שָׂמַחְנוּ,
תִּמְכְּנוּ.

הרב קוק, עין אי"ה, מסכת מעשר שני פרק ז משנה י
... על כן, כשם שיש תועלת גדולה לתיקון הנפש בוידוי העוונות ...
גם כן בוידוי המצוות, למען ישמח בהם בלבבו, ויחזק ארחות חייו
בדרך ה'.

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We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively.
We have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted enthusiastically,
We have been empathetic, we have cultivated truth,
We have given good advice, we have respected, we have learned, we have forgiven,
We have comforted, we have been creative, we have stirred,
We have been spiritual activists, we have been just, we have longed for Israel,
We have been merciful, we have given full effort,
We have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired.

Rabbi Kook's Commentary to Mishnah Ma'aser Sheni 5:10:

Therefore, just as there is great value

to the confession of sins...

there is also great value to the confession of mitzvot (our positive deeds),

which gladdens the heart

and strengthens the holy paths of life!



ON TESHUVAH (REPENTANCE)

Zach Beer

Zachary Beer is a BA/MA student in History at the City College of New York. He has served his campus Jewish community in a myriad of roles at his Hillel, and is currently serving as Events and Education Coordinator. He also recently studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as a Nachshon Project Fellow.

I have experienced the feeling of loss before. My great-grandparents passed away when I was younger. I have been to the funerals and shivas of friend's parents, victims of terror, members of my community, and others.

Until recently, I didn't understand mourning.

Very suddenly, earlier this year, my beloved Zeida, my grandfather, was taken from us. He caught coronavirus and appeared to be doing better. He was supposed to get out of the hospital, and then, over a few hours in the afternoon, he crashed and passed away.

Certainly, I had heartbreak; certainly, I felt traumatized, but there was one feeling harder than most. This is what I call mourning.

My intellect knew my grandfather was gone. It was factual. I helped to bury him with my own two hands. This fact was indisputable. However, there was another part of me that did not understand, did not accept this reality. It said to me, "He's hiding at home, in his room, perhaps. He is still around somewhere. You can still talk to him, get one last chance to say 'I love you'." But this wasn't true. He is gone.

This is the feeling of mourning for me. The chasm between reality, and what I imagine to be.

Eicha, or Lamentations, the book of Tanakh intimately connected with mourning, describes this feeling as:

עַל-אֵלֶּה | אָנִי בֹכֶה עֵינַי | עֵינַי יִרְדּוּ מֵיָם פִּי-רַחֵק מִמְּנֵי מְנַחֵם מִשִּׁיב
נַפְשִׁי הָיוּ בְנֵי שׁוֹמְמִים כִּי גָבַר אוֹיְבִי: ט

For these things I weep; my eyes, my eyes, shed tears, **for the comforter to restore my soul is removed from me**; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed. (Eicha 1:16)

We generally like to think that we are close to God. That we have a personal relationship, and that God truly loves us and is near to us. Our moment however, presents a stark contrast to this idea. God is distant from us, God isn't there anymore.

In such a moment, we might think, legitimately, that our connection with God is cut off. That we are no longer God's people, not to mention any personal connection with the Almighty as well. The wisest of all men himself said so-

מַעֲוֹת לֹא-יֻכָּל לְתַקֵּן וְחֶסְרוֹן לֹא-יֻכָּל לְהַמְנוֹת

What is crooked will not be able to be straightened, and what is missing will not be able to be made good (Kohelet 1:16)

This is logical. When we investigate mourning we should rightfully assume it is permanent. This is the way of the world. Death is final. What is missing will not be returned.

However, when one deals with the One Who Is Above All, one plays by a different set of rules. Even death, seemingly, is reversible in the eyes of God, as the poem Yigal, a formulation of Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith concludes:

מִתִּים יְחִיָּה קֵל בְּרַב חֶסֶדוֹ, בְּרוּךְ עַד־עַד שֵׁם תְּהִלָּתוֹ

God will revive the dead in His abundant kindness – Blessed forever is His praised Name.

If this is true, God does have the power to revive the dead, at least at some future point. Death, it then seems, is temporary, in some sense of the word. God can, in other words, bridge the chasm between what is fact and what we want, hope, and imagine to be.

What about our relationship God? Did the Almighty create a mechanism to overcome the split we had? Is there a method to repair the relationship?

In fact there is. As Maimonides powerfully states:

גְּדוּלַּהּ תְּשׁוּבָה שְׁמִקְרִבֶת אֶת הָאָדָם לְשִׁכְיָנָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (הושע יד ב)
"שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ". וְנֶאֱמַר (עמוס ד ו) "וְלֹא שִׁבְתֶּם עַדִּי נְאֻם
ה'". וְנֶאֱמַר (ירמיה ד א) "אִם תָּשׁוּב יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם ה' אֵלַי תָּשׁוּב". כְּלוּמַר
אִם תִּחְזֹר בְּתִשׁוּבָה בִּי תִדְבֹק. הַתְּשׁוּבָה מְקַרְבֶּת אֶת הָרְחוּקִים. אָמֵשׁ
הִיא זֶה שְׁנֵאוּי לְפָנַי הַמְּקוּם מְשֻׁקָץ וּמְרַחֵק וְתוֹעֵבָה. וְהַיּוֹם הוּא אֶהְיֶה
וְנִחְמַד קָרוֹב וְיָדִיד. וְכֵן אֶתָּה מוֹצֵא שֶׁבְּלִשׁוֹן שֶׁהִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְרַחֵק
הַחוּטָאִים בֶּה מְקַרֵּב אֶת הַשְּׂבִיִּים בֵּין יַחֲדָה בֵּין רַבִּים. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (הושע ב א)
"וְהִיא בַּמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר לָהֶם לֹא עֲמִי אַתֶּם יֹאמַר לָהֶם בְּנֵי אֵל חַי

Teshuvah (repentance) is great for it draws a man close to the Shechinah as [Hoshea 14:2] states: "Return, O Israel, to God, your Lord;" [Amos 4:6] states: "You have not returned to Me," declares God;" and [Jeremiah 4:1] states: "If you will return, O Israel," declares God, "You will return to Me." Implied is that if you will return in Teshuvah, you will cling to Me. Teshuvah brings near those who were far removed. Previously, this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed, and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close, and dear. Similarly, we find God employs the same expression with which He separates [Himself] from the sinners to draw close those who repent. [Hoshea 2:1] states: "Instead of saying to you: 'You are not My nation,' He will tell you: 'You are the children of the living God'". (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 7:6)

In this way, God gave us a power usually reserved for him alone. We can bridge our will and reality, in a limited human sense. If there is a relationship, with God or another person, that is damaged, we have been given the tool to overcome it. Much as God can override death, we can override the death of our relationships. We can apologize, we can choose to do better, we can mend what is broken.

This power is great, it is godly, and it is not to waste. God may forgive some sins, but it is on our initiative that our relationship will be repaired, as the

Mishnah states:

עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַמָּקוֹם, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ,
אֵין יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיִּרְצֶה אֶת חֵבְרוֹ

For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur grants atonement. However, for transgressions between a person and their Yom Kippur does not grant atonement, until he has pacified his fellow. (Yoma 1:8)

Unlike God, our power is not “limited” to the end of history, the messianic age. Rather, we have the power, at the very least, to utilize our power every year. We can, and do, become God-like, as we do on Yom Kippur when we rise above our human constraints and are compared to angels.

It is my wish that we can utilize this power within ourselves, and truly become angelic in this Teshuvah season.

WHEN GUILT ISN'T REPENTANCE

Sofia Freudenstein

Sofia Freudenstein is a fourth year student at the University of Toronto where she double majors in Jewish Studies and Philosophy. She has been involved in HillelUofT as a multifaith intern and by organizing Jewish learning opportunities, and is hoping to bring some of her passions to her role as Student Cabinet Member of Hillel International.

Inspired by my Soloveitchik seminar with Professor Daniel Rynhold

Instead of formulating an organized dvar torah, I have decided to provide quotations that highlight the contrast of ideas in the works of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on the nature of guilt, the teshuva process, and what it means to change our pasts.

Hopefully seeing these two texts in dialogue can remind us that attempting to reconcile with our previous selves is a universal phenomenon, making the pain and turmoil one might experience during High Holidays slightly more bearable, and maybe instead as an opportunity to channel resilience in the ability to reshape the story we tell about ourselves when getting from Point A to Point B.

Friedrich Nietzsche - Framing the Problem of Guilt

“[F]or example, the major moral concept Schuld [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept Schilden [debts]?...And whence did this primeval, deeply rooted, perhaps by now ineradicable idea draw its power - this idea between the equivalence between injury and pain? I have already divulged it: in the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the idea of 'legal subjects' and in turn points back to the fundamental forms of buying, selling, barter, trade and traffic.” (Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals Essay 2 §4)

- What is Nietzsche comparing guilt to? What is the significance of this comparison?

“[Man] has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before God: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him...to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for.” (Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals Essay 2 §22)

- According to Nietzsche, what does guilt feel like?
- According to Nietzsche, is guilt something one can get over?
- How have you experienced guilt? Do you resonate with Nietzsche's description?

Rabbi Soloveitchik - Repentance Free of Guilt

“Kapparah means: forgiveness or withdrawal of claim. This is a legal concept, borrowed from the laws of property. Just as one may release his fellow man of a debt owed to him, so may God absolve one of penalty to which he is liable due to sin. Kapparah removes the need for punishment...All this concerns the liability incurred by the sinner. The moment acquittal is granted and punishment is wiped from the books, man's liability is terminated.” (On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik 58-59)

“The very term [teshuva/]repentance (literally ‘return’)...is not ‘remorse’ or ‘acknowledgement’ and does not depend upon depression or a sense of despair. Repentance is ‘return’, ‘restoration.’” (On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik 83)

- How does Soloveitchik's usage of kapparah differ from the usage of guilt?
- How is teshuvah different from guilt according to Soloveitchik?

“Sometimes, one will ‘erase’ certain years of a lifetime...But when one blots out a part of his past he also severs part of his being; his past shrinks and his personality is dwarfed.” (On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik 271-272)

“[t]here is another way [of repentance] - not by annihilating evil but by rectifying it and elevating it. This repentance does not entail making a clean break with the past or obliterating memories. It allows man, at one and the same time, to continue to identify with the past and still return to God in repentance...” (On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik 276)

- What is Soloveitchik saying to do with our past sins?
- How is this understanding of previous sins different from guilt?
- Do you relate to this understanding of looking at the past? Can one merely change the narrative?

CHANA POEM

Naima Hirsch

Naima Hirsch is a first year student at Yeshivat Maharat, the first institution to ordain women to serve as Orthodox clergy. Her writing has been published in a number of magazines and journals, both in print and online. Naima recently graduated from Hunter College, where she was an active member of the Hunter Hillel community.

Based on the verse from the haftorah (scriptural reading from Prophets on the first day of Rosh HaShanah):

וְחַנָּה הִיא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל-לִבָּהּ רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נִעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע וַיַּחְשְׁבָה
עָלֶי לְשֹׁכֵרָה:

Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. (I Samuel 1:13)

- What does praying look like to you? How is it similar or how does it differ from this image?
- What do you think of the image of Hannah praying but her actions being misconstrued by those around her? Have you ever felt this way?
- Is prayer/religious commitment a private or public experience for you?

only her lips moved, her voice could not be heard

She walks in the light of God,
a light reflected in her children's eyes.
She sings her cheerful ditty of plenty.
I sing this plaintive hymn of infertility.

I walk every day bitter of soul,
as if my shoes were knives,
their blades twisting and turning into my feet.

I stand a pillar amidst tapestries,
letting nature's light pierce my skin.
I cry out
a wail so loud I cannot make a sound.

SHOFAR

David Polisuk

David Polisuk is a fourth-year history and political science student at the University of Toronto, Canada. As a Hillel Student Leader, he has planned religious, educational, and social programs for Jewish students on campus. In his free time, he enjoys cooking, listening to podcasts, and going on bike rides.

Over the past seven months we've learned a lot of new words: social distancing, rate of transmission, personal protective equipment, asynchronous classes, and Zoom breakout rooms. Rosh Hashanah is similarly a holiday of many words. Synagogue services consist of hundreds of pages of confessions, songs, and prayers that often feel like countless hours. It is therefore ironic that the most important mitzvah, commandment, of this holiday of words involves no words at all. This mitzvah is listening to three sets of three different types of shofar blasts. The shofar is such an important part of the holiday that the Torah refers to Rosh Hashanah as the day of shofar blowing (Num. 29:1). This leads to the question: why is hearing the shofar the most important part of Rosh Hashanah and what does that fact teach us about the holiday?

To answer this question, I will begin by discussing a prayer that fills up many pages of the Rosh Hashanah service since it is frequently repeated. This prayer is known as viduy or the confessional prayer. A major component of Rosh Hashanah and the Days of Awe, that immediately succeed Rosh Hashanah and culminate on Yom Kippur, is the concept of asking G-d for repentance in order to be blessed with a good year. Viduy therefore consists of twenty-two statements admitting to sins such as robbing, making false accusations, and speaking slander. Some of these statements are difficult to relate to either because we believe that we haven't committed these sins or because we believe that they aren't sins at all. For example, most of us have probably not given intentionally bad advice and, especially considering the pressures of social media, most of us probably don't think that speaking about someone is considered gossip. It is therefore difficult for us to achieve true atonement with the words of the prayers alone.

In contrast to the limitations of prayer, the shofar blasts allow us to achieve a higher level of repentance. Due to its primitive sound, the shofar blasts are often compared to a cry. The sages believe that every Jewish soul, regardless of their bodily actions, remains pure and desires to return to G-d. The sound of the shofar is therefore a cry from a body that yearns to reconnect spiritually but doesn't know how.

The fact that the shofar is the most important mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is therefore very empowering. It means that regardless of whether we have the right words or intentions, G-d will listen to our deep-down desire to be better. Therefore, as you begin a new Jewish year and an unconventional academic year and strive to improve, remember the message of the shofar. This year may be tough, and you may not necessarily have the words to describe it, but the shofar reminds us that G-d is always with us and will help us achieve our deepest goals. Furthermore, the fact that we pray in the plural, confess sins that we may not have committed, and listen to the shofar as a group shows that we are responsible for one another. It is therefore also important to check in and check up on one another, especially during this difficult time. Shanah Tova and may you be inscribed in the Book of Life.



ROSH HASHANAH POEM

Lauren Roth

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It is the best time of the year

Celebrate your faith and be a dear!

Although we are not a very big group,

We love each other and sit down and have soup

We are known to not eat ham

But we make up a fam

Someday we will all be together eating apples and honey

Telling each other life stories—some of which are serious and some of which are funny.

But this year we are looking up at the stars

And loving each other from afar,

But we adore ourselves and do not shed a tear

Because together in spirit, we are celebrating the Jewish New Year!

