



Sh'ma | שמע

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH IDEAS

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During the High Holidays, our attention is focused on a recounting of the past year and an imagining of the next one. This issue of *Sh'ma* — which looks at the Yom Kippur liturgy — is designed to help us, individually and as a community, to focus on a fascinating and difficult ritual. The *Avodah* service, part of a special Yom Kippur *musaf*, is the ritual reenactment of the moment when the *Kohen HaGadol*, the High Priest, beseeched God for our atonement. It was the holiest moment of the holiest day of the year, in a place referred to as the holy of holies, and it is enacted by the holiest of our holy people, the *Kohen HaGadol*. It is then (and only then) that the High Priest utters God's divine name and we, a prostrated people, are cleansed of our sins.

We invite you to explore this amazing ritual as we examine the multiple meanings of the word "*avodah*": work, service, and prayer. One essay explores the closeness of the Hebrew words for "work" and "slavery," and another the porousness of work and the rest of life; several pieces reflect on how work, service, and prayer intersect in the course of our lives as *avodat HaShem*, (service to God), and *avodah she'balev*, (service of the heart).

Several essays in the issue reflect upon the nature of personal and communal prayer at the holidays, and upon the intense drama we reenact during this ritual and liturgy — our prostration on the floor, the blood of the goat, and the sweat of the High Priest as he expiates our sins. Beginning with a simple *piyyut*, a liturgical poem, the *Avodah* service has become the quintessential prayer of these days of awe. Reclaiming some of the drama of the prayer may allow us to reclaim the power of the day.

— *Shana tova u'metukah*, Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

All That Matters

MENACHEM CREDITOR

Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, contains some incredibly strange moments when viewed by year-round Jewish eyes.

For instance, the *Hineni* prayer, which introduces the *Musaf* service, is recited by one person on behalf of the many, placing a religious intercessor between the many and their God. *How strange*. Though strains of "intercessional prayer" exist in biblical and rabbinic literature, the notion that one person speaks to God for another person stands in stark comparison to the predominant Jewish belief that God is "near unto all who call." (Psalms 144:18) And yet, on Yom Kippur, as congregations reach the highpoint of *Musaf*, one appointed person truly does carry on his or her shoulders the prayerful hopes of the many for the year to come. The very first word of *Hineni* translates as "here I am," testifying to

the central role the prayer leader will assume during this singularly fragile encounter.

But the strangest moment of *Musaf*, the climax of the whole day, is the *Avodah*, the High Priest's service. The *Avodah* is an elaborate ritual of animal sacrifice, including the sprinkling

We shouldn't be watching a drama but rather standing with the High Priest in the Holy of Holies, unsure if we'll get it right — unsure if we'll live or die!

of the slaughtered animal's blood, and, finally, expiation prayers recited by the High Priest on behalf of self, family, community, and the entire world. (A direct translation of "*avodah*" is "work" or "service.") And, for most attendees of modern synagogue communities, it feels completely foreign. In fact, many communities

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Rabbi Menachem Creditor (menachemcreditor.org) is the spiritual leader of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, Calif.; editor of the volume *Peace in Our Cities: Rabbis Against Gun Violence*; and a regular contributor to the Huffington Post's religion blog.

create alternatives to this liturgical moment. The intense detail, the graphic description of the sacrifice, and the stark hierarchy of the priesthood do not feel familiar to the modern Jew.

That foreignness is not, however, what keeps most people, even engaged shul-goers, from embracing the *Avodah*. Rather, we keep our distance because we are afraid of the implications of this work; we fear becoming exposed to the uncertainty of the future. We are afraid of dying, of mortality, of fading legacies. These fears — which are a primal aspect of an informed Jewish spiritual life — define the language of our prayer. It is understandable that our liturgical choices correspond to our readiness (or not) to confront these very scary emotions.

The choice to avoid the anxiety of the *Avodah* makes sense, even if the costs of its omission are high. Even the masterful new Conservative High Holiday prayer book, *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, adds a line to the end of the *Avodah* that historicizes and transmutes the ritual: “...but today we are blessed to have another way to serve.” These seemingly inoffensive words transform the *Avodah* into something it is not: a recounting. Framing the *Avodah* as a historical rite reduces the experience into the telling of a story. We shouldn’t be watching a drama but rather standing with the High Priest in the Holy of Holies, unsure if we’ll get it right — unsure if we’ll live or die!

Our reluctance to engage with the *Avodah* is informed by that fear of death, that anxiety about an unwritten future, that terror of confronting our primal mortality narrative. But in that avoidance, we avert our eyes from the possible paths ahead. In fact, central to the *Avodah* is another Jewish ritual particular to Yom Kippur: full prostration. We cannot long endure the intimacy with God, and so at several points of the *Avodah*, each of us falls to the floor. Our bowing corresponds to the ancient

practice during the course of the *Avodah*, when the High Priest would call out God’s name, and those assembled would fall to the ground in an awestruck act of humility.

The big gift of this intoxicating mix of rituals is this: After solitary prostration, we rise together; we are reduced to our essence by the experience of confronting our deepest fears. We fall, aware of our limited days on earth, and we rise with immeasurable gratitude for just one more moment of life. That first glimpse into the eyes of a fellow supplicant, after we each rise from full prostration, is a taste of the world to come.

Unfortunately, if we step outside these encounters, we become outsiders to the potential of our own growth.

The totality of who we are — embodied souls, each and every one of us — requires visceral experience. We need to experience the blood of the *Avodah*. We truly are that fragile.

This year, during the *Avodah*, consider closing your eyes and imagining the feel of the soft hair, the warmth, the pulse of the sacrificial goat. Remember that one of the two sacrificial animals designated for Yom Kippur was sent into the wilderness, perhaps to live. But the other animal would certainly die. Know that the future is uncertain. Allow your pulse to quicken. Feel your own life force. Fear for it — for you, for your family, for your community, for the world itself. Pray for us all. Then, open your eyes to the beauty of the paths ahead. You haven’t died. You’ve lived through the experience. Thank God!

I close with the words of poet Rebecca Kai Dotlich. Though she writes of poetry, her words can also describe visceral prayer such as the *Avodah*: “A good poem takes you to the city, to the sea, to the heart of any and all matters; you see it, taste it, belong to it. ...A good poem is the arrangement of enchantment.” 

Difficult Liturgy: Easing the Mental Cramp

HOWARD WETTSTEIN

Some years ago, I attended a bat mitzvah for my sister and 14 other women, their years spanning seven decades, at a suburban New York Reconstructionist synagogue. Present was Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, the world’s first bat mitzvah and the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Her husband, Rabbi

Ira Eisenstein, co-founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, gave an unforgettable sermon on the metaphorical character of religious concepts — an idea, he argued, that might resolve interdenominational theological disputes.

The idea was appealing, intriguing, but also puzzling: If religious language is metaphorical (including passages about the

chosenness of Israel and the resurrection of the dead) why did Reconstructionism alter the language of the prayer book? If our liturgy is merely a mythological expression of lofty aspirations, why not sing it with *kavannah*? There is virtue, after all, in all of Israel sharing a liturgy.

I asked; he answered, surprisingly: “If I could do it [rewrite the prayer book] again, I would change nothing.” Though it took me awhile to assimilate his answer, I liked his idea. But questions remained: Are difficult, even ugly, prayers — such as calls for vengeance, or gratitude for not having been created a woman or a gentile — worth reciting? Why do we pray for the reinstitution of animal sacrifice? And while there is something magical about the thought of reuniting our entire ancestry (*t’chiat ha’matim* — the Hebrew sounds so much better than “resurrection of the dead”), the concept is not what most people would ask for in sober moments.

Eisenstein would likely suggest that finding naturalistic substitutes for such concepts — for example, perhaps rendering *t’chiat ha’matim* as a metaphor for a renewed sense of connection — would solve the problem. I want to suggest, on the contrary, that we engage with these concepts as they stand. Eisenstein’s suggestion is that we are really asking for something else; my suggestion is that the asking be seen in the light of poetry. Thus, to ask for *t’chiat ha’matim*, the resurrection of the dead, is a way — our way, Israel’s way — of connecting with the magic, the wondrousness of intimacy with one’s seriously extended family, with one’s history. It’s the magic that deserves our attention.

During my first sojourn in Jewish religious life, as a college student, I struggled with the question of God’s existence. I don’t remember much struggle with the finer points of downstream theology — the Messiah, for example. That was too much, too hard to get near. But now, in my second sojourn many years later, I have come to think that messianic concepts go to the heart of what we are about: One should never lose the vision, the dream, of what it might be like for humanity to come together as a single family. We can fill in the details of the messianic dream as we like, but we must take it seriously; we must teach our children about the cosmic importance of small steps toward that dream.

How about our prayers concerning the

Temple and animal sacrifice? What might we make of such prayers? To so pray is to express solidarity with a crowning moment in Jewish history. We can’t go back to Temple times; we don’t even want to go back, but one can dream of the way things were before the exile, before the destruction of our ancient culture. (And no doubt the historical reality of the sacrificial culture was not quite as we imagine it.) There is, certainly in my own case, some measure of ironic consciousness in asking that we be returned to that period. But such is the way of prayer, as is the way of poetry.



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The Kohen HaGadol and his Descendants

Kohen HaGadol, the High Priest, is descended from Aaron, Moses’ brother, and Kohanim are, theoretically at least, descendants as well.

The *Kohen aliyah* is the first *aliyah* to the Torah (when a community observes this practice).

Any adult Jew (any adult male in Orthodox synagogues) can lead the *Avodah* service on Yom Kippur — that is, the *sh’liach* or *shlichat tzibur*, the communal representative in prayer, can be a *Kohen*, but is not chosen to lead the *Avodah* service because of that status.

Today, many surnames — such as Cohen, Cohn, Katz, and Kahn — derive from this legacy.

There are no doubt other dimensions. We should not forget that our focus on the “return” began when we were lost, recently exiled, and hopeless. Our current words, said with fervor, may express solidarity with those exiles, with our exiles over the centuries, even with exiles everywhere. It is our way of being with them — and, at moments, of crying with them.

Perhaps attention to the nuances of *tefillah* (prayer) — to the variety of activities that count as *tefillah*, the variety of feelings and thoughts implicated — would ease the mental cramp induced by our requests for things we don’t exactly want. Think of the power of our collectively falling on our faces during the *Avodah* service’s rehearsal of the priestly activity on Yom Kippur. Consider an engaged reading of Psalms, with its poetic exploration of religious and human feelings, from the sublime to the profane. Think of the praise, the gratitude expressed, the whining, the whisperings of love and hope and fear. Think of those all too rare moments of prayer when the activity — sometimes individual, sometimes communal — induces in us a precious seriousness about life, about others, about God.



Howard Wettstein is a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Dr. Barbara Wettstein, and in proximity to their children and grandchildren. His book, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, was published in 2012 by Oxford University Press. He can be reached at Howard.Wettstein@ucr.edu.

An Extraordinary Light

RACHEL ADLER

I first encountered the *Avodah* service at age 7, and I kept the memory secret for years. I was visiting my Orthodox paternal grandmother in the women's section of her shul. My Reform mother stayed outside with my sister. I looked down from the balcony and experienced the ineffable. To the accompaniment of a haunting melody, the men below prostrated themselves in flurries of black and white *tal-litot*. A concentrated golden light suffused the scene. Later, when my mother asked why I had stayed inside so long, I could only stammer: "It was so beautiful. They all knelt down." "Oh no," my mother said positively, "Jews don't kneel." For years I wondered if I had just imagined the event. Prudently, I decided not even to mention the golden light.

The *Musaf* progresses from concern with self, to family, to the Jewish people, and to all humanity — a contemporary liberal ethic of relationships.

As a young adult *ba'alat teshuva* (newly Orthodox), I re-encountered the *Avodah*, minus the extraordinary golden light. (Its explanation had to wait until I read American philosopher William James and discovered that other people had also experienced golden lights.) At this second encounter, I sadly became aware that most Orthodox women do not prostrate themselves.

My childhood memory suggests that ritual can be compelling even to someone who does not understand its cognitive content. In fact, cognitive content can trouble ritual; it often serves as a powerful impetus for ritual change. According to the historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, ritual is a return, a reenactment of an original event. Yet ritual is not static. As anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff has emphasized, ritual constantly changes, but it must feel to the participant as if it has always been this way. Perhaps ritual change is a way of facilitating that return to origins when it has become difficult. In the process, the archetypal event itself is re-envisioned and re-understood.

The *Avodah* service is itself a product of ritual change. It was apparently constructed by the Palestinian liturgical poet Yose ben Yose, circa the fifth or sixth century CE, and then, throughout the Middle Ages, liturgical poets wrote and augmented the *Avodah* liturgies

and *piyyutim*. One of the best known of these, "*Amitz Koach*," written by Meshullam ben Kalonymus, is the main *Avodah piyyut* for the Ashkenazic *machzor*. Sephardic liturgies use an ancient, anonymous *piyyut* beginning "*Atah Konanta Me'Olam*." The liturgies draw on the Mishnah's re-envisioning of the Temple Yom Kippur service described in Leviticus 16. In that text, the goal of Yom Kippur ritual is to cleanse the sanctuary from impurities. In Mishnah Yoma, it is the community itself that is to be purified. Since, according to the Mishnah, atonement involves confession, the Yoma text provides the High Priest with confessions over the various offerings. It is the High Priest's pronunciation of YHWH, the ineffable divine name, during these confessions and the witnesses' responses to hearing it that take center stage in *Avodah* liturgies, not the sacrifices.

Classically, the *Avodah* is not just narrated. It is enacted. The worshipers themselves *become* the witnesses to the High Priest's confessions, prostrate themselves, and respond, "*Barukh shem kvod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*," as if they had just heard the lost divine name. Communal enactments are powerfully convincing ways of encountering God, as my childhood memory attests. Ritual enactments rely on reframings and reinterpretation to persuade worshipers to act, because if they find the content irrelevant, irrational, or incomprehensible, some worshippers will simply refuse to participate.

All *Avodah* liturgies begin by framing the significance of the priestly ritual, because they must establish why it remains important and relevant. The classical poems recount the creation and early biblical history, setting the High Priest's service into the very fabric of the universe. The *Avodah* in the Reform movement's *machzor*, *Gates of Repentance*, reworks the creation prologue, emphasizing the distinctive powers and moral obligations of human beings and the special mission and redemptive role of the people Israel. Both the Conservative and Reconstructionist *Avodah* services begin with a Hasidic teaching from S. Ansky's play *The Dybbuk* (see pages 12-13). It asserts that wherever a person looks toward heaven is the Holy of Holies, that every day is a Day of Atonement, and that everyone is a High Priest. These prologues individualize and universalize

Rachel Adler is professor of modern Jewish thought and Judaism and gender at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. The author of *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, which won the National Jewish Book Award for Jewish Thought, she was one of the first theologians to integrate feminist perspectives and concerns into the interpretation of Jewish texts and the renewal of Jewish law and ethics.

the meaning of the *Avodah* and offer it for ordinary people to appropriate.

To make the *Avodah* accessible, non-Orthodox prayer books often also shorten and excerpt the difficult liturgies of the past, although all retain the High Priest's confessions. Interpretive translations are an important feature. The Reconstructionist *Avodah* is not even a separate service; instead, pieces of it are woven into a restructured *Musaf* that progresses from concern with self, to family, to the Jewish people, and to all humanity — a

contemporary liberal ethic of relationships.

The conclusion of the classical *Avodah* describes the joy and relief of a world renewed and set right, a world we do not inhabit. Nevertheless, in multiple contemporary versions, we are drawn to reenact this story in which sin can be acknowledged and purged and the slate wiped clean, and to re-envision repeatedly a process of contrition and renewal over which the ineffable name of God echoes. And if we are lucky enough to be part of a solid communal reenactment, it will feel as if it has always been this way. 



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The Beginning of Service

SHARON COHEN ANISFELD

I was initially intrigued when asked to reflect on what it means to be “called” to one’s work as a rabbi — and then I was surprised by the layers of internal resistance I faced as I sat down to respond to the question.

First, I encountered the cultural baggage: The language of religious calling is more popular in American Christian circles than in Jewish ones, and so it feels a bit foreign to my ear, even though the idea of “calling” is certainly present in the Hebrew Bible and other classical Jewish sources.

Second, I noticed the theological baggage: I don’t trust people who are absolutely sure that they are doing what God wants of them. When people describe their work in the world — as rabbis, or anything else — as a response to a divine call, it makes me nervous. I hear hints of certainty and grandiosity that I find unsettling at best.

Third, I faced the emotional baggage: To reflect on whether I feel “called” to my work in the rabbinate is, on some level, to reflect on how I feel about what I have done and am doing with my life. I love my work, and find it engaging and enlivening on most days — but am I certain that this is what I am “called” to do in this world? The question feels intensely personal and scary, because the stakes are so high.

In spite of my resistance, I’m drawn to this question of “calling.” I don’t want to make the mistake that we so often make as Jews — diminishing our own religious vocabulary and experience by distancing ourselves from language that we have come to view as Christian and therefore un-Jewish. I don’t want to relinquish a religious category that has potential value because it has been tarnished by theological

arrogance. And I certainly don’t want to avoid asking an important spiritual question of myself because the emotional stakes are too high.

Our *avodah* — our deepest service in this world — flows from this awareness of and attention to what we lack and how we love.

The language of “calling” is compelling, I think, because it speaks to the human longing to live a life that matters to another (or to an Other). In the words of the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

“But the greatest desire of all is to be
In the dream of another
To feel a slight pull, like reins,
To feel a heavy pull, like chains.”¹

I became a rabbi because I wanted to feel that pull — sometimes slight, sometimes heavy — of belonging. From a young age, I felt claimed — by God, by Torah, by the Jewish people — and I have always treasured that feeling, even when I have strained against it, even when I have been tugged in other directions.

The longing to live a life that matters is universal, but it is not generic. It is deeply personal and particular. In many Hasidic teachings, this idea is powerfully conveyed through the language of “*shlichut*” — the idea that every person is “sent” to this world to fulfill a unique and particular purpose. (We might consider the different nuances of being “called” and being “sent.”) Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky writes eloquently on this topic in a teaching on *avodat haShem* (service of God) in his collected works, *Netivot Shalom*: “Every individual is a small world unto himself... No person has ever

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Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld is dean of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass. She is co-editor of two volumes of women’s writings on Passover, *The Women’s Seder Sourcebook: Rituals and Readings for Use at the Passover Seder* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002) and *The Women’s Passover Companion: Women’s Reflections on the Festival of Freedom* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002). Anisfeld was named to the “America’s Top 50 Rabbis” list by *Newsweek/The Daily Beast* in both 2011 and 2012.

¹ These lines are from “The Greatest Desire of All” in Yehuda Amichai: *A Life of Poetry*, 1948-1994, page 438.

been identical to another person since the creation of the world, and therefore each and every person has a special *shlichut*, a distinctive purpose for which he was sent... The beginning of all *avodah*, all service, is discovering for what particular purpose one was sent to this world.”

Needless to say, the task of discerning our particular purpose is not simple, and our responsibility to the world does not remain static. According to the *Netivot Shalom*, it requires that we pay close attention — in every hour and season of our lives — both to our greatest struggles and our greatest strengths. We each have places within ourselves that are in need of deep repair — limitations we will wrestle with throughout our lives. And we each have our own distinct talents, our particular ways of serving God. Our *avodah* — our deepest service

in this world — flows from this awareness of and attention to what we lack and how we love. It is possible only if we open ourselves to difficulty as well as to delight. If we see our difficulties as failures, we lose our capacity to grow. If we dismiss our delights as distractions, we lose our capacity to give.

The role of the contemporary rabbi is expanding and being redefined in all kinds of ways — some inspiring and some decidedly uninspiring. Amidst the ever-growing demands on our time and energy, we would do well to return to the understanding of *avodat haShem* offered by the *Netivot Shalom* and ask: Are we drawing on our deepest struggles and strengths to be of service to our world? And are we inviting those we serve to do the same?



From ‘Avdut’ to ‘Avodah’: Between Slavery and Service

SHAI HELD

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, God’s people are enslaved to a false god; by the book’s end, they have been liberated to serve the real One.

The king of Egypt is not just a brutal taskmaster; he is a brazen and delusional despot: “My Nile is my own,” he declares; “I made it for myself.” (Ezekiel 29:3) A medieval midrash imagines him going even further in his insolence: “I have no need of God,” he says; “I created myself.” (Midrash HaGadol to Exodus 5:2) For Pharaoh, grandiosity and cruelty go hand-in-hand: neither knows any limits at all. In response to the request Moses and Aaron make for a brief opportunity to worship God in the wilderness, Pharaoh places more and more onerous burdens on his increasingly desperate slaves. He disdainfully condemns Moses and Aaron for wanting to cause the Israelites to desist from their labors — and, tellingly, the word the narrator places in his mouth is “*hishbatem*” (Exodus 5:5), from the same root as the word Shabbat, a day of rest. The reader knows this is intended to acknowledge that God, and God alone, is the Creator. (Exodus 20:11) Thus, in upbraiding Moses and Aaron for wanting to give the Israelites a Sabbath, Pharaoh unwittingly reveals the vast gulf separating *avdut* — enslavement to a human master — from *avodah* — dignified service to the God of Israel.

Exodus begins with the Israelites forced to build cities for a human king who views them as a potential threat to his rule and treats them accordingly; it ends with the people engaged in building a tabernacle (*mishkan*) in which the God who has redeemed them can dwell. This trajectory is crucial to Jewish theology: The people move from “perverted work, designed by Pharaoh to destroy God’s people... [to] divinely mandated work, designed to bring together God and God’s people, in the closest proximity possible in this life.”¹ As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites work without respite against their will. When they build the tabernacle, in stark contrast, Moses asks for *voluntary* contributions: “Take from among you gifts to the Lord; everyone *whose heart so moves him* shall bring them.” (Exodus 35:5) Finally freed from slavery, the Israelites are slowly being taught that there is a form of service radically different from slavery, one that honors and nurtures one’s sense of agency rather than degrading it and whittling it away.

Not surprisingly, then, as Moses lays out instructions for how to build the tabernacle, he starts by invoking Shabbat: “On six days, work may be done, but on the seventh day, you shall have a sabbath of complete rest (*Shabbat Shabbaton*), holy to the Lord...” (Exodus 35:2) An unbridgeable chasm divides enslavement to a human tyrant and service to

Shai Held is co-founder, dean, and chair in Jewish thought at Mechon Hadar. His book, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Indiana University Press) is due out in December.

¹ Ellen F. Davis, “Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers? A Biblical Perspective on Human Work,” *Anglican Theological Review* 83:1 (Winter 2001), pp 30-31. My own analysis is heavily indebted to Davis’ provocative study of Exodus.

the God of creation and covenant: Whereas, as we saw above, the former prohibits even a moment of Shabbat, the latter actually mandates and regularizes it. If, in serving Pharaoh, the Israelites were stripped of their dignity, in serving God, they will have it affirmed. Moreover, they will be charged with affirming it themselves. God commands them to take their own dignity seriously.

Is Shabbat about affirming that God, and God alone, is God, or is Shabbat a testimony to human dignity and the importance of rest? The biblical answer is that it is both. The Bible sees no contradiction between a day aimed at affirming God as sovereign over the entirety of creation and a day aimed at insisting that everyone, including slaves male and female, is entitled and obligated to rest. (Exodus 20:10) Observing Shabbat is a claim about who the Israelites serve, but also, and crucially, about how the One they serve understands and treats them. Therein lies a key difference between service to God and enslavement to a human pretender: Whereas the latter systematically dehumanizes his subjects, the former values and cherishes them. Work and service come in dignified and degrading versions; the Bible is, in part, about a

journey from the latter toward the former.

It is critical to emphasize that the journey the Israelites take — from one building project to another — transforms them from slaves of an earthly ruler to servants of a Heavenly One. Freedom, as imagined by the book of Exodus, is decidedly not about casting off the burdens of service altogether. In fact, it says a great deal about our secularized society and its often-impo-
 verished conceptions of freedom, that while we often cite the demand that Pharaoh “let my people go!” we omit the *telos* of that call, “that they may serve Me.” Perhaps we should make the point differently: The Torah is passionately concerned with a journey from slavery to freedom, but it imagines freedom in ways that are different from (one is tempted to say antithetical to) the ways freedom is commonly spoken of in contemporary terms, in capitalist, consumerist America. Doing whatever I want whenever I want, is arguably not freedom at all, but enslavement to impulse. The depths of freedom are discovered not in self-assertion but in rare moments of authentic self-transcendence. Authentic freedom, Jewish theology insists, is found in service to something (and Someone) greater than oneself.²



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² It should, though, be noted that we must tread carefully here, because, as Isaiah Berlin famously warned, invocations of positive liberty are a favored tool of totalitarians — and, we ought to add, of religious bullies of all stripes. Once some people presume to know who other people really are deep down, and thus to have greater insight than they into what they truly want, the very real danger of political oppression in the name of “self-mastery” or some purportedly higher freedom emerges in full force. This sobering fact, all too often ignored by religious apologists, points to a crucial line we moderns ought to uphold: Invocations of self-transcendence and of more authentic, deeper, truer selves must rely on persuasion rather than force. We should allow people the freedom to discover what we insist is their true freedom.

Breaking Idle

RACHEL BRODIE

Here is a definition of *avodah zara* (idolatry): any behavior that needs its own 12-step program.

The pathological dimensions of workaholism are signaled in the word itself: taken from the lexicon of addiction, the word is meant to convey the sense that a normative behavior — in this case, the commitment to one’s job — has tilted into the realm of compulsion. Whatever one’s impetus to work hard; whatever one’s pleasure in feeling that one makes a difference to the project or the world; whatever one’s satisfaction in meeting expectations, completing tasks, and achieving goals — all of this is overtaken by the obsessive urge to be working.

The Torah describes the Israelites’ time in Egypt and their transformation from workers to slaves as a slippery process. Because Pharaoh’s manipulation was deliberate, the slave may not have known exactly when work, *avodah*, became enslavement, *avdut*.

Today, the transition from work to workaholism may also be blurred. Since the

“master” is internal, the manipulation is unconscious. Workaholism generally includes specific consequences to the behavior: deterioration of relationships with family and friends, decreased attention to “outside interests,” and diminished self-care. Self-imposed (though often experienced as involuntary) enslavement to one’s work seems to offer an illusion of some “freedom” from the challenges presented in those other realms.

The dangers of *avdut* — literal or metaphorical enslavement — can be measured in the diminishment of the worker’s body, mind, and soul. The cycle is vicious; the physical toll, the reduced mental space, and the existential angst that fills the limited downtime all serve to reinforce the distorted worldview of the enslaved. When one is confined in a narrow place, *mitzrayim* (the biblical name for Egypt that also means “narrow straits” or “distress”), the tunnel vision that comes from such a severe imbalance of life’s experiences supports the feelings
continued on next page

Rachel Brodie is the Chief Jewish Officer of the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco.

of inevitability that accompany all “choices” that are made. The slippery slope where *avodah* becomes *avodah zara* is but a few steps away.

The Hebrew word “*zara*” literally means “foreign” or “strange,” but in the rabbinic idiom, “*avodah zara*” — usually translated as “idol worship” — is shorthand for the beliefs and practices of “the other.” (Any “other,” but in the rabbinic era, this primarily referred to pantheists, polytheists, and early Christians). Biblical caricatures of idolatry aside, we need look no further than initial attempts to serve the God of Israel to uncover the fault line between *avodah* and *zara* in the realm of Israelite worship.

The object lesson of the golden calf makes clear that *anything* — even worshiping the God of Israel — can become idolatrous.

The object lesson of the golden calf makes clear that *anything* — even worshiping the God of Israel — can become idolatrous. After Moses (their one tangible link to God) disappears atop the mountain, the Israelites — in their desire to find God’s presence in their midst — concretize their yearnings in the form of the golden calf.

How does the construction of the calf differ from the Israelites’ next great building project — the *mishkan* (the portable sanctuary used during the years of wandering)? Both are attempts to concretize the same abstract concept — to locate God’s presence in their midst. Both make use of *avodat yad*, literally, the work of the hand: artisanship for the purpose of worship. Both provide opportunities for creative expression to function as a spiritual practice. Both seem like communal labors of love. And

yet, only the golden calf was considered *avodah zara*, idolatrous.

Certainly, the creation of the *mishkan* at God’s command, as opposed to the human initiative behind the golden calf predisposed God toward the *mishkan*. But divine initiation is not enough to warrant the distinction. More significantly, the *mishkan* served as a container for the people’s projections without conflating the symbol with its referent, God. And the solid mass of metal that comprised the golden calf could only reflect what those who surrounded it projected onto it, inverting and perverting both the understanding of God and the concept of *avodah* by desiring God to be of service to them. We can easily dismiss as primitive the excessive literalism of locating God in an object (as in the calf) or even in a particular space (as in the *mishkan*). From our perspective, it all seems so obvious — the God of Israel cannot be reduced to any one thing or contained in any one place

Neither can our lives. The workaholic — or anyone who struggles at times with a serious lack of balance in life — may perceive the world as a narrow place affording few choices, offering but a single way to survive amidst an existential emptiness. Just as the physical slavery of the ancient Israelites in Egypt and the individual’s experience of addiction are both described as *avdut*, both the *avodah zara* of idol worshippers and the *avodah zara* of obsession are also analogous. An obsessive focus on people, objects, ideas, ideals, and even deeply held values may lead us into the proverbial tunnel of tunnel vision, where the tunnel becomes a *mishkan* for good intentions that ultimately serve no one. 

My Body, My Self: Avodah Be’gashmiut

OR N. ROSE

As the High Holy Days approach and I engage in the process of *heshbon ha’nefesh*, soul accounting, among the sources I turn to are the teachings of the Hasidic masters, particularly those of the founders of this great spiritual revival movement. I was introduced to the sermons and stories of these masters as a child, and they continue to nourish and challenge me today.

One of the elements of this popular mystical tradition that I find especially helpful is the focus on spiritual integration. The Hasidic masters insist that we seek to fashion a life of holiness

in which we carefully consider how to serve God, not only in the synagogue or study hall, but also in the marketplace, in the fields, and at home. The Hasidim lived within the framework of traditional halakhah (Jewish law) and sought to extend their religious activities into those areas not included in the already wide-ranging system of mitzvot. The ultimate challenge, as they saw it, was to try and create a continuous connection with God (*devekut*) in all times and places. This spiritual aspiration is based on a theological worldview that stresses the radical immanence of God in all of

Rabbi Or Rose, a member of the Sh’ma Advisory Board, is director of the Center for Global Judaism at Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass., and co-director of CIRCLE: The Center for Inter-Religious & Communal Leadership Education. He is a contributing editor to *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid’s Table* (Jewish Lights).

creation. If God's glory "fills the whole earth" (Isaiah 6:3), then we must seek out "holy sparks" throughout our lives. The Hasidic masters speak openly about the challenges of maintaining one's spiritual focus, but they call on us to maintain a connection even in times of confusion and struggle (*katnut*).

In presenting their vision of this holistic devotional posture, the rebbes often speak of *avodah be'gashmiut*, "service through materiality." Much of this work has to do with developing a God-centered consciousness. What is my intention when I eat and drink, when I converse with family and friends, or when I make love to my spouse? Are my actions mindless, do I seek only immediate gratification, or is there a higher purpose to what I do? How can I "uplift" these acts and sanctify these moments?

Avodah be'gashmiut is a complex mystical idea that has been interpreted in different and sometimes conflicting ways by Hasidim and modern interpreters. For example, some texts encourage us to use the experience of physical pleasure to stimulate divine service. Other sources insist that the true devotee should pay no attention to his/her physical pleasure and focus exclusively on bringing pleasure to God. Rather than delve into those differences here, I want to share a brief personal reflection on this practice.

In adapting the concept of *avodah be'gashmiut* in my own life, one area in which I am struggling is my relationship with my body. At age 39, I am more than 50 pounds overweight; I take several medications to help regulate my blood pressure and cholesterol, and I rarely exercise. Though I can cite understandable reasons for my health issues — genetics, long work hours, and young children — I also recognize that a significant part of the problem is my increasing alienation from my own physical body. While I regularly read illuminating Hasidic and other spiritual teachings about mindful eating and walking practices, I have yet to embody these insights meaningfully. In my attempts to grow as an intellectual and as an educator over the last two decades, I have gradually adopted a set of very unhealthy physical habits. Ironically, I think one of the issues underlying this imbalance is my fear of mortality and my drive to make some meaningful professional contribution in the limited time available to me.

I regard this alienation as a serious spiritual shortcoming, because I am not treating my body

with the care and respect it deserves as a divine creation. I know my behavior affects others in my life — primarily my family and friends — who spend too much time worrying about my physical wellbeing. As the father of young children, I feel a particular responsibility to improve my health so that I can be a more active presence in their lives for as long as possible.

As part of my process of *teshuvah*, or return, this year, I am trying to think more care-

As part of my process of *teshuvah*, or return, this year, I am trying to think more carefully about my body — my *gashmiut* — as a vessel for sacred action at home and in the world.

fully about my body — my *gashmiut* — as a vessel for sacred action at home and in the world. And so, with great difficulty, I am attempting to be more conscious of what I eat and why I eat it. I am also recommitting myself to exercising and playing outdoors with my children. I cannot disregard my body as I sit and pore over holy books, plan new courses, and wax poetic about the importance of living an integrated spiritual life.

Of course, even as I write these words, I hear the *ba'al davar* (the inner voice of dissuasion and accusation) cynically telling me that I am not up to the task: "How many diets have you tried? How many exercise videos do you own?" I will try again, reminding myself that at the root of the word "*hasid*" is "*hesed*" (loving-kindness). The goal is not to berate myself, but to honestly and compassionately take responsibility for my life as I seek to serve as an *eved HaShem* (a servant of God). 



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The Name of God: Finding One's Own Name

AVITAL HOCHSTEIN

The description of the *Avodah* service, the “work” that the High Priest would engage in on Yom Kippur, is the centerpiece of the *Musaf* service. It is primarily a *piyyut*, a poem, written in the tenth century by Meshullam ben Kalonymos. The poem is fragmented by three confessions that the High Priest makes in the Temple while performing the special services of the Day of Atonement.

Hearing this poem-prayer invites the individual to enter the process of self-seeking. As we shall see, it is a process that requires “work,” reflection, and thoughtful scrutiny of self. This process is crucial to one’s presenting one’s self by name. (And we will see that one’s “name” is important.)

The three confessions, as described in the prayer (based on the Mishnah and Talmud), open each time with the words: “Please, O, God I have sinned,” using “The Name” (*HaShem*) to refer to God. After listing different types of sins, the High Priest requests forgiveness and atonement, opening again with a similar formula: “Please, O, God, please forgive the sins...” using again “The Name.” To augment his request, the Priest would quote a verse from Leviticus 16 that also appears in each of the three confessions in the prayer: “For on this day God will grant you atonement to cleanse you from all your sins; before God you shall be cleansed (purified).” This time, God’s ineffable name is used. We do not know enough about the exact sound of the name of God that was uttered at those three moments, but, as we shall see, it clearly was unique and by the description of the response it elicited, was also quite significant.

In each appearance in the poem-prayer, the verse’s flow is interrupted by a response of the audience upon hearing God’s name. So the poem-prayer includes the following lines three times: For on this day, God shall grant you atonement to cleanse you from all your sins; from all your sins shall you be clean before the Lord. And the priests and the people who were standing in the Temple court, upon hearing “The Name” in its glory and awesomeness, explicitly coming forth from the mouth of the High Priest would kneel, bow down, thank God, and fall on their faces, saying “*Barukh shem kvod malkhuto l’olam va’ed*,” “Bless ‘The Name’ of his glorious kingship forever.” The High Priest

would lengthen the uttering of “The Name” and would respond with the last words of the verse, “You shall be cleansed (purified).”

I would like to focus on two biblical associations that give meaning to this calling of “The Name,” associations that provide guidance and a framework for the “work” that Yom Kippur suggests.

After the children of Israel construct the golden calf, they engage in a long process of reconnection, atonement, and covenantal renewal with God. The process is marked by Moses bringing them the second tablets, which is thought to have taken place on the tenth day of the seventh month, Yom Kippur. At the meeting when Moses negotiates with God for the second tablet, names play a significant role. Moses turns to God and says: “You said to me, ‘I know you by name and I like you.’” (Exodus, 33:12) Moses associates God’s knowing him by name with God’s fondness of him. The knowledge of another’s name is perceived as a deep acquaintance accompanied by acceptance and approval.

Moses’ moving request to God at that moment focuses on making the relationship mutual. And God obliges, again associating the use of a name — in this case, “The Name,” the name of God — with an intimate meeting, a meeting that is a critical moment on the way to God’s feeling reaccepted by the people. “I will pass my entire being/goodness before you and call out My Name/the Name before you.” (Exodus 33:19) God’s self-knowledge, on the one hand, and God’s willingness to share and be exposed, on the other, are foundational in enabling the relationship with Moses to deepen. Having knowledge of self and revealing it are encompassed by the use of one’s name, and are the basis for meeting intimately and with acceptance.

In Deuteronomy 6:12-13, Moses warns the children of Israel not only against taking what they have for granted, but also against forgetting God. In that warning, Moses tells the Israelites that the particular act that will protect them against forgetting is the use of God’s name. Using “The Name,” and names in general, protects against a danger often present in relationships — the danger of being forgotten or being taken for granted.

A more complete picture is now apparent: A lack of acquaintance with self is mirrored by a lack of acknowledgment, an absence of acceptance; a

Avital Hochstein is a faculty member and research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and a member of the executive team and faculty at Mechon Hadar in New York. A doctoral candidate at Bar-Ilan University, she co-authored, with Chana Safrai, *Women Out, Women In: The Place of Women in Midrash* (Yedioth Aharonoth).

lack of self-recognition is reflected by not being recognized — being taken for granted. These are resolved by the use of names — a name that reflects to another how I understand myself or how the Other, God, presents Himself to people — a name that is necessary for meeting, knowing, and accepting. A moving double process takes place: A meeting and defining of self parallels and enables a meeting and a revealing to another. The hope is that these — self-knowledge and exposure —

stem from and culminate in acceptance.

The three confessions using God's name are an invitation to engage in a process of self-knowledge, an invitation to give one's self a name and to share it, a name that will lead to acceptance of self by self and others, and maybe by the Other. This finding and sharing of names is our "work," our "*avodah*," our *imitatio Dei* triggered by the "*avodah*," the High Priest's "work" on Yom Kippur. 



Shema | שמע
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When the Actor? When the Audience?

DAVID DUNN BAUER

The appeal of Jewish worship for me has always resided in its innate theatricality — not that we witness a spectacle, but that we participate in one. When I walk into any worship setting — toting my own prayer book or picking one up at the door — I feel like an actor at a reading of a play. Even if I know the text well, I don't know what the show that night will be. I will only discover its mood, tempo, and climactic moments along the way, trying to approach ancient liturgy as any good actor would approach a well-rehearsed show: to speak each line as if for the first time.

The *Avodah* service, on the other hand, is a liturgical moment that places most of the congregation in the audience rather than on-stage. Like the reading of the Torah, *kriyat haTorah*, it is storytelling — the purest and oldest form of theater. There are three acts of narrative that tell the story of the High Priest. Like the murder of Gonzago in *Hamlet*, the *Avodah* service is a play within a play. Perhaps because it feels more like theater than prayer, it has become the part of the Yom Kippur liturgy most commonly adapted or jettisoned on the arduous path from Kol Nidre to the break-fast. An exploration of its theatricality may restore its relevance to the rituals of *teshuvah*.

The liturgy of the *Avodah* service consists of two narratives, one center stage and the other backstage. Center stage is the setting for a ritual encounter between the people and God, facilitated by the High Priest. The people fall upon their faces upon hearing the divine name and they are miraculously cleansed of sin. Backstage is the setting for the private experience of the High Priest who, in his obligatory tasks, sweats through multiple costumes and intensifying levels of consequence, accomplishing *teshuvah* for his family, his tribe, and his people.

The High Priest's actions are continuous and concentrated. We witness and perhaps read along with a recounting of the Temple worshippers' experience, not in real time, but certainly in a prolonged tempo, compared to the intense speed with which we often chant prayers. We have no choice but to settle in for the experience. And yet, the multiple and concentric circles of theatricality make it a good drama: It's harsh and bloody, and reality blends with the mysterious and inexplicable to accomplish the miraculous.

The theatrical dynamic is heightened by tension in the text. The Temple worshippers anticipate hearing the divine name and hearing the litany of their sins. The High Priest, by comparison, is nervous, anxious, and absolutely needing to get it right. Again: it is a play within a play within a play. The people experience a single prolonged moment of tension; the High Priest, on the other hand, experiences a series of nerve-wracking moments in which the wellbeing of his family, tribe, and people hang in the balance.

Perhaps the most remarkable moment in the liturgy is the one when spiritual and theatrical coexist, when the High Priest needs to focus simultaneously on God and the people. It is the moment in which he utters the "Holy Name," which he himself only speaks this one day each year, and he pronounces the people cleansed from sin. He reaches a moment of religious intensity all his own. He times the moment so that — between speaking "The Name" and the verb *titharu*, "You shall be cleansed" — he gathers the attention of all, the prostrated people and the divine, so that people recite "*Barukh shem kvod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*" before hearing him utter the magical word.

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Rabbi David Dunn Bauer, an alumnus of Yale University and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, is the first Jewish recipient of the Certificate in Sexuality and Religion from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif. For two decades prior to his rabbinical studies, he directed opera and theater around the United States, Europe, and Israel. He has a private practice in queer spiritual counseling (queerspiritualcounseling.com) and teaches frequently about the links among sex, God, and queer experience.

Facing God in Our Own Language

S. Ansky was a Jewish playwright and ethnographer born in Russia whose most famous work was “The Dybbuk.” The play, first performed in Warsaw in 1920 and still performed today, tells the story of a young bride who is possessed by a dybbuk — the spirit of her deceased beloved. This translated and adapted excerpt features the monologue of the Hasidic rebbe who is brought in to exorcise the spirit from the bride. The passage, which notes the work of the High Priest during the Avodah service of Yom Kippur, is often included in contemporary High Holiday liturgy.

Lila Kagedan is a student at Yeshivat Maharat and Harvard University. She is an educator and clinical ethicist with a special interest in global health settings.

Andy Green is a fourth-year student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

Rabbi **Heidi Hoover**, a recent graduate of the Academy for Jewish Religion, is the spiritual leader of Temple Beth Emeth v’Ohr Progressive Shaari Zedek in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Rabbi **Daniel Bar-Nahum** is head rabbi and director of education at Temple Emanu-El of East Meadow, in East Meadow, N.Y.

Emily Barton is a third-year rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

David Markus is a senior rabbinical student in the ALEPH (Jewish Renewal) ordination program, and associate spiritual leader at Temple Beth-El of City Island, N.Y. (yourschulbythesea.org). By day, he serves as a judicial referee in New York’s Supreme Court, Ninth Judicial District.

A What is the world of God? Is it the world that God inhabits? Is it the world over which God has dominion? Does God make this world great and holy or is the world great and holy because it contains the presence of God?

—**Lila Kagedan**

B Holiness, *kedusha*, is not a static state but a relational one. We designate our beloved through *kiddushin*; we elevate the souls of our departed with *kaddish*; and we sanctify our time with *kiddush*, surrounded by family and friends. So, too, only by designating, elevating, and sanctifying Israel and Jerusalem with presence of body and intention of mind, do we create relationship and affirm holiness.

—**Andy Green**

A The world of God is great and holy!

B Of all the lands of the world, the Land of Israel was set aside to be holy for us;

and in the Land of Israel, the holiest city is Jerusalem.

C In Jerusalem, the holiest place was the Holy Temple; and the holiest site in the Temple was the Holy of Holies...

D ...There are 70 nations, and of them, Israel was set aside to be holy unto God.

The holiest of the people Israel is the tribe of the Levites.

The holiest of the Levites are the priests;

And among the priests, the holiest was the High Priest.

E ...And the holiest of the Shabbatot is the Day of Atonement.

F ...There are 70 languages in the world, and of them, Hebrew was chosen as our holy tongue.

G The holiest of all things written... is the Torah. ...the holiest part is the Ten Commandments.

H And the holiest of all the words in the Ten Commandments is the name of God.

I At a certain hour, on a certain day of the year, all these four holiness met together.

This took place on the Day of Atonement, at the hour when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and there revealed the divine name.

G The Torah is the culmination of an unwritten tradition put into writing to serve as a reminder of our imperfections and our heritage. The Ten Commandments are the most basic and fundamental of those unwritten ideals, without which the Torah would lose its inherent holiness.

—**Ilan Schwartz**

H “The Name” of God (*HaShem*) is more than a word; it is, in and of itself, a world. “The Name” of God is unpronounceable and unknowable; “The Name” of God is faithful, long-suffering, and eternal. “The Name” was uttered by God at the burning bush, by Moses at Sinai, and by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies, and it is uttered by each of us when

Ilan Schwartz is a fourth-year student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

Daniel Millner, a fourth-year rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in the Bronx, serves as the YCT rabbinic intern at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and at Congregation Beth Israel in Berkeley, Calif. Millner also proudly serves as a chaplain candidate in the U.S. Navy.

Michael Shefrin, a third-year rabbinical student at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, serves as student rabbi at Congregation B'nai David in Visalia, Calif.

Tamara Cohen is a fourth-year student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pa., and a writer, an activist, and an educator.

Each of these writers is involved with Rabbis Without Borders, a program of CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL.org).



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C I peel away the outer layers as I seek the Holy of Holies in my soul, the core of my inner Temple. When I stand at that moment, when I find the Presence that resides inside me, what will I see? How will I become more worthy of that Presence?

—**Heidi Hoover**

D No need for a Levite, there is holiness within me! God-given from generation to generation, *mi dor l'dor*, holiness renders my relationship with God unique. Not bound by caste, this holiness grants me a one-on-one audience with the Eternal, pushes me to grasp at a name, courses in my veins, and commands dialogue.

E To open oneself to Shabbat, to rest as God rested after the creation, is to acknowledge the piece of me that is already one with God. When I seek forgiveness or atonement, I am seeking ultimate connection — to repair my relationship with God, but also to reconnect with my self.

—**Emily Barton**

F Hebrew is *lashon ha'kodesh*, a language made holy by tradition and love. And yet, prayers arise in all tongues and without words: Even when gates of forgiveness seem closed to words, they remain open to tears, acts, and prayerful silence. Especially on Yom Kippur, we are called to use words to transcend words, for the Ineffable Truth is beyond words in any language.

—**David Markus**

I And if he invoked God's name in purity, all of Israel was forgiven.

Every human being created by God in God's own image is a High Priest. Each day of a person's life is the Day of Atonement... Each of us can face God with the language of the heart.

Each of us can be forgiven. Each one of us can achieve atonement and be made pure in the eyes of God.

FROM S. ANSKY'S "THE DYBBUK"

Translated by Rabbi Edward Feld. Reprinted with permission from *Mahtzor Lev Shalem*, ©Rabbinical Assembly, 2010, p. 326.

we bring thought, word, and deed together in an effort to repair a broken world where God is one and God's name is one.

—**Daniel Millner**

I Call upon an ancient ritual that exposes your imperfect humanness to time, space, and God in a unified moment. Sins, foibles, wrongs, mistakes, and shortcomings are all washed clean; what is left is the ultimate gift from the Divine Presence — another chance to live well.

—**Michael Shefrin**

I Is there indeed a name so powerful?

The four letters gleam like keys on a ring that will open every prison door in one breath.

Yes! Call out the God-name in your name, also in the name of the one who scarred you, and in the name of the one you scarred.

Unlock with me forgiveness: Right here, right now, fall down and say it all.

—**Tamara Cohen**



Isaac Brynjugard-Bialik

When we ritually prostrate ourselves at that moment, we extend the tension within the narration. We hold our breaths and quiver in anticipation as the people experience communal atonement.

As if to sweep the traces of human footsteps from the sand, the liturgy comes in immediately with a second-person singular address of God, “And You, out of Your goodness, aroused Your love and forgave the tribe of Your servants.” We relieve the theatricality of old and extend its theatrical contrivance for a significant 30 seconds, and then we pretend that it never happened, returning fully to the present religious moment.

Temple rites exemplify the primal origins of live theatrical performance: real blood and real God. People throughout the centuries of Western history have felt the world change as the result of artfully staged encounters between humanity and divinity. Examples include

Aeschylus (*The Eumenides*), Passion Plays, the Catholic Mass, Cirque du Soleil, and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. Ingenious expert performers and producers create for us mystical experiences that we could not conjure for ourselves.

By virtue of our front-row seats and backstage passes we become acquainted with both the High Priest and the worshipers better than they knew each other in the time of the Temple. Albeit with a redemptive conclusion, the combined narratives of this high drama approach the Aristotelian requirements for tragedy. The description of the public ritual depicts the people’s awe, *yirah*, at the might of God. The narrative of the hard-working High Priest awakens our compassion, *rachamim*, for a fellow human being. By seeing both the High Priest and the people close up, we become more fully involved in the high drama of Yom Kippur. 

Entering the Holy of Holies: A Biblio-drama in Three Parts

ELIE SPITZ

Kohen Gadol: I carry the weight of the community on my shoulders; I feel both weighed down and uplifted. My work as Kohen Gadol is an enormous privilege and a fearsome responsibility. I tend to my duties with utmost care. Normally, I wear golden epaulettes on my shoulders inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes. Normally, I wear the *urim v’tumim* on my chest with its twelve precious stones, one for each tribe. I am a *klei kodesh*, a holy vessel, a servant of God, and a vehicle of the people.

In a moment, I will enter the Holy of Holies. There, I will call on the Ever Present One in the name of the children of Israel. Now, I am dressed in white linen, a symbol of the longing for purity and simplicity. I am barefoot, like Moses before the burning bush. Although the stones are cold beneath my feet, my concentration is focused. I will give over my whole self to God. “*Selah lanu.*” “Forgive us. Return us to your good graces.”

I am afraid. God is so powerful and I am but flesh. In a moment, I could be consumed, as were Aaron’s sons as they brought strange fire before God. A misstep could not only lead to my demise, but it could also inflict enormous damage on my people. I will appear before God cloaked in the smoke of incense, a protection

of sweet smells that will soothe my nerves and draw my spirit upward.

In a moment, I will pronounce God’s four-letter name as did my father and my father’s father, all the way back to Aaron. The generations of *kohenim* flow through me. Outside the Holy of Holies are the Israelites.

Before I enter, let me turn to You, my God. I pray: “Let me meet your needs. May I do so faithfully with recognition of your glory; may I come forward knowing Your presence as a source of light and love; may You find favor with Your people. May You accept my service and respond to your children with forgiveness.”

Kohen’s Wife: It is my husband’s sincerity of faith that drew me to him. When I married him, I knew that one day he would serve as the High Priest.

Last night, my husband could hardly sleep. He was so anxious, afraid for himself and the people. I told him, “Don’t worry. It is not your first Yom Kippur. God is in the business of forgiveness. You are familiar with the rituals.” And yet, he tossed and turned — afraid. I am troubled at times by the fear that comes to bear in this holy hour. I wish that he could relax and find more joy in his service. Only when his tasks are completed will he relax and the people celebrate.

Elie Spitz has served for 25 years as the rabbi of Congregation B’nai Israel in Tustin, Calif. Before each High Holiday period, he thinks, “This year will be easier.” The stress of these days only increases because he expects each year’s engagement with his synagogue to surpass that of the previous year. He asks, as you read this reflection, to pray for him and for other rabbis to fulfill their tasks honestly, humbly, and ably.



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Elie Spitz: As I write these words, I am aware of how different is my faith and service from that of the priest of old. On the Day of Judgment, I, too, am being judged. As a rabbi, I know that many of my congregants approach the High Holidays as their time of communal connection and Jewish affirmation, and I prepare accordingly.

God is present as I call on my people to examine the meaning of their lives. While I focus primarily on how we live our lives rather than on the fear evoked by standing before God, I

envy the clarity and sensuality of the old offerings. The rituals had a proscribed efficacy.

I also idealize the *Kohen HaGadol's* faith in the immediacy of God. My faith is so less certain. Though I speak with God, I rarely feel the fear and trepidation identified with a concrete faith. And yet, on Yom Kippur, when I read of the *Kohen HaGadol*, I feel connected. I, too, am a servant of the people and of God. Our communal services are a bridge to God, too, a bridge to renewal as a New Year begins. 

Priestly Stories: Why Not all Hierarchies are Harmful

JANE KANAREK

When the midwives of the Exodus story, in defiance of Pharaoh's order to kill all the male children, instead help the women to give birth, the Torah declares: "And because the midwives feared God [rather than Pharaoh], God made for them houses (*batim*)."

(Exodus 1:21) Rabbinic interpretation suggests that the word "houses" refers to dynasties. Because the midwives feared the divine and saved the children, these women gave birth to whole dynasties! According to the Babylonian Talmud (Sotah 11b), the midwives were not, in fact, Egyptian women, but rather Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Aaron and Moses. And the dynasties that these women produced were either those of the priesthood — both priests and levites — or those of kingship, even messianic kingship. Two sages, Rav and Shmuel, debate which dynasties were born to Yocheved and Miriam. One sage (it is not clear who) proposes that Yocheved is given the reward of priestly dynasties as the mother of Aaron and Moses. The other sage proposes that the reward is kingship: Miriam is an ancestor of David and thus progenitor of the messianic line. The Talmud never resolves this debate, leaving us with a picture of both Yocheved and Miriam as the ancestors of our ancient hierarchies of status: of priest (*Kohen*), Levite (*Levi*), and Israel (*Yisrael*), and of king and commoner.

One of the most frequent ways in which we mark and remember the ongoing hierarchy of *Kohen*, *Levi*, and *Yisrael* is during the Shabbat and weekday Torah service through the giving of *aliyot*, where the first two blessings are reserved for, respectively, priest and levite. Communities committed to egalitarian

worship, where all adult Jews count toward the required ten of a prayer quorum (*minyan*), have responded to this hierarchy in three ways: 1) They have kept the status quo and given the first two *aliyot* only to male descendants of priests and Levites; 2) They have retained the first two *aliyot* for *Kohenim* and *Levi'im* but included females within the category of those eligible for these *aliyot*; 3) They have made the first two *aliyot* available to all adult Jews, regardless of status. In other words, while some communities choose to retain this ancient hierarchy, others have chosen to extend egalitarianism beyond gender to hierarchies of status.

While I believe that hierarchies of gender are damaging, I do not believe that in the case of synagogue ritual, the hierarchy of priest, Levite, and Israel has the ability to harm.

I am a feminist Jew with a deep belief in gender equality, and yet, in the case of this hierarchy of status, I remain committed to retaining its markers within the synagogue liturgy, both in *aliyot* to the Torah and in *dukhenen*, the priestly recital of blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 during the *Amidah* (the "standing" prayer). I do ask, though, that these privileges of blessing be extended to women. While I believe that hierarchies of gender are damaging, I do not believe that in the case of synagogue ritual, the hierarchy of priest, Levite, and Israel has the ability to harm. *Aliyot* are still open to all, and while inside the synagogue only priests *dukhen*, at all other times everyone else may recite these

continued on next page

Rabbi Jane Kanarek is assistant professor of rabbinics and associate dean of academic development and advising at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass.



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Upcoming

October 2013

The Meanings of the Kotel

- **Aryeh Cohen, Bonna Devora Haberman, Pnina Lahav, & Leah Aharoni** on Women of the Wall
- **Ellen Dreyfus** on the fetishization of the Kotel
- **Nigel Savage, Misha'el Zion, Naomi Less, Ruhama Weiss, Becky Rolnick, & Lawrence Bush** on what makes something "holy"
- **Sara Hirschhorn** on changing American Jewish attitudes to the Kotel
- **Ben Lynfield** on the Mugrabi Quarter
- **Alona Nitzan-Shifan** on the architecture of the Kotel Plaza
- **Motti Golani** on the Kotel before 1967
- **Joshua Schwartz** on the archeology of the Kotel
- **Hillel Cohen** on Jews and Muslims at the Kotel
- **Yossi Klein-Halevi** on the Kotel as the heart of Jerusalem
- **Arieh Saposnik** on Jewish symbols
- **Moshe Sokolow** on the Kotel in rabbinic literature
- **Gannit Ankori** curates images of the Kotel
- **Mahdi Kleibo** on a Palestinian view of the Kotel

same words as blessing. I find these simple acts that recall ancient Temple ritual to be ritually powerful. Increasingly, too, I also find a disturbing sense of loss in erasing this hierarchy from the synagogue, loss not only of Temple memory but also of our long-standing stories about women — in this case, the midwives who defied Pharaoh.

As the tale from tractate Sotah teaches, priests and Levites stand in the line of Yocheved. Thus, when a priest or Levite takes one of the first two *aliyot* or a priest recites the priestly blessing, she or he does so as a descendant of Yocheved. These rituals act not only as memories of the Temple service, but also as memories of Yocheved's defiance of Pharaoh's order —

the beginning of liberation from slavery — and her divine reward.

Paradoxically, though, on Yom Kippur, when we retell the atonement ritual of the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) in the *Avodah* service, any adult Jew may act as prayer leader and recall the words of the ancient *Kohen*. In other words, while most of the time only those in the priestly line act as priests, on this one particular day, in a service where one would expect to demand a priest as leader, all Jews have the potential to act *as if* they are descended from Yocheved, mother of Aaron, the first *Kohen Gadol*.

In choosing to keep this one hierarchy as well as to recite the *Avodah* service, I also choose to tell the story of Yocheved and her courage. 📖

Recovering a Priestly View of Repentance

LOUIS E. NEWMAN

We all know what repentance is and what it demands of us. We must take full responsibility for our wrongdoing. We must turn toward those we have harmed in order to apologize, seek forgiveness, and repair the damage we have done. We must turn inward, engaging in a process of soul-reckoning, and then resolve to do better in the future. And we must demonstrate through our actions that we have truly changed. None of this is easy, of course, but neither is it mysterious.

This process of repentance has its roots in the teachings of the prophets, who repeatedly admonished Israel to "turn from" its transgressions and "turn back" to God and a righteous life.

*"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
For you have fallen because of your sin.
Take words with you
And return to the Lord." (Hosea 14:2-3)*
*"Is it my desire that a wicked man shall die?" asks the Lord God.
"It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live." (Ezekiel 18:23)*

For the prophets, and the rabbis who followed them, the essence of *teshuvah* was this act of "turning," re-orienting ourselves morally by distancing ourselves from our transgressions and drawing closer to God. It is a profoundly personal and interpersonal process of moral transformation.

But there is another model of expiation for our transgressions, rooted in the priestly cult, that we tend to overlook. It is recounted most dramatically during *Musaf* on Yom Kippur.

"Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the

head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness."
(Leviticus 16:12-22)

For the ancient priests, such rituals, together with an elaborate system of sin offerings, literally purged the people of their transgressions, giving them a clean slate for the coming year.

What possible relevance could these ancient sacrificial rites have for us today? Surely the prophetic/rabbinic view of repentance, with its emphasis on soul-searching and repairing relationships, is more in keeping with our contemporary moral outlook.

I want to suggest, however, that there is more wisdom in these priestly rituals than we might at first suppose. For the priests, sin represents a stain on our souls. Transgressions are not simply missteps; they penetrate to the very core of our being. When we sin, we symbolically forfeit our place within the holy community of Israel and must redeem ourselves by ritually reaffirming our commitment to God. No simple apology will suffice. In an age when most Jews are allergic to the very word "sin" ("isn't that a Christian concept?"), the priests remind us that sin is real — tangible and pervasive.

Atonement, then, is a matter of purifying us

of the stain that we leave on our souls each time we transgress. And nothing purifies as palpably as the fire on the altar. When the sacrificial animal is slaughtered and burned to ashes, it symbolizes the sin being consumed in fire and turned to smoke. When the goat is sent off into the wilderness, the people are released from the burden of their sins, which have now been physically removed from the community. These ritual gestures powerfully convey our determination to purge sin from our midst.

Finally, the priestly rites remind us that sin is a communal issue that calls for a communal response. Of course, the liturgy of the High Holidays makes this point with its repetition of the formula “for the sins that *we* have sinned. ...” The priests convey this by confessing the sins of the whole people, transferring them to the goat and sending them off. And this must be done even though, presumably,

individual Israelites have been bringing their sin offerings throughout the year. As a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” Israel must engage in an act of communal expiation and so set itself right again with God. “For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord.” (Leviticus 16:30)

The rabbis were wise, then, to remind us, however briefly, of these priestly rituals each Yom Kippur. They reinforce the fact that sinfulness is a tangible force in our lives that must be removed through a powerful set of communal rituals so that we can be cleansed as we enter a New Year. In combination with the prophetic view of repentance as “turning,” this priestly view of repentance as purification may yet inspire us to take our transgressions — and the removal of them — with the seriousness that they deserve. 



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Louis E. Newman is the John M. and Elizabeth W. Musser Professor of Religious Studies, as well as associate dean and director of advising at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. He is the author of several books on Jewish ethics — most recently, *Repentance: The Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah* (Jewish Lights, 2010).

Why Not Skip the Avodah? Finding Our History in a Prayer

NAFTALI S. COHN

Why not skip it?” This is a question we might ask ourselves about the Yom Kippur prayer known as the *Avodah*. It is written in difficult language, read in a rushed manner, and about a topic that is very far from our experience: ancient animal sacrifices.

But if we read the story as a window into the history of our people after the Temple’s destruction by the Romans in 70 CE, we can provide meaning to this seemingly vestigial part of our service. The prayer that we read today has its roots in the text of the Mishnah, created by the early rabbis roughly a century after the Temple’s destruction. And these rabbis had their own unique vision of what the ceremony was and what it meant.

To recognize where the rabbis innovated, we must begin with the original biblical command to perform the Yom Kippur sacrifices. In Leviticus 16, the day’s proceedings center on three sacrifices that “purge” impurity and sin from the sacred spaces and “carry off” the sins of the people. Such effects were achieved by a series of ritual actions with the animals and their blood: the High Priest would draw lots over two he-goats, slaughter a bull and one he-goat, enter into the innermost sanctum in

a cloud of incense smoke, sprinkle sacrificial blood on the ark-cover and on the altar, and send off the he-goat designated “for Azazel” into the wilderness. These concrete physical acts would create profound metaphysical consequences: the cleansing and renewal of the sacred spaces and of the people.

Moving ahead a number of centuries to the period after the Temple’s destruction, the rabbis retained the rudiments of the biblical account, but retold the story in a way that changed the nature and emphasis of the ritual quite radically. Most prominently, they treated the rite not as one performed only by a handful of priests working in seclusion, as in the Bible, but one witnessed by the entire people of Israel. According to Mishnah *Yoma* 1:8, there was such a large crowd present for the events of the day that they “filled the Temple courtyard even before cock’s-crow arrived.”

The participation of the gathered people was also integral to the day’s proceedings. In the Bible, the High Priest simply draws lots over the he-goats. In the Mishnah, the High Priest lifts up the lot marked “for the Lord” and publicly announces the result (*Yoma* 4:1) so that the people see and hear it. Similarly,

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Naftali S. Cohn is associate professor of religion and graduate program director at Concordia University in Montreal. His book, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis*, was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2012.

where the Bible briefly mentions a confession over the scapegoat, the Mishnah develops specific public declarations of sin over each of the animals and adds that the people responded in each instance with a rousing utterance of their own: “*Barukh shem kvod malkhuto l’olam va’ed*,” “Blessed is the name of the glory of His kingdom for ever and ever.” (Ezekiel 3:12)

These mishnaic passages point to an additional key element in the rabbinic version of the Yom Kippur ritual: the spoken word. As part of the ceremony, the High Priest, those assisting him, and the people, made very specific proclamations not mentioned in earlier sources — the lot’s outcome, the confessions, and the verse from Ezekiel.

The revisions the rabbis made to the rite not only shifted the nature of the rituals but also inserted key players into the ceremony. In *Yoma*, Chapter 1, specially appointed elders of the Great Court were in charge of instructing the High Priest in the procedure of the day and of ensuring that he did it correctly. These members of the Great Court had authority over the way the rituals were carried out. Since no

contemporaneous sources mention any legal institution with such a power on Yom Kippur or at other times, this appears to be a rabbinic invention.

By placing the court elders, whom they considered to be their predecessors, front and center in their story about the Temple past, the rabbis subtly validated their own vision for ritual practice in the past and in their own time. They suggested that practices utilizing speech and centering on the participation and experience of the community — practices determined by rabbis — are the proper way of celebrating the day.

The story of the Yom Kippur *Avodah* retold in our liturgy is worth reading because it helps us understand the moment in Jewish history when the rabbis re-envisioned Jewish tradition for an era with no Temple. Further, when we come together as a community to recite the *Avodah*, we reenact the flourishing of ritual life after the destruction and, at the same time, add ourselves to the larger stream of Jewish religious history. These are good reasons, I think, not to skip it. 

Service-Learning: An Exchange of Letters

“Service,” one of the translations for the word “avodah,” has become an increasingly important method of engaging young Jews in the Jewish community. Service-learning trips — inside the U.S. or, frequently, overseas — are sponsored by organizations seeking to expose young adults and others to volunteerism in a Jewish context in order to build Jewish identity and a passion for helping others. In the following exchange of letters, Rabbis Will Berkovitz and Danya Ruttenberg, who have organized and staffed numerous service-learning trips, reflect on the effectiveness of these costly programs.

Dear Will,

I have a (not very shocking) confession to make: I’ve had very mixed experiences as both a participant and a staff member on service learning trips. On the one hand, these trips offer a fantastic opportunity for participants to witness poverty, systemic oppression, and suffering firsthand — to become educated about possible solutions and serious advocates for change when they return home. When run well, the trips can create opportunities to connect more deeply with Jewish tradition and even, theoretically, to encounter God through the understanding of our obligations to one another, *ben adam l’haveiro*.

However, too many of these service-learning trips fall short of this ideal. Too many are billed as a chance to have fun in a “cool” place. Even more important, many of the trips are staffed

by people who lack the tools and training to help participants unpack new and challenging experiences and connect them to Judaism in a way that has meaning and depth. No matter how good a stock curriculum is, without an educator who knows what she or he is doing, it will be insufficient. And the stakes are high; organizations don’t invest huge sums of money to send young people abroad because nobody in the destination country can paint a gym or build a house.

The concept of service learning is that the experience transforms the participants and turns them into passionate activists at home. But if the experience isn’t really life changing, or if people return home to shallow post-trip projects, shouldn’t we save that money and send it directly to the communities in need? How much are we actually helping those communities?

Will Berkovitz, CEO of the Jewish Family Service of Greater Seattle, has spent his career developing partnership initiatives with organizations across the United States, aiming to cultivate dedication to service through a Jewish lens. A frequent contributor to the Huffington Post, he currently lives in Seattle with his wife, Lelach, and their children, Nativ, Idan, and Ma’ayan.

Should we rethink the model? Should we look for new models? I welcome your thoughts.

B'kavod,
Danya

...

Hi Danya,

I am not that surprised by your confession. In fact, I was hoping for something a bit juicier. I have also had service experiences, both internationally and domestically, with mixed results. Several elements must converge in just the right way for Jewish service-learning experiences to be deeply impactful and possibly even transformative — particularly for the participant. When the alchemy is off, the result can be at best mediocre and at worst detrimental. I may be an idealist, but I believe we can continue to refine the positive outcomes, which vastly outweigh the negative ones. As you allude to, you need to have the right people around the table asking the right questions from the outset. By the outset, I mean from site selection to promotion, from application to orientation.

Jewish service-learning experiences aren't trips to Cancun or even New Orleans. My skin crawled when I read your all too true comment, "Too many are billed as a chance to have fun in a 'cool' place." It makes me think of the "Onion" headline, "Alternative Spring Break Devolves Into Real Spring Break," above a photo of beer cans, a passed-out college student, and a Habitat for Humanity sign. When they are framed in such a way, the participant's mindset becomes that of a consumer who needs to be satisfied. Instead of transformational, the attitude becomes transactional. Similarly, promising a ten-day life-changing experience can yield the same result. "My life wasn't changed, and we didn't even go to the French Quarter."

And this leads to your critique of the staffing model. Rather than sending the most seasoned and qualified staff people, often these service experiences are treated almost like a bonus or a junket for young professionals who themselves are having a first-time experience. Providing professional development opportunities for those leading the service experiences can yield very positive outcomes. A Jewish professional who is well versed in reflection and context setting, and who is taught the skills to build in the follow-up goals from the outset, has a greater likelihood of increasing impact both to the individual participant and the community the participant visited.

I understand your ambivalence, and I believe there is value in refining, rethinking, and exploring new models. But I also believe something much bigger is built than a home when people from different cultures work side-by-side together. And it doesn't matter if they are moving bricks or painting a wall. Here's my question to you: Do you believe we should abandon Jewish service experiences altogether, or just the international trips? It sounds as though you have ideas about different models. What do you have in mind? I have been wrestling with the nature of the "J" in Jewish service-learning, and I welcome your ideas.

Be well,
Will

...

Hi Will,

While I agree that there can be a tremendous value in these experiences, I also think that the people providing these trips need to ask some tough questions about the trips' goals and efficacy. Some organizations are retooling their logistics and vision: American Jewish World Service, for example, has gone through

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Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, a Sh'ma Advisory Board member, is the author of *Surprised by God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion* (Beacon Press), which was nominated for the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature. She served as editor of *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism* (NYU Press) and four other anthologies. Ruttenberg served as a campus rabbi at Tufts and Northwestern universities. Currently, she is a rabbinic consultant to several organizations. More information can be found at danyaruttenberg.net.



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Address all **editorial correspondence** to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 1368, Menlo Park, CA 94026, or E-mail: Sberrin@shma.com.

For all **Web-related inquiries**, contact Robert J. Saferstein: Rsafenstein@shma.com.

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such a process and has decided to end some of its service trips in favor of focusing, in the future, on key leadership populations such as rabbis, educators, and lay leaders. The hope, I imagine, is that this will increase the likelihood of participants being more influential upon return. I think all trip organizers need to ask themselves: What kind of change on the ground, and how much of it, makes this time-, staff-, and resource-intensive project worthwhile? Are we only measuring success using hard-to-measure, if important, intangibles — such as the depth of the cultural exchange, the transformational nature of the conversations, the possibility that

These experiences are visceral, gritty, and complicated. And it is often when they are troubling and disruptive that they become transformative. People get involved with what they can see, touch and feel for themselves, not what others tell them.

the things learned on the trip may have reverberations later on in participants' lives — as an index? If so, how do we know if we're achieving our goals? Of course the impact on hearts and minds is crucial to this work, but if our ultimate goal is indeed social justice, I think we

also need to be adamant about using these significant resources for concrete, measurable, and profound good.

To answer your question, I do ask harder questions concerning international trips. The formidable cost of plane tickets alone demands real accountability. There are certainly plenty of ways for people to face down poverty and suffering, to be of service and/or to create transformative, cross-cultural relationships even in their backyard — relationships that might continue even after the ten days of immersion. While I see the unique opportunities in long-distance trips, I think that, when we offer them, we need to be more exacting in our vision and evaluation.

You asked about the “J” in Jewish service, and it’s a great question. Genuinely Jewish trips must offer something one couldn’t find on a secular American trip. In order for an experience to be authentically Jewish, there must be more than just a Maimonides text thrown into discussion sessions. We need to not be afraid of God-language or of engaging with the holy, rather than sticking to the safety of a secularized “*tikkun olam*” handle, and we need to help people understand their questions and wrestlings about what they experience on the trip from within the talmudic tradition. What do you think? And what are your thoughts on service-learning trips to Israel — including those that complicate a simplistic narrative? What should our vision for the future look like?

B’kavod,
Danya

...

Hi Danya.

While we should strive for the ideal, we shouldn’t let that paralyze us. I understand that the costs of these trips are formidable (and, as an aside, personally, I don’t believe that service-learning flights should be subsidized), and if people were involved in their local communities, there would be a greater possibility of sustained relationships. But in the quest for social justice, we need to start where people are and to push, prod, and challenge. If that means an expensive flight — even if the funds could serve the local community better — so be it. I suspect it is very rare that an individual will say, “I’ll forgo my experience and send my money directly to the community.”

The experience of witnessing poverty and struggling with the question of the value of flying

Discussion Guide

1. How does Judaism support the notion of “calling” — that is, how do we draw on our own talents and strengths to be of “service” to our selves, our families, our communities, and the world?
2. “Avodah” means “work,” “prayer,” and “service.” How does the building of the *mishkan*, the tabernacle, become emblematic of “work” and “service” to God? And how does that service to God inform and challenge our contemporary understanding of freedom?
3. What does it mean to pray, as we do in the Yom Kippur *Musaf*, for the restoration of sacrifices and Temple worship, when most of us don’t really want them re-instituted?
4. The *Avodah* service is recited by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies. How does this historical hierarchy serve in the dramatic moment of our liturgy? How do you wrestle with hierarchies of holiness (such as *aliyot* for *Kohen*, *Levi*, and *Yisrael*) in your community?
5. When we historicize our difficult liturgy, do we diminish its power? How might we get closer to the texture, drama, and power of some of our more difficult prayers?
6. Sometimes a New Year provides opportunities to “try on” a new behavior. What might you experiment with this year?

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- Prayer and the Use of Multiple Intelligences

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across the planet or the country to do a service project for a week can and should not be sanitized or overly intellectualized. These experiences are visceral, gritty, and complicated. And it is often when they are troubling and disruptive that they become transformative. People get involved with what they can see, touch, and feel for themselves, not what others tell them. Moses didn't take action when he was standing on the balcony watching the people toiling; he had to go down to the street to feel the indignity of the slaves. And if he hadn't tried to help, he would never have learned that the root of the problem was Pharaoh. Similarly, participants need to go through a process to fully understand the underlying systemic issues. They may start by digging a hole, but that is not where it ends. And even if we haven't measured the results, it doesn't mean that "profound good" hasn't happened.

These experiences should not be for an elite few, but rather for anyone whose "heart moves them," and who is willing to take the experience seriously. Many people, myself included, would not be working for social change if it were not for an international service-learning experience.

Regarding service-learning trips to Israel, they have great potential. Repair the World just conducted a study that demonstrated their impact. As a people, we need to learn how to live in the gray area and stop pretending that the world is black or white.

Be well,
Will



Jessica Bonn, a practicing psychotherapist in Jerusalem, lives in a cozy household of six where she aims to recreate the pluralism of her youth in Habonim: Bialik before meals and *birkat hamazon* as a complementary course of blessing.

Abram Sterne is a clinical child psychologist in private practice in Silver Spring, Md. He moved recently from Jerusalem, where he lived with his family for several years. See abramsterne.com for more information.

Rabbi **Salomon Gruenwald**, associate rabbi of Congregation Hebrew Educational Alliance in Denver, Colo., was ordained in 2008 by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in Los Angeles. In 2011, Gruenwald launched JConnect-Denver, an innovative program to engage Jewish adults in their 20s and 30s.

Rabbi **Yechiel Hoffman** is the director of youth learning and engagement for Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles. A co-founder of JEDLAB, he is a doctoral candidate in education at Northeastern University studying network-learning.

For whom are the trees planted? For whom the fruit and the shade?

Who is deserving of the fairest fruit produced by man's creative spirit in every land?

Do we dare to be extraordinary? Does Israel dare to be different from other nations and go beyond the murkiness of other countries both east and west?

That seems to be the call of Yom Kippur. Our *avodah*, our work, is a call to travel further from the mundane, and in that journey to relive the majesty and splendor of our faith and hopes.

We have a choice, in the words of T. S. Elliot's "The Love Story of J. Alfred Prufrock," to measure out our lives with coffee spoons or to dare to disturb the universe. Yom Kippur is a moment each year for us to grasp at such opportunities for meaning and to ask questions that move worlds. That is the purpose of the *Avodah* service: The High Priest lifts us up so that we will not be found wanting under the scrutiny of God's gaze.

To surrender to the power of prayer and devotion, to dare to change the order of worlds through our desire to do and mean real things, to make a difference in our lives —these are the prayers of Bialik and the pious alike. — **Abram Sterne**

American Judaism in the latter half of the 20th century distanced itself from those aspects of the tradition that seemed antiquated. Many approached prayer and ritual with academic rationalism and removed or downplayed references to the Temple and its sacrifices. Much of this change was necessary in order to speak to Jews living in the modern world. But something was also lost along the way.

The scene painted by the *Avodah* service may make us squeamish as moderns, but the Yom Kippur service in the Temple must have been powerful and moving for those who experienced it. The dramatic confessions of the High Priest, the pageantry of sending our sins away on the goat to Azazel, the mystical

enchantment of hearing God's ineffable name, the sensation and pathos of bowing low to the ground — all of these elements had to touch something very deep.

Today, Jews are expressing a longing for a new sort of *Mikdash* — one grounded in tradition and open

to creativity. We seek an experienced and embodied Judaism that speaks to our modern sensibilities but also cuts deep into our souls and our need for what the *Avodah* service provided — renewal (*teshuvah*) and rebirth (*kapparah*). — **Salomon Gruenwald**

How do we value human creativity in the form of *avodah*, understood as work, worship, and service, in contrast to *melakhah*, understood as creative activity? In the two narratives of human creation, the Torah reveals the purpose of human creativity. In the first, after six days of creation, God forms humans to emulate God's powers of *melakhah*. In the second narrative, God forms humans to complete a world that lacks a person to engage in *avodah* with the formed earth. How does the human, created to creatively act, differ from the human intended to work, worship, and serve the world?

The answer lies between these two narratives, when God rests. Like God, we rest on Shabbat — embracing *avodah*, yet desisting from *melakhah*. Through *havdalah*, we distinguish between our creative capacity to be engaged in creating something in its complete form (*melakhah*) and the creative engagement in process (*avodah*). While *melakhah* births a moment of creation into the world, *avodah* continuously creates for the world. *Avodah* fulfills the human desire to find purpose through experiencing the world. Yearning to connect with

our selves, others, and God, *avodah*, as a continuous creative encounter with the world, offers a means to this journey. Let us learn not only to produce but also to work within worship, and to serve in the garden of God's creation.

— **Yechiel Hoffman**

Who in the garden planted trees?
For fruit and shade, of all species.
For fruit and shade, of all species.
And in the fields, grain did seed?

To whom our thanks?
To whom our blessing?
To 'avodah' and to 'melakhah.'

— Hayyim Nahman Bialik,
"Shir Ha-Avodah ve-ha-Melakhah," 1932

"The windows of this house will be open
on every side, that the fairest fruit produced
by man's creative spirit in every land
and every age may enter."

— from a speech by Bialik at the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the Hebrew University, 1925

The ecstatic superlatives of the Yom Kippur *musaf piyyut*, "Mareh Kohen" (the Kohen's Appearance), which describe the splendor of the High Priest as he emerged from the *Avodah* service alive and unscathed, conveys the relief of an entire people that has escaped death. The Temple service, in particular the *Avodah* ritual, was the vehicle for Jewish continuity. And when the Temple was destroyed, memory replaced it.

Unlike the handful of modern literalists who dream of a Third Temple on Mount Moriah, Bialik, the self-proclaimed draftsman for the perpetuation of Jewish culture, seems to have envisioned a Third Temple just one peak over, on Mount Scopus. His speech at the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the Hebrew University is rife with Temple imagery; he refers to the imagined structure as a "house" to which the masses will throng bearing the "fairest fruit," the *bikkurim*. Bialik envisioned this Temple as open to "every land," recalling "a house of prayer for all the nations." (Isaiah 56:7) Perhaps Bialik, in his famous chorus, nods to the High Priest, with his words: "To whom our thanks? To whom our blessing? To 'avodah' and to 'melakhah.'" How might we reinterpret specific elements of the *Avodah* — "High Priest," "confession," "goat for Azazel" — in keeping with Bialik's modern incarnation of a Temple that integrates particular and universal, tradition and renewal?

— **Jessica Bonn**

Sh'ma invites a plurality of voices to engage with matters critical to contemporary Judaism. We aim to inspire Jews and fellow travelers to think deeply, act responsibly, and better our communities.

Who are Sh'ma Readers?

"They are deeply committed to Jewish tradition and Jewish continuity; spiritually curious and at times adventurous; at home, at least to some extent, with the world of Jewish texts and the texture of Jewish rituals; appreciative of the many genuine intellectual, ethical, and political benefits of secular modernity though not unaware of its fraught relationship with Jewish life; people for whom their Jewish identity is a vital component in an ongoing process of self-creation and expression by the light of their understanding of morals, community, and spirituality, a process they share with other families of humanity, and with concerned individuals everywhere."

Professor Yehudah Mirsky, Brandeis University Israel Center

Our Vision

Each month, *Sh'ma* creates a "conversation" in print, digital, and online forms that bring together an array of voices around a single theme. These voices cross the spectrum of Judaism — secular and religious, communal and non-partisan, engaged and striving — and expose readers to challenging, sometimes conflicting ideas. We are guided in this approach by the wisdom of *elu v' elu*, both these and also these are the words of God. We raise relevant questions thoughtfully and wrestle lovingly with Jewish concerns as we attempt to navigate the intellectual, communal, and spiritual challenges of contemporary Judaism. Our focus is on ideas — their complexity and range, and how they inform action. *Sh'ma* hosts intelligent and creative conversations that reside outside of any particular institution. Our readers turn to *Sh'ma* to find what they cannot find elsewhere — concise, accessible, informative, and intelligent discussion and argumentation. At the intersection of tradition and change, *Sh'ma* helps readers confront modernity with a deep respect for Jewish values and accumulated wisdom, bringing to bear the richness of Jewish sources, texts, philosophy, and experience.

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Ethics continued from page 24

It asks: What is "revere" and what is "honor"? Again, honor ensures that the needs of the elder are met, and reverence — the child "must neither stand in his [the father's] place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him" — suggests that we respect our parents' wishes without contradiction, allowing them to make their own decisions whenever possible.

Though I could have launched this series on parenting with a column on babies or children — there is no shortage of topics that address ethical questions in child rearing — I chose instead to focus on the other end of the spectrum. It is often our experience of being the child that informs our own parenting — learning through example (or counter example) how to love, nurture, be gentle and forceful, set limits and boundaries, listen and hear, speak with and not at, stand close or lean away. We don't learn *only* from our parents, of course, but regardless of how much we try to distinguish ourselves from them, the imprint is noticeable. And we know that our parenting leaves a similar residue in our children. This past year I've watched my daughter become a mother, I've been struck by the easy assimilation of what she carries forward from my mothering instincts and behaviors — and, no doubt, what she's discarded.

Over the next months, among the questions we will explore are:

- Is it ethical for parents to tell their children something they don't believe?
- How do we negotiate the line between respect for authority and critical thinking? How do parents teach children about obedience and loyalty and yet acknowledge bad systems, or evil?
- Is it ethical for parents to read their children's private writings in an effort to "protect" them?
- How do parents weigh the decision about vaccinating children?
- What are the limits of "helping" our children with their homework? With their college applications?
- Is it ethical for parents to lie on their children's behalf?
- How much does a parent contemplating a personal change that will severely test or possibly dissolve the family (for example, divorce or a gender identity transition) need to take into consideration his or her children?
- How do we weigh decisions about eating in the non-kosher or less strictly kosher or even more kosher homes of our grown children or parents (or parents-in-law)?
- What ethical questions are raised if parents decide to conceive another child because his or her bone marrow could be a match for and save the life of their older child?

Visit our ethics page on shma.com to raise additional questions, and to join the conversation and share your own experiences and observations about how you have understood your ethical responsibilities as a parent. 

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Sh'ma | שמע Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of parenting. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our interpretive tradition teach us about the multidimensional understandings of family and the ethical questions that are raised as parents take on parenting with serious reflection. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Susan Berrin, the editor of *Sh'ma*, is also editor of two anthologies, *A Heart of Wisdom: Making the Jewish Journey from Midlife Through the Elder Years* (Jewish Lights) and *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology* (Jason Aronson).

Learning to Parent

SUSAN BERRIN

Many of us, fortunate to become parents, do our best to raise happy, independent, and emotionally and physically healthy children. This year, on the back page of each issue, we will be exploring the ethical obligations of parenting. We define parenting broadly: parenting children from birth through their adulthood, and what feels like “parenting” when we care for our elder parents as they age and require a different kind of filial attention. We define ethics broadly as well: We’ll look at the moral dimensions of parenting and the array of values that are tested as parents coach their child developmentally through life’s challenges.

Over the course of ten columns, writers will explore Jewish texts and traditions and imagine creatively how to address the questions parents face about the day-to-day practicalities of life as well as the big existential questions we want to share with our children.

My husband and I have five children; three are my biological children, and my husband brought two into our marriage. Now in their 20s and 30s, these independent and interdependent beings remain much in our lives, and we often find ourselves reflecting on the choices we and they make.

We also have two living parents, each in their 90s. My mother, 92, has lived alone for the past 27 years since my father died. I’m blessed, I know, because I built my life on a solid foundation of love; there was nothing equivocal about my parents’ love for me or my mother’s role as a mother. I only began to grasp that unusual upbringing in my 20s as a college student who compared notes from

childhood with other young women.

But now, life has put before me several complicated questions: Who is my mother to me? What of the term (and role) “mother” still exists in our relationship? How do I responsibly serve and respond to the glimpses of “mother-as-mother” in the context of a very old, frail, and sometimes forgetful woman? Almost a year ago, she had a fall and then a brief stay in the hospital and rehab center. On her release, her discharge team recommended that she not live alone. But my mother is happiest in her own environment, and she doesn’t have the resources for more than sporadic help (housekeeping, occasional driver for errands). Does my mother have the right to make her own decisions — even if they leave her vulnerable or at odds with professional advice? At what price happiness? At what price my clear conscience or my ease, knowing she’s safe? When do I push her to do more, and when not? At what point do my sister and I (for her or with her) veto her wishes?

Two biblical verses address the relationship of a child to her or his parents: The fifth commandment, “*Kibud av v'em*,” “Honor your father and your mother...” (Exodus 20:12) and “*Ish imo v'aviv tira'u*” “Each person shall revere his mother and father.” (Leviticus 19:3) Why the two commandments? One teaches to honor and the other to revere; one teaches us a behavior and the other an attitude. Not all of us have parents we can revere, but — according to Jewish teachings — we must still honor them and attend to their needs. A passage in BT Kiddushin (31b) helps with this distinction.

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