

עשרת ימי תשובה

ASERET Y'MEI T'SHUVAH

TEN DAYS OF RETURN

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah



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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has ensured that 2020 has been an extraordinary year so far, and now as we arrive at the Jewish New Year of 5781, we find ourselves having to face the reality that we are not gathering together as a congregation in the synagogue.

I decided to create this booklet for *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, the 'ten days of return', because I was aware that since the High Holy Days services will be held online, they will not be accessible to those who do not have the requisite technology.

Meanwhile, I will be retiring at the end of April 2021, and so these are my last High Holy Day services as rabbi of the congregation.

When I was thinking about what to put into this booklet, it was obvious that it would include my sermons for *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Then it occurred to me that it might be helpful to offer reflections for the days in between the New Year and the Day of Atonement, since the whole period from *Rosh Ha-Shanah* through *Yom Kippur* constitute *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*.

Considering the eight days 'between', my mind turned to key liturgical refrains that mark out these sacred days, all of which, come in threes. I decided to explore them as follows:

- * *T'ki'ah, T'ruah, Sh'varim* – the three different sounds of the *Shofar* (2nd *Tishri*)
- * *Malchuyyot, Zichronot, Shofarot* – Sovereignty, Remembrances and Blastings – the themes of the three *Shofar* blowing sequences in the *Musaf* ('Additional') service on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (3rd, 4th, 5th *Tishri*)
- * *T'shuvah, T'fillah, Tz'dakah*, Return, Prayer, Acts of Justice – the three core features of *aseret y'mei t'shuvah* that are proclaimed in the *K'dushah*, the blessing of 'Holiness' in the *Amidah*, the central prayer of Jewish liturgy during the *Mussaf* service (6th, 7th, 8th *Tishri*)

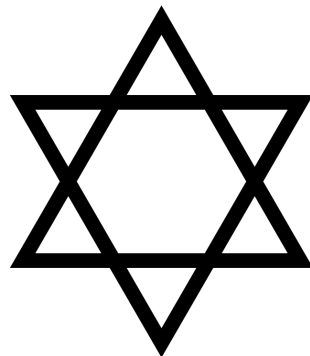
- * *S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kappeir lanu* – 'Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement' – the threefold refrain that accompanies the *Al Cheit*, the confession of our failings and misdeeds on *Yom Kippur* (9th *Tishri*)

Some very significant Jewish teachings take the form of threes. We might think of each set of three as an equilateral triangle, recalling that when two triangles intersect, they form a *Magein David*, the Shield of David.

Whether you mark the sacred days at home or online, or both, I hope you find this booklet helpful on your journey towards renewal.

L'shanah tovah!

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah



1st Tishri

Erev Rosh Ha-Shanah: Entering a New Year as the Coronavirus Crisis Continues

The New Year has dawned and we are still living in this coronavirus crisis that began to overwhelm our lives back in February. And we don't know when it will end. So, we are marking *Erev Rosh Ha-Shanah* this year, not in the *shul* sanctuary, with the congregation gathered together, but on a technological online marvel called Zoom.

We are not together in physical space, but as Jews in the Diaspora have done for millennia, we are sharing a long sacred moment in time. And in the course of 24 hours, we will also share this sacred day with Jews across the globe.

Why are we choosing to share this moment? Each of us will have our own personal answer to that question. The New Year beckons and, perhaps, we are fearful and hopeful in equal measure. Is the coronavirus on the wane or will there be a new spike in the late autumn? Of course, we don't know and not knowing is the heart of the issue as we face each New Year. We can never know what lies ahead – all we know is what lies behind us and what is happening right now. But this sacred moment gives us pause for thought and reflection.

Of course, there are some things we do know – albeit not with 100% certainty. The year is marked not only by festivals and commemorative dates in the calendar, but by birthdays, anniversaries and milestones in our own lives and in the lives of our loved ones. As I look ahead, I know that I will be retiring at the end of April, after serving this congregation for over 20 years – and 32 years after my ordination as a rabbi. So much has changed at Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue since I first began working here in December 2000. We have been on a journey together as a community – a journey of exploration that has involved expanding our horizons and becoming more inclusive, so that the congregation is more diverse and also more focused on our shared progressive values. I am proud of what we have achieved together.

Twenty years ago, at *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, shortly after I had been appointed to the post – but before I started working – I wrote a poem which is included in the meditations section before the *Erev Rosh Ha-Shanah* service in our Liberal Judaism High Holy Day prayer book, *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*. I would like to share it with you now because it expresses what it was like for me to make a beginning back then after a time of great trial, not knowing what lay ahead; fearful – and also hopeful:

Rosh Ha-Shanah
New Year
New moon of *Tishri*
Dawning darkly
First stars
Sparkling pathways
From the past
Into the future

Hinneini
Here I am
Standing on the threshold
Of the new year
Ready
But
Retreating

T'shuvah?
I turn back from the brink
Sarah's laughter
Ringing in my ears
New life?
New beginning?

Is it possible?
For me?
And then
In the desert
Of those questions
Hagar's eyes
Opening mine
Forcing me
To turn around again
Pressing me
To look forward
To gaze into the landscape
Beyond
To see
Wells of water
In the wilderness

Hinneini
Here I am
Standing on the threshold
Of the new year
Ready
To begin
Again.¹

In order to make a new beginning, we all need to turn around, and as we look forward, be prepared to see wells of water in the wilderness. Alongside our personal circumstances and concerns, as we stand on the threshold of a new year, we all face the wilderness of the continuing coronavirus crisis – and beyond that, the wilderness of continuing climate change, which we can only begin to address effectively if we allow ourselves to learn lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the most bewildering aspects of the pandemic has been that it has not only been a negative experience. We have all witnessed the way in which the lockdown created a much-needed *Shabbat* for the planet. We have learnt from the retreat from a 24/7 existence that we can renew our lives and renew the life of the world by ceasing from so many of the activities which we have considered essential to modern life.

¹ *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*. Liberal Judaism, London, 2003, p.

In my sermon at the end of July, I spoke about the Build Back Better movement, which is dedicated to ensuring that as the coronavirus crisis does begin to diminish, we don't go back to our old ways, but rather build together a better, more sustainable and more equal and just society. Let me remind you of the key goals of the movement:²

1. Secure the health and needs of everyone in the UK now and into the future
2. Protect and invest in our public services
3. Rebuild society with a transformative green new deal
4. Invest in people
5. Build solidarity and community across borders

Whatever our fears for the future, hopefully, our impulse to repair the world, will propel us forwards, or at least, enable us to take tentative steps that gain in momentum as we realise that the future really does depend on us, on what we do and don't do tomorrow and the day after.

Ultimately, whatever my fears, I have always felt driven forward by a sense that what each individual does or doesn't do matters and makes a difference to the world. But more than a sense of the demand for individual volition, one of the reasons I became a rabbi was because I believe that individuals can make the most difference when we work together in community. Before I decided to embark on the rabbinate, I considered joining a *kibbutz*. I had lived on one for almost eight months in 1978 -79, and Marxist that I was back then, I loved the sense of collective endeavour. But my memory of living on that left-wing *ha-shomer ha-tza'ir kibbutz* in the Western Galilee, a couple of kilometres from the Lebanese border, was that, perched on top of a hill as it was, the *kibbutz* was a bit of an island and did not have much impact on the wider society. And so, I decided that becoming a rabbi and offering spiritual leadership to a progressive congregation that was part of a wider movement, would provide the communal context for individuals to transform their lives and the lives of others. Considering, the journey we have been on as a congregation these past twenty years, I think I was right.

We have work to do in the world in the year ahead. But we must begin with ourselves and the work we need to do to repair ourselves and our relationships

² <https://www.buildbackbetteruk.org/what-we-want>

And before we even start this work, we have to recognise where we are right now. At the end of July 2008, I wrote another *Rosh Ha-Shanah* poem. Aubrey Milstein, *Zichrono livrachah*, May his memory be for blessing, a long-serving lay leader who had been a stalwart to me and to the congregation had just died³, and I felt unsettled and sensed his passing marked the end of an era. We have been more than unsettled by the coronavirus crisis. For those of us who did not go through the Second World War, we have been experiencing an unprecedented period of upheaval – and it's not yet over. I offer these lines as an acknowledgement of the place of uncertainty that we are inhabiting at this moment. May we find ways of leading ourselves and our loved ones, our community and our world, towards renewal.

Hinneini

Here I am

Here we are

Now

In this moment

The ancient beat of Life

Pulsing through us.

And yet

Not living deeply

Not being fully present

Forever rushing carelessly in-
to

Traps in the

Undergrowth—Underworld

Caught by

Complexity

Ambiguity

Uncertainty

The terrifying indifference of
Chance.

And then simply

Conjugating questions

Why me?

Why you?

Why us?

Why them?

And still

Here I am

Here we are

Now

In this moment

A new beginning

Beckons.

And let us say: Amen.

³ On 25th July 2008. Aubrey Milstein, Z"l, was born on 30th October 1921.

1st Tishri

Rosh Ha-Shanah Shacharit: Testing Times

Preparations for the High Holy Days this year began very early at the *shul*. I usually start working on my sermons for *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* in August, but this year, the continuing coronavirus crisis led to the decision that we could not gather in the synagogue for the autumn festivals, which meant that I began thinking about them in July. And then, along with my rabbinic colleagues, I started to consider how we could adapt the services for an online experience.

Having decided to create a booklet of my sermons and reflections for the days between *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* to help those who don't have access to technology to feel included, the newly elected chair of the *shul*, Louise Mordecai, had the lovely idea of putting together *Rosh Ha-shanah* packages for those not online. So, we had a special meeting of the Pastoral Care Group and agreed that the packages would include honey-cake, apples and honey, my booklet— and also a loan copy of the *machzor*, the High Holy Day prayer book if needed. The next step was to contact those who had responded to the call for volunteers at the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown. Several people baked cakes. One member made New Year cards. As a result of the efforts of a number of people, in the past week deliveries were made to congregants in the Worthing area, Brighton and Hove, Lewes, Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, Peacehaven, East Dean and Eastbourne.

The coronavirus crisis has been marked by illness and death, suffering and loss – and also by an abundance of *g'milut chasadim*, deeds of loving kindness, as people reached out to their neighbours, in particular, to the isolated and the elderly. It is usual at this sacred high-point of the Jewish year to remind ourselves of our core values and the need to repair ourselves and our relationships. The coronavirus crisis has been a living lesson in how to go about this.

The coronavirus crisis has also been and continues to be a testing time. Our resilience is being tested. Our resourcefulness, endurance, self-discipline, empathy, generosity, optimism. Our capacity to remain

hopeful in the face of uncertainty about what the future will bring is being tested. I'm using the first-person plural in the spirit of the liturgy. We are going through this together. And at the same time, each one of us, has our own particular circumstances and experiences, and is confronted with our own personal trials and tribulations and challenges. Each one of us is being tested.

In one of the *Torah* portions set aside for *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, Genesis chapter 22, known as the *Akeidah*, we read that our ancestor Abraham was tested:⁴

And it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham.
Va-y'hi achar ha-d'varim ha-eilleh v'ha-Elohim nissah et-Avraham.

'After these things' – a reference to the banishment of Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael with his mother Hagar in the previous chapter.⁵ Abraham had been tested enough one might think. But then he was confronted with the ultimate test. The text continues:

And God said to him, 'Abraham', and he said: 'Here I am' [*hinneini*]. Then God said: 'Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go for yourself to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.'

'Go for yourself' – *Lech I'cha* – the use of this expression reminds us of Abraham's first momentous journey, when together with Sarah and his household, he left his land, his kindred, and his parental home to go on a journey to a land that God promised to show him.⁶ Abraham went of his own volition back then. And he's called to do the same now. But in place of the promise of a future for his descendants, on this occasion, he was challenged to take a journey that would involve obliterating that future. The enormity of the moment and all that Abraham had already sacrificed is brought out in a 4th century *midrash*, commenting on the staggered way in which this second call to 'go for yourself' is delivered:⁷

⁴ *Va-yeira*, Gen. 22:1. Traditionally read on the second day of *Rosh Ha-Shanah*

⁵ *Va-yeira*, Gen. 21:14-21. Traditionally read on the first day of *Rosh Ha-Shanah*

⁶ *Lech I'cha*, Gen. 12: 1ff.

⁷ *B'reishit* (Gen.) *Rabbah* 39:9 and 55:7. Also: Babylonian *Talmud Sanhedrin* 89b.

God said: 'Take your son.'

Abraham replied: 'I have two sons.'

God said: 'Your only one.'

Abraham replied: 'This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother.'

God said: 'Whom you love'

Abraham replied: 'I love them both.'

God said: 'Isaac.'

Of course, Abraham loved both his sons – which made the test he was confronted with even more agonising. On the surface, Abraham's test was a test of faith; his faith in God; that God would not, ultimately, demand the sacrifice of Isaac. But the story makes it clear that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son. And so it was, when Isaac was lying bound on the altar and Abraham had raised his knife to slaughter him, that It took an urgent call to get Abraham to stop:⁸

Then the messenger of the Eternal called to him from heaven and said: 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he answered: 'Here I am.' And the messenger said: 'Do not raise your hand against the lad, or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me.'

It's a terrifying story. And as we follow it, we should ask ourselves about the mother of Isaac: Sarah. The mother who waited so long to have a child.⁹ What was it like for her to see her husband and son go off that day? Her death is recorded at the beginning of the next *parashah*.¹⁰ Did Sarah die of anxiety as she waited? The story is known as the *Akeidah*, the 'Binding' because Isaac was bound but not slaughtered. But the name confronts us just as powerfully as if Isaac had been killed by his father. We can read the story as a moral tale against the sacrifice of children. But the binding, evoking as it does the image of Isaac bound on the altar, also confronts us with questions about the way in which we are bound metaphorically, and bind others, not least, children, metaphorically, with the chords, restraints and constraints of our anxieties and fears.

⁸ *Va-yeira*, Genesis. 22:11-12.

⁹ See *Va-yeira*, Gen.18: 9-15 and 21: 1-2.

¹⁰ *Chayyei Sarah*, Gen. 23:1.

This coronavirus crisis has stimulated our anxieties and fears to an excruciating extent. It is testing our ability to resist the ways in which we tie ourselves and others into knots of anguish. And more challenging even than this, the pandemic is confronting us – at a time when our daily lives have been completely disrupted, leaving us in disarray – with the need to bind ourselves in ways that are helpful, like the routines and rhythms we create to structure our daily lives, which have become so essential as our lives have been turned upside down. Like the straps of *t'fillin*,¹¹ reminding us of our responsibility to direct ourselves to righteous action, binding can be liberating if it is enabling and life-affirming; or, to put it more bluntly, if it helps us to get out of bed each day and keep ourselves going.

This ancient story has still more to teach us for this coronavirus time. After the sacrifice of Isaac has been interrupted, we read: ¹²

Abraham raised his eyes and saw, behold there was a ram behind him caught in the thicket by its horns. So, he went and took the ram, and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Among other things, the *shofar*, the ram's horn blown at *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is a reminder of that moment, of that replacement of a ram for a son. For centuries, animals were sacrificed on the altar in successive Temples in Jerusalem. An agricultural people, our ancestors expressed their service of God by offering the fruits of their labours. A Temple has not stood for almost 2000 years, and since that time, as we read in the Babylonian Talmud, Jews have been required to offer in place of the service of the altar, the service of our hearts, that is, prayer.¹³ And more than this. We find this story in a 2nd century collection of rabbinic wisdom:¹⁴

¹¹ *T'fillin*. The black leather bands and boxes (known as 'phylacteries'). Derived from the words of the first and second paragraphs of the *Sh'ma*: 'You shall bind them as a sign upon your arm and as bands between your eyes' (Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18).

¹² *Va-yeira*, Genesis 22:13.

¹³ Babylonian *Talmud Ta'anit* 2a.

¹⁴ *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 4:5. Quoting: Hosea 6:6. This is a parallel collection to the more well-known *Pirkei Avot*, Chapters of the Sages, appended to *Mishnah*, the first rabbinic code of law, edited c.200.

Once, as Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was walking out of Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed him. Seeing the Temple in ruins, he cried, 'Woe to us this place is in ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel's sins.' Rabbi Yochanan said to him: 'My son, do not grieve, for we have another means of atonement which is no less effective.' What is it? It is deeds of loving kindness [*g'milut chasadim*], about which Scripture says: "I desire loving kindness [*chesed*] and not sacrifice."¹⁵

Deeds of loving kindness: *g'milut chasadim*. Yes, we are being tested during this coronavirus crisis; tested, above all, concerning how we treat others and the planet in which we live. At *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, we are commanded 'to listen to the voice of [the] *shofar*' – *lishmo'a kol shofar*.¹⁶ The voice of the *shofar* confronts us with urgent questions: How are we living? How are we relating to others: Within our families? Within our community? In the wider society? How are we relating to the world – to other nations and to the Earth? What are we going do to make *t'shuvah*, to turn ourselves around and make amends for all that we have done – and all that we have failed to do?

We are commanded 'to listen to the voice of the *shofar*'. But there is also another voice we must hear. The *shofar's* call to action to repair the world *out there* is also a call to repair the microworld that each of us inhabits in our individual lives, right down to the inner sanctum of our beating hearts.

Let us listen to the beating of our hearts this *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and face the uncertainties of the year ahead with courage and fortitude, determined to do what we can to renew our lives and the life of the Earth.

And let us say: Amen.

¹⁵ See also Rabbi Elazar said: Doing righteous deeds of charity is greater than offering all of the sacrifices, as it is written: 'Doing charity and justice is more desirable to the Eternal than sacrifice' (Proverbs 21:3) (Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 49b).

¹⁶ The concluding words of the blessing recited before the *shofar* is sounded. See *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*. Liberal Judaism, London, 2003, p. 140.

2nd Tishri – T'ki'ah, T'ru'ah, Sh'varim

On *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, we are commanded 'to listen to the voice of the *shofar*' – *lishmo'a kol shofar*.¹⁷ In traditional communities, 2nd Tishri is the second day of *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, and when the first day falls on *Shabbat*, the *shofar* (ram's horn) is only sounded on the second day. The reason for this is not because the *shofar* should not be sounded, but because the *shofar*-blower might inadvertently carry the *shofar*, and so break the *Shabbat* prohibition against carrying.¹⁸

The blessing speaks of 'the voice of the *shofar*', but the *shofar* has many voices: *T'ki'ah*, *T'ruah*, *Sh'varim*. *T'ki'ah* – a loud blast (*T'ki'ah G'dolah*: a 'great' loud blast). *T'ruah* – nine rapidly discharged short blasts. *Sh'varim* – three blasts delivered in a broken, undulating way. The meaning of these words partially explains the actual sounds they represent: *T'ki'ah* – from the root, *Tav-Kuf-Ayin*, to thrust, clap, give a blow, blast; *T'ruah* – from the root, *Reish-Vav-Ayin*, to raise a shout, give a blast; *Sh'varim* – from the root, *Shin-Beit-Reish*, to break.

In the *Torah*, the first day of the seventh month, which came to be known as *Tishri*, is recorded not as a new year, but as *Yom T'ru'ah*, the 'Day of Blasting'.¹⁹ The first day of the seventh month was the time of calling the community together in readiness for the tenth day of the month: The Day of Atonement; *Yom Ha-Kippurim*, as it is called in the *Torah*.²⁰ Rabbinic Judaism transformed the first day of *Tishri* into the 'new year for years',²¹ and 'the Day of Blasting' became an occasion for an entire ceremony of blasting the *shofar* during the *Musaf* ('Additional') service, chiefly as a call to *t'shuvah*, 'return'. And so, the ten days from the 1st through the 10th of *Tishri* became *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, the 'ten days of return'.²²

¹⁷ The concluding words of the blessing recited before the *shofar* is sounded. For reference, see note 16.

¹⁸ Babylonian *Talmud*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 29b.

¹⁹ Numbers 29:1 and Leviticus 23:24.

²⁰ Lev. 23:27.

²¹ *Mishnah Rosh Ha-Shanah* 1:1.

²² This designation became common in post-Talmudic times. Maimonides, Moshe ben Maimon, also known as the RaM-BaM (1135-1204) referred to 'the ten days' in *Hilchot T'shuvah* (Laws of Repentance) 2:6, in his code the *Mishneh Torah*.

The journey of *t'shuvah* is essentially a personal journey for each one of us. As we consider the different voices of the *shofar*, the ten days are an opportunity to reflect on our own voices – not in a metaphorical sense, rather in the actual sense of the different sounds we make when speaking: when we speak loudly or softly, rapidly or hesitantly; when we speak to be heard and when we speak to ourselves, when we speak at moments of joy and celebration and when we speak at times of sorrow and despair; and when we feel unable to speak.

Jewish teaching is very much focused on words – first spoken and then written. The first creation story in the Book of Genesis presents God calling the world into existence.²³ As we make our *t'shuvah* journeys, we may wish to reflect on how important words are to us – both spoken and written – and how important silence is to us. Words can be inspiring and uplifting, consoling and healing. Words can also be used like weapons. If we find the courage, we might think about when we use words constructively and when we use them destructively. Our challenge for the 2nd day of *Tishri*.



²³ Genesis 1: 3 ff.

3rd Tishri – Malchuyyot: From Judgement to Acknowledgement

The first series of *shofar* blasts on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is called *Malchuyyot*, 'Kingdoms'. The *Aleinu*, the prayer that concludes all Jewish liturgical services, was introduced by the Babylonian sages for use on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*,²⁴ when the Eternal One is perceived primarily as *melech malchei ha-m'lachim*, 'the King above the King of Kings'; 'the King of Kings' being the designation used by Assyrian and Babylonian rulers in the Ancient Near East.

The most important dimension of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* as conceived by the early rabbis is expressed by one its names: *Yom Ha-Din*, the Day of Judgement. On *Yom Ha-Din*, the Eternal Judge of human affairs, sits on His throne – and yes, the Judge is a King – and pronounces judgement on human beings. Those considered thoroughly wicked are written in the Book of Death, those considered thoroughly righteous are written in the Book of Life, and the lives of those who are neither thoroughly wicked nor thoroughly righteous hang in the balance. Only those who mend their ways and repent in the days between *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*, will be written in the Book of Life.²⁵

It is a truly awe-evoking image. For some, it is the image of the Judge sitting on His throne that compels them to attend the *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* services. For others, many of whom would not step inside a synagogue, it is a repellent image that keeps them away from connecting with Jewish communal life. As progressive Jews, who, perhaps, feel less commanded and demanded upon by an Eternal Commander, the image of God as a mighty Sovereign and Judge can be reimagined in terms that makes sense for our own lives. The voices of the *shofar* call us to reflect on our lives, to interrogate, and, yes, judge, our deeds and misdeeds. *Yom ha-Din* challenges us to examine ourselves and take steps to change.

²⁴ Jacobson, B.S., *The Weekday Siddur: An Exposition and Analysis of its Structure, Contents, Language and Ideas* (2nd ed, Sinai Pub., Tel Aviv, p.307).

²⁵ Babylonian *Talmud*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 32b.

One of the traditions associated with *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, the 'ten days of return', is to conduct *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, an accounting of ourselves in much the same way as one would go about an accounting of one's economic affairs.

So, for those who haven't done this already, on this 3rd day of *Tishri*, in the spirit of *Malchuyyot*, why not take a piece of paper, and like a profit and loss account, make a list of the good you have done in one column and the harm you have caused in another, and then reflect on ways in which you can increase the good and acknowledge the harm, and take steps to make amends.

If the either/or nature of drawing up an account doesn't speak to you, then try thinking of your actions in a threefold way in terms of what you have done that has been helpful, what has hindered, and what has harmed. The process of hindering can go either way. What we do may hinder the help we can offer someone and we can also hinder the harm we may cause someone.

Alternatively, you might simply choose to begin the process of reflecting on your actions of the past year by tackling three areas for improvement.

Cheshbon ha-nefesh: Our challenge for the 3rd day of *Tishri*.



4th *Tishri* – *Zichronot*: Remembering and Re-Membering

The second series of *shofar* blasts on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is called *Zichronot*, 'Remembrances'. One of the rabbinic names for *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is *Yom Ha-Zikaron*, 'The Day of Remembrance'. According to the *Torah*, God remembered our ancestors in their plight again and again,²⁶ and as the blessing for the *shofar* blasts of *Zichronot* puts it, the Eternal One 'remembers the covenant' - *zo-cheir ha-b'rit*²⁷ – present tense.

The present demands our presence. We, too, are called during these *yamim nora'im*, literally, 'awed days', to remember. The *Torah* exhorts us again and again: 'You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt'.²⁸ Every evening and morning, the blessing of *g'ulah*, 'redemption', after the *Sh'ma*, reminds us of our ancestors' liberation from slavery. Each *Shabbat* is, both, a 'memorial of the work of creation' – *zikaron l'ma'aseih v'reishit* – and a 'memorial of the Exodus from Egypt' – *zeicher litzi'at mitzrayim*.²⁹

So, we remember our liberation – and we also remember the persecution we have suffered: '*Zachor Amalek* Remember what Amalek did to you by the way as you were coming out of Egypt. / How he met you by the way and attacked the weakest in your rear.'³⁰

Remembering is a Jewish reflex transmuted into a liturgical refrain. But during the ten days of return, we are challenged to do another kind of remembering: to remember our own lives; to remember our deeds of the past year. It's natural to want to block out this kind of remembrance. After all, remembering can be very painful. And while we may readily access the memories of the hurt done to us, we do not so readily remember the hurts we have inflicted.

²⁶ See, e.g., *Sh'mot*, Exodus 2:24, Jeremiah 2:2, Psalm 98:3.

²⁷ *Machzor Ru'ach Chadashah*, Liberal Judaism, 2003, p. 150

²⁸ *R'eih*, Deuteronomy 16:12.

²⁹ These phrases are included in *birkat ha-yom*, 'the blessing of the day', recited as part of *kiddush* on *Erev Shabbat*. The word *zikaron* evokes a tangible memorial; every living thing is a memorial of creation. The word *zeicher* denotes a conceptual memory; we remember the Exodus because the memory has been passed on from generation to generation

³⁰ *Ki Teitzei*, Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

But in order to repair ourselves and our relationships and begin the New Year, we must remember the hurt and damage we have caused ourselves and others. How can we commit to acting differently in the future, if we haven't acknowledged how we have acted in the past?

Ultimately, remembering can engender re-membering; a bringing together of the disparate parts of ourselves, and the possibility of healing our broken relationships. But for this to happen, we have to be prepared to look back; to rake through the tangled undergrowth of the path trailing behind us. Our challenge for the 4th day of *Tishri*.



5th Tishri – Shofarot: The Call to Act

The third and final series of *shofar* blasts on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is called *Shofarot*, 'Horns.' The voices of the *shofar* thunder through the *Torah* and more broadly, the *TaNaKh*,³¹ the Hebrew Bible. Quite apart from the specific sounds of the *shofar* we are compelled to hear on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, each time the *shofar* is mentioned in the *TaNaKh*, the context is one of loud proclamation. At Sinai, 'the voice of the *shofar* grew louder and louder'.³² Chapter 58 of the Book of Isaiah, opens with the words: 'Cry aloud, do not hold back, let your voice re-sound like a *shofar*; declare to My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob, their sins'.³³ Significantly, we read this passage during the *Yom Kippur* morning service.³⁴ In the *Torah's* account of the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year following seven cycles of seven, the *shofar* was to be sounded on *Yom Kippur* to 'proclaim *d'ror*, 'freedom', throughout the land to all its inhabitants'.³⁵ There is no evidence that the Jubilee year was ever put into practice, but elsewhere in the *TaNaKh*, the *shofar* also heralds the future time of restoration: 'And it shall come to pass on that day that a great *shofar* shall be blown; and they shall come that were lost in the land of Syria, and they that were dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they shall worship the Eternal on the holy Mountain in Jerusalem'.³⁶

Above all the reasons for sounding the *shofar* on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is its role in summoning us to sit up and take notice. As Maimonides put it in his 'Laws of Repentance', the *shofar* is an alarm call, proclaiming:³⁷ 'Awake you sleepers from your sleep! Rouse yourselves, you slumberers out of your slumber! Examine your deeds, and return to God in repentance'.

³¹ *TaNaKh*: An acronym for the Hebrew Bible – which falls into three parts: *Torah* (Five Books coming now of Moses), *N'vi'im* (Prophets) and *K'tuvim* (Writings).

³² *Yitro*, Exodus 19:19.

³³ Isaiah 58:1.

³⁴ Isaiah 58 is read as the *haftarah*, the 'conclusion' of the scriptural readings on *Yom Kippur* morning. See *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*, pp.271-273.

³⁵ *B'har*, Leviticus 25:9-10.

³⁶ Isaiah 27:13.

³⁷ *Hilchot T'shuvah*, Laws of Repentance, 3:4, *Mishneh Torah*.

So, the *shofar* blasts are a call to action. A call to act in the context of our own personal lives. A call to act in the wider context of the society we inhabit and the world around us. The call is not subtle. It is urgent. Another year has passed in which poverty and inequality has continued unchecked. Another year has passed in which the voices of the persecuted and the oppressed, the vulnerable and the marginal have not been heard. Another year has passed in which the ecological crisis has deepened – albeit the early days of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown brought some respite.

The *shofar* calls each one of us to take responsibility and to play our part in whatever way we can in tackling injustice and engaging in *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. At the midpoint of the ten days of returning, let's pause and think about what we can do, what practical steps we can take to generate change and make a difference. Our challenge for the 5th day of *Tishri*.



6th Tishri – T'shuvah: Returning to Ourselves and Others

T'shuvah is the goal of *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, the 'ten days of return' that begin on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and conclude at the end of *Yom Kippur*. The word is usually translated as 'repentance', but the root *Shin-Vav-Beit* means to turn, or return.

Repentance is the purpose of *t'shuvah*, but the notion of turning and returning is more dynamic. It reminds us that the process of acknowledging our misdeeds and taking steps to make amends involves a journey.

The word 'journey' has been overused in recent years, but it really does apply to *t'shuvah*. We all know that Life is a journey from birth to death. *T'shuvah* involves recognising that we have strayed off the path of our lives, or taken a route that has led to a cul-de-sac, and that we need to turn back and return to our path. Turning back does not mean going back; we can't go back. The past is the past. We can only move forwards. However far we have strayed when we turn and move towards the path and then find it again, we discover that we are further along. We have learnt from our experiences. In making the effort to turn and return we have become more self-aware and admitted our errors and mistakes and how and why we came to lose our way.

T'shuvah doesn't just involve returning to the path of our lives, it also entails returning to ourselves and to others and rebuilding our relationships.

But none of this is easy. *T'shuvah* is elusive. If we approach it in a mechanical fashion, ticking off items on the list, we will not experience the sense of renewal it offers. *T'shuvah* requires our commitment, but not our drive. We cannot speed our way back to the path of our lives; in the awareness of our frailties, all we can do is put one foot in front of another, tentatively, and feel our way along. *T'shuvah* requires our humility.

Nevertheless, there is sense of urgency attached to *t'shuvah*. The purpose of our return is our repentance. We will not automatically be absolved on *Yom Kippur*. On the contrary, as we read in the *Mishnah*, tractate *Yoma*:³⁸

One who says: I shall sin and repent, sin and repent, they do not afford that person the opportunity to repent. [If one says]: I shall sin and *Yom Ha-Kippurim*³⁹ will atone for me, *Yom Ha-Kippurim*, does not effect atonement. For transgressions between a person and God, *Yom Ha-Kippurim* effects atonement, but for transgressions between one person and another, *Yom Ha-Kippurim* does not effect atonement, until they have appeased their friend.

As the *asoret y'mei t'shuvah* turn towards *Yom Kippur*, the need to make amends and repair our relationships becomes more pressing. Acknowledging this is our challenge on the 6th day of *Tishri*.



³⁸ *Mishnah Yoma* 8:9. The *Mishnah* is the first code of rabbinic law edited around the year 200. *Yoma* is Aramaic for 'The Day'.

³⁹ The name for *Yom Kippur* in the *Torah*. See: *Emor*, Leviticus 23:27.

7th Tishri – T'fillah: Addressing God and Ourselves

What is prayer? Some people never pray. Others only pray in desperate situations; their prayer a plea for help: Please God, please help me! Jewish prayer takes the form of liturgy, set prayers, mostly written hundreds of years ago.⁴⁰ The majority of these prayers are not actually prayers in the commonly accepted understanding of the word. Most are poems of praise to God in the form of blessing. There are blessings connected with thanksgiving, and acknowledgement of God for the gifts we enjoy that nourish us and enrich our lives, and blessings concerning actions that we are commanded to perform, like lighting candles.

Petitionary prayer is largely confined to thirteen blessings recited on weekdays in the middle of the *Amidah*, which consists of nineteen blessings all together.⁴¹ Apart from the option of adding a personal prayer to the blessing for healing, the themes of the petitionary blessings are fixed, and include requests for understanding, repentance, forgiveness, justice.

On *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the liturgy is even more extensive and includes special prayers, like *Avinu Malkeinu*, which addresses God as 'our Parent and 'our Sovereign'. The tone of these prayers is utterly supplicatory. For example, the concluding verse of *Avinu Malkeinu*:

Our Parent, our Sovereign, be gracious to us and answer us, for there is little goodness in us; treat us with justice [*tz'dakah*] and lovingkindness [*chesed*]. Save us.

⁴⁰ The rabbinic sages devised the first post-biblical prayers, but it wasn't until the 9th century that the first complete prayer book was written: *Seder Rav Amram*, the work of the head of the Babylonian Talmudic Academy of Sura at that time, Amram bar Sheshna. For an in-depth exposition of the development of Jewish prayer, see: *Jewish Liturgy. A Comprehensive History* by Ismar Elbogen. JPSA, 1993.

⁴¹ The *Amidah* (meaning, 'standing') is the central prayer of Jewish worship, traditionally recited while standing. The thirteen petitionary blessings are not recited on *Shabbat* and the festivals because it would be inappropriate to petition God while enjoying God's gifts of rest and joy. In place of the thirteen petitions, a blessing for *Shabbat* is recited. The thirteen petitions consist of six that are personal, six that are communal, and a final one, asking God to listen to our prayers.

As *Yom Kippur* approaches, the question arises, what role does prayer play in our efforts to experience atonement? Answers to this question emerge when we look at the Hebrew word for prayer, *t'fillah*. The root *Pei-Lamed-Lamed* means to intervene, interpose, arbitrate, judge, intercede. Interestingly, 'to pray', *l'hitpalleil*, is a reflexive form. Reflective forms express an action in relation to ourselves. In the context of praying, this is very significant. We assume that to pray is to address God, but *l'hitpalleil* suggests that when we pray, we also address ourselves.

If we think of prayer in terms of the root meanings of *t'fillah*, then what we are doing when we pray is interrogating ourselves. And so, to pray, *l'hitpalleil*, is to open our hearts and to acknowledge our frailties and our needs – for love, compassion, support, affirmation, forgiveness. To pray is to give thanks for our lives and all the ways in which our needs are met. To pray is to acknowledge that we have the power to shape and transform our lives. To pray is to acknowledge that in order to transform our lives, we must also be prepared to let go and move on and trust that we can renew ourselves and our relationships.

Our *t'shuvah* journeys began seven days ago. To allow ourselves to pray is to open up the possibility that we will be able to reach our destination and begin again. Our challenge for the 7th day of *Tishri*.



8th Tishri – Tz'dakah: Acting Justly

Where is the ten-day *t'shuvah* journey taking us? The obvious answer is: repentance – and so, at the end of *Yom Kippur*: forgiveness and atonement. But what is the point of our repentance? Repentance isn't an end in itself. If it were, the journey would only be from the past to the present. But Jewish teaching is concerned with the work of renewal and repair for the sake of the future. So, the goal of the journey of *t'shuvah* reaches beyond repentance, forgiveness and atonement to *tz'dakah*; to the task of practising righteousness and justice after the *yamim nora'im*, the 'awed days', are over.

Tz'dakah is usually translated as 'charity'. But the root meaning of charity, the Latin concept of *caritas*, is very different from the root meaning of *tz'dakah*. *Caritas* centres on the feelings of love that move us to feel compassion for others and to take action to support them, both materially and emotionally. *Tz'dakah*, based on the root *Tzadi-Dalet-Kuf* and related to the word *tzedek*, 'justice', focuses on the imperative of just action.⁴² Emotions cannot be compelled, so righteous acts that are dependent on our feelings are useless. We may feel moved to help others, but we may not. *Tz'dakah*, by contrast, is a commandment. It is our obligation to put right what is wrong in relation to the poor, including the homeless, those who are oppressed and persecuted, and, specifically, the most vulnerable groups in society, identified in the *Torah* as the stranger, the orphan and the widow.⁴³

In the *haftarah*⁴⁴ on *Yom Kippur* morning from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 58, the prophet decries observance of the rituals of *Yom Kippur* that are not accompanied by acts of righteousness:⁴⁵

⁴² The most famous phrase about justice in the *Torah* is in *Shoftim*, Deuteronomy 16:20: *Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*, 'Justice, justice, shall you pursue'.

⁴³ Significantly, the word *tz'dakah* is used in relation to restoring the garment of a poor person given in pledge (*Ki Teitzei*, Deuteronomy 24:10-13). The code in *Ki Teitzei* also mentions all three of these categories of vulnerable people (Deut. 24:17 to 22). See also: *K'doshim*, Leviticus 19:9-10 and 33-34.

⁴⁴ *Haftarah* means 'conclusion'. The *haftarah* is the concluding Scriptural passage taken from the biblical books of the *N'vi'im*, Prophets, and read on *Shabbat* and festival mornings.

⁴⁵ Isaiah 58:5-7.

Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Eternal One? / Is not this the fast I choose: to release the shackles of wickedness and untie the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free and to break off every yoke? / Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?

The unknown prophet who speaks in the later chapters of the Book of Isaiah was addressing the exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BCE.⁴⁶ The prophet's words also address us and are just as relevant to the society we inhabit. So, how will we respond? We know that we live in a world in which injustice is rife. What will we do about it? Our ten-day *t'shuvah* journey will conclude at the end of *Yom Kippur*, and then it will be our task to harvest the fruits of our repentance with acts of *tz'dakah*. The moment has come to begin to focus our attention to how we will conduct our lives after *Yom Kippur*. Our challenge for the 8th day of *Tishri*.



⁴⁶ Isaiah 1:1 speaks of 'Isaiah, son of Amoz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah'. Isaiah 6:1 mentions Isaiah's call to prophecy in the year that King Uzziah died (742 BCE). While chapters 1-39 belong to the period when Isaiah prophesied, chapters 40 to 66 are later in origin, the work of a Second (Deutero) Isaiah. Sometimes chapters 55-66 are seen as the work of a Third (Trito) Isaiah.

9th Tishri – *S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kappeir lanu*

'Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement': Preparing for *Yom Kippur*

S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kappeir lanu. There are several poignant melodies for this phrase that concludes the recitation of the *Al Cheit*, the confession of our 'sins' on *Yom Kippur*;⁴⁷ each tune designed to move us and open our hearts. I've put the word 'sin' in inverted commas because strictly speaking, *cheit*, expresses the kind of error we commit when we miss our way. There are many words for 'sin' in the vocabulary of *Yom Kippur*.⁴⁸ We may find it difficult to identify with the word, 'sin', because it may feel far removed from the errors and misdeeds that most of us perpetrate. The text of the *Al Cheit* makes it clear that, even the ordinary errors we make that we so often excuse ourselves for, are serious and require our repentance.

S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kappeir lanu. On *Yom Kippur*, following our work of *t'shuvah*, our efforts are dedicated to confessing our misdeeds and seeking forgiveness, pardon and atonement. Although each one of us is on our own personal journey, confession is recited in the first-person plural, expressing our shared predicament as frail human beings who go astray.

Human beings need forgiveness. We need to feel forgiven so that we can let go of the past and move on. But Jewish teaching makes it clear that we can only be forgiven if we repent and do what we can to make amends. We also need to forgive others. In fact, if we fail to forgive someone who has sought our forgiveness three times, we are the ones in the wrong.⁴⁹

But forgiveness on *Yom Kippur* takes on a deeper resonance. Having engaged in the process of *t'shuvah*, and having done what we can to repent and seek forgiveness from those we have harmed, we are seeking forgiveness from the Eternal One. More than forgiveness, we are seeking pardon. The Hebrew, *m'chal lanu*, 'pardon us', expresses a blotting out or

⁴⁷ See *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*, pp. 198-200 and pp.259-261.

⁴⁸ See the *Machzor*, p. 164, for 'A Vocabulary of Sin' based on *A Guide to Yom Kippur* by Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs (Jewish Chronicle Publications, London, 1957, pp.75f.)

⁴⁹ *Hilchot T'shuvah*, Laws of Repentance, 2:9, *Mishneh Torah* by Maimonides, Moshe ben Mamon, the 'RaMBaM'

wiping out, an annulment.⁵⁰ But how can we be seeking an annulment, in other words, a cancellation of our misconduct? Because, ultimately, *Yom Kippur* represents the drawing of a line under all that has gone before, so that we can start the New Year afresh. The Hebrew, *kappeir lanu*, 'grant us atonement', literally, means 'cover us'. We read in the *Torah* that the Ark was covered with a *kapporet*, a 'covering'.⁵¹ The goal of *Yom Kippur* is a covering over of our misdeeds of the past year. They do not disappear or evaporate; they are not conjured away by the rituals of *Yom Kippur*; they are covered over. So, what do we do with the covered over wrongs we have committed during the past year? Do we store them away? Do we bury them? We do neither. We recognise that they are covered over – and move on. But we are running ahead of ourselves. As *Yom Kippur* approaches, is there anything we can do to lighten the burden of our regret? We can acknowledge that we have left much undone on our *t'shuvah* journey and prepare for *Yom Kippur*. Our challenge for the 9th day of *Tishri*.



⁵⁰ The Biblical Hebrew root is *Mem Chet Hei*. In Rabbinic Hebrew: *Mem Chet Lamed*.

⁵¹ The *kapporet* that covered the Ark was a slab of gold, 2.5 cubits by 1.5 cubits. See: *T'rumah*, Exodus 25:17-22..

10th Tishri – Yom Kippur

Prelude

Hinneini ⁵²

Here I am
Standing before You
Sensing the power of Your
Elusive presence
Grounding me
In the ground of Your being
As I acknowledge
The daunting task of
Standing before the congregation
As their Emissary
As a fellow traveller
On this sacred journey
Towards atonement.

And as we take our faltering steps together
I will remind myself of the impossible reality of
What it is to be a human being
As I dip a hand briefly from time to time into
Each of my two pockets:⁵³
'I am but dust and ashes'
'The world was created for my sake.'

⁵² My reflection on 'A Meditation for Rabbis and Readers' recited before the *Kol Nidrei* Service. See: *Machzor Ruach Chadashah. Services for the Days of Awe*. Liberal Judaism, 2003, pp.168-170.

⁵³ 'I am but dust and ashes' (Genesis 18:27). "The world was created for my sake." (Babylonian *Talmud, Sanhedrin* 37a). Rabbi Simcha Bunim of P'shischa (1765-1827, born in Vadislov, Poland) said that everyone should have two pockets; one to contain, "I am but dust and ashes," and the other to contain, "The world was created for my sake."

Erev Yom Kippur: A Day in Eternity and Eternity in a Day

What an extraordinary *Yom Kippur* we are experiencing this year. When I was a child, and right up until I began my rabbinic studies at Leo Baeck College in the autumn of 1984, aged 29, I used to spend *Yom Kippur* with my Mum. We would sit together in the family home, talking about the past – including her experiences of life in her family. When she was a child – the youngest of nine – she and the other younger children, would also stay at home on *Yom Kippur*. Then at the end of the day they would go to the synagogue – Poets Road in Stoke Newington, North London – bearing sweet fruits to greet their parents, who, dressed in their white *kittels*,⁵⁴ used to spend the whole day in *shul*.

Since 1984, I have also spent *Yom Kippur* day in *shul* – until this year. Going to the synagogue on *Yom Kippur* or staying at home, used to be a marker of one's level of Jewish observance. But this year, along with the thousands of Jews who never go to synagogue on *Yom Kippur*, many thousands more are staying at home and attending the services at the same time. How does that work? In my experience, a fundamental aspect of the unique nature of *Yom Kippur* is the simple fact that it is spent in the synagogue, in a place defined by its purpose as the locus of congregational life, and clearly differentiated from the private world of our home lives. For several months now, as the coronavirus crisis has continued, the division between home and community has been bridged by online congregational activities, including services, that we attend from our studies and living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms. But these have been very specific and time-limited. How does one spend a whole day, engaged in a congregational activity, while being at home?

In planning for *Yom Kippur* online, aware of the issue of screen fatigue, we – that is, *Avodat Ha-Lev*,⁵⁵ the committee that organises the religious life of

⁵⁴ A *kittel* is a white cotton or linen garment in which the deceased is clothed for burial. Traditionally, it is also worn on *Yom Kippur* – and may also be worn at other sacred times, including, when leading the *Pesach* (Passover) *Seder*. In some communities, the bridegroom, wears a *kittel* on their wedding day.

⁵⁵ *Avodat Ha-Lev* is 'Service of the Heart'. It is the name given to the 1967 Prayer Book of Liberal Judaism. It is inspired by a comment in the Babylonian *Talmud*, *Ta'anit* 2a, quoting the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*: "... to love the Eternal your God, and to serve God with all your heart with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 11:13). What is the service of the heart? [*avodah shehi b'lev*] You must say: It is prayer. Service of the heart replaced the service of sacrifice after the last Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

the synagogue – decided that no service should be longer than 90 minutes, and that on *Yom Kippur* day, there should be substantial breaks between services. In collaboration with my rabbinic colleagues, this involved shortening both the *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and the *Yom Kippur* services. Arranging *Yom Kippur* online has been demanding and time-consuming, but the heart of the matter does not concern the practicalities involved, but rather the nature of the experience. I know what it's like to spend *Yom Kippur* quietly at home and I know what it's like to spend *Yom Kippur* in the congregational domain of the synagogue, but is it possible to combine the two?

Well, we are about to find out. But maybe, I'm addressing this issue from the wrong premise. *Yom Kippur* is not about space or place; it is about time. Engaging with *Yom Kippur* involves entering sacred time. Wherever we are – whether we usually stay at home or usually go to the synagogue on *Yom Kippur* – if we consciously inhabit the day, allow the day to envelop us and leave the constraints of daily life behind, in which time is measured and used or wasted, then we may enter a dimension in which time is eternal.

The rabbinic sages referred to *Yom Kippur* using the Aramaic word, *Yoma*,⁵⁶ meaning 'The Day.' 'The Day' is not like any other day. It's not just that we spend *Yom Kippur* differently than any other day, and engage in special activities that are unique to the day. *Yom Kippur* exists in a unique boundary-less dimension of time. On the surface, of course, this can't be true. After all, the day is divided into six services – from sunset through sunset again – three of which are specifically designated by the time of day: *Erev*, 'Evening', *Shacharit*, 'Morning', and *Minchah*, 'Afternoon'.⁵⁷ But while the day is divided into discrete sections, these are less to do with specific units of time and more to do with the flow of time, which like the ebb and flow of the sea moves endlessly and just as it does so, flows over a great stillness in its depths. To engage with *Yom Kippur* with all our heart and soul involves plunging into the depths – into our depths, into the depths we are taken to in the flow of the day.

⁵⁶ *Yoma* is the name given to the new tractate dealing with the laws for *Yom Kippur* in the *Mishnah*, the first rabbinic code of law edited c. 200 CE, and in the Babylonian *Talmud*, edited around the year 500.

⁵⁷ The *Erev Yom Kippur* service is also known by the name of the text with which it opens: *Kol Nidrei* (Aramaic for 'all vows'). The other services are: *Musaf* (Additional – after *Shacharit*), *N'ilah* (Closing) and *Yizkor* (Memorial), which does not have a fixed place during the day.

During the coronavirus crisis, while the seasons have changed, our usual expectations about time have been subverted. In particular, for those who are not essential workers, and have been spending most of their time at home, as one day merges with another day, the notion of past and present collapses. Meanwhile, the future is unfathomable. Of course, we can never know what the future holds. But before the pandemic engulfed our lives, many of us would spend substantial amounts of time looking forward – to holidays, to birthdays and weddings and other milestones, to the next academic year with its new challenges. And so, we have been forced to live our lives in the present, day by day. And more than this, without recourse to our planning ahead reflex, and in the awareness of the devastating impact of Covid-19, many of us have been living each day more mindfully and more deeply; appreciating the gifts of the day that we have often taken for granted, like a hot drink in the morning and sparrows chirping.

In a profound sense, our experience of life during the pandemic has provided unexpected preparation for experiencing *Yom Kippur*. One of the unique features of this unique day is the final service, *N'ilah*, which means 'closing'. Paradoxically, this eternal moment will come to an end. It must come to an end, so that we can be guided by what we have learned from immersing ourselves in it, tomorrow and the day after. The Day is eternity, but it is not static; it is *Yoma*, The Day that encapsulates all the days of our lives, all the myriad moments of being alive: despair and hopefulness, anxiety and expectation, disappointment and gratitude, sorrow and joy, fear and confidence, rage and tranquillity, bewilderment and wonder, self-accusation and self-acceptance. Each one of us is on a journey today, a journey towards atonement – at-one-ment – and if we delve deeply into the day, we will touch all these feelings. But of course, the day has a deeper purpose still. We can only emerge after *N'ilah* feeling renewed, if we have done the work of facing ourselves, and recognising the impact of our actions on others as well as on ourselves. It's not enough to feel our feelings. If we just do this, the chances are, we will end up feeling sorry for ourselves, rather than feeling sorry for what we have done to others. And so, we have work to do. *Yoma*, The Day is a gift, giving us the opportunity to search our souls, acknowledge our mistakes and the hurts we have inflicted, and commit ourselves to renewing our lives.

Kein y'hi ratzon – May this be our will. And let us say Amen.

Yom Kippur Morning: The Power of Words

Tens of thousands of words are uttered on *Yom Kippur*; words expressing Jewish teaching; mostly words of prayer. Words are powerful. The impact of the *TaNaKH*,⁵⁸ the Hebrew Bible on the world testifies to this. The *Torah* reflects the understanding of ancient times that words were, literally, a force for life – or for death – reflected in the blessings and curses recorded in the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.⁵⁹

So, as we utter words today in the tens of thousands, we are engaging in a powerful act – a collective act, despite the fact that this *Yom Kippur* we are not gathered together.

The assumption of Jewish teaching is that words should translate into actions. That is the whole point of the law codes in the *Torah* and in later rabbinic texts; the *Mishnah*, the *Talmud* and subsequent codes of *halachah*, Jewish Law. That is the whole point of *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, the ten days of return that conclude on *Yom Kippur*.

So, observance of *Yom Kippur* depends on us making that translation – or to put it in Jewish terms, it depends on us turning ourselves around, re-orientating ourselves, changing course and returning to the path of our lives, so that our words do translate into actions on the day after *Yom Kippur* and on the days that follow.

When I was a young person, right up until I embarked on my rabbinic studies in 1984 at the age of 29, I changed course many times. After my O-levels, my family moved briefly to Sheffield and I started my A-levels, but after two terms we returned to London, and I went out to work for a few months, before embarking on a one year's A-level programme at a technical college, studying English and Sociology. I wanted to pursue English at university, but having gone to a comprehensive school I didn't have the Latin O-level required at the time, so I decided on Sociology. Anyway, as a result of my exam nerves, I did badly in my English A-level. I got in to Essex University on clearing to study Sociology. But I didn't like being marooned

⁵⁸ See 5th *Tishri*, note 31.

⁵⁹ *B'chukkotai*, Leviticus 26:3-46 and *Ki Tavo*, Deuteronomy 27:11-28:69.

on a bleak campus in the middle of nowhere, so I left after two terms. I then got accepted at the London School of Economics the following September – again, to study Sociology.

Thankfully, I completed the course and got my degree. I thought I'd like to be an English teacher and was accepted at the Institute of Education, London University to do a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education. But then, exams facing me, I left three weeks before the end of the course. I had an inspirational tutor at the Institute and she got me involved in writing and editing, which included being assistant editor of the international women's studies journal she created,⁶⁰ editing a book⁶¹ and co-editing two others.⁶² But between leaving the Institute and getting involved in writing and editing, I went to Israel and lived on the *kibbutz* for a few months, thinking that maybe that's where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. Following my return, I combined writing and editing with embarking on a PhD at LSE, researching the journals of the early feminist movement. But after three years, I changed the course of my life once again, and applied to the Leo Baeck College to become a rabbi – well, it wasn't quite that direct because, first, I visited Israel again and reconsidered going to live on a *kibbutz*.

Why am I telling you all this? Partly because I'm going to be retiring in seven months, by which time it will be 37 years since I entered the Leo Baeck College. It's easy to look at a rabbi and imagine that somehow, they were born to be one or were focused on that vocation all their lives. But the main reason for sharing my tale of the twists and turns of my journey – and I've not included my personal journey, which has been just as eventful, or the reasons for each twist and turn – is to demonstrate that changing course, even if it might involve quite a bit of anguish and uncertainty and a few dead ends, can be very fruitful. In fact, even the dead ends can be fruitful. After all, I did end up being a teacher; at its core that's what being a rabbi is all about.

⁶⁰ *Women's Studies International Quarterly* (later: *Forum*) edited by Dale Spender

⁶¹ *Reassessments of First Wave Feminism* (Pergamon Press, 1982).

⁶² *Learning to Lose. Sexism in Education* edited with Dale Spender (The Women's Press, 1980), *On the Problem of Men: Two Feminist Conferences* edited with Scarlet Friedman (The Women's Press, 1982).

When I was doing my PhD research, I made a special study of Christabel Pankhurst, the radical leader of the suffragette movement.⁶³ One of Christabel Pankhurst's famous slogans was 'deeds not words.' Jewish teaching emphasises words *and* deeds, and most important that words are inextricably linked to deeds. I began by mentioning the tens of thousands of words uttered on *Yom Kippur*. These words are texts on the page – or, this year, on the screen – but we say them and sing them and make them our own. As we do this, as we imbibe these words, our nourishment for the day in place of food, they feed our neglected souls, bringing us back to ourselves. We call these words prayer, *t'fillah*, in Hebrew. But prayers only come to life, when they are prayed, and in Hebrew, to pray, *l'hitpalleil*, is to interrogate oneself.⁶⁴

It is in the process of interrogating ourselves that *t'shuvah*, re-orientating ourselves and returning to ourselves and others becomes possible. In the *Musaf*, the 'additional' service that follows the morning service, in the special *k'dushah*, the blessing proclaiming God's Holiness, we recite the words: *U't'shuvah, u't'fillah, u'tz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zeirah* – 'But return, and prayer, and acts of justice cancel the calamitous decree.'⁶⁵ These ancient words reflect an understanding that on *Yom Kippur* the destiny of each individual is sealed by Divine decree. The prospect of our destiny being sealed is terrifying – which is why the 'but' is so important. Ultimately, our destiny is in our hands. If we allow the prayers that we utter to reawaken ourselves so that we are able to acknowledge that we need to return to the path of our lives, we can change the course of our lives. But the transformation of *t'shuvah* isn't just for our own personal benefit. The threefold process of *t'shuvah*, *t'fillah* and *tz'dakah* makes it clear that we are called to act justly. So, although the journey of *Yom Kippur* will end this evening, the purpose of the day won't be realised unless we set out tomorrow ready to engage in acts of justice. The world is in need of repair. The coronavirus crisis has revealed the persistence of class inequality in our society.⁶⁶ Following the murder of African-American George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, the re-emergence

⁶³ See 'Christobel Pankhurst: Reclaiming Her Power' in *Feminist Theorists. Three centuries of women's intellectual traditions* edited by Dale Spender (The Women's Press, 1983, pp. 256-284).

⁶⁴ See my reflection for the 7th day of *Tishri*.

⁶⁵ Literally, 'the evil decree'.

⁶⁶ Coronavirus: Higher death rate in poorer areas, ONS figures suggest, *The Guardian*, 01.05.20. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52506979> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases>

of the Black Lives Matter movement has forced a re-examination of the persistence of racism here in the UK.⁶⁷ And still, the global refugee crisis continues, as traumatised people continue to make their desperate bids to escape war, persecution and destitution.⁶⁸ And if all that wasn't enough, after a brief respite during the height of the pandemic, the climate change emergency continues.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, one particular conflict close to our hearts, between Israel and the Palestinians grinds on. The Israeli government can make as many peace deals as it likes with its Arab neighbours,⁷⁰ but until a just peace is secured with the Palestinians, there will be no peace.

Of course, we could say that we are not personally responsible for injustice and the brokenness of the world and that our personal actions can have very little impact. Jewish teaching suggests otherwise. What each one of us does or does not do can make a difference. One of the powerful images associated with *aseret y'mei t'shuvah* is that of the scales of judgement in which our deeds are weighed in the balance.⁷¹ A passage in the Babylonian Talmud gets to the heart of the matter:⁷² 'A person who performs one *mitzvah*, 'commandment', is praiseworthy because they tilt the balance of themselves and the entire world to the scale of merit.' Needless to say, as the passage goes on to teach, the same is true in the opposite direction for one who performs a single transgression. The important point is that each and every person has the power to tip the scales.

May this day set apart from the challenges of the world nourish us and replenish each one of us for the tasks of repair that lie ahead.

And let us say: Amen.

⁶⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52861726> On August 23, a police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin, shot Jacob Blake, another unarmed black man, paralysing him. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/25/wisconsin-police-fire-teargas-during-second-night-of-protest-over-shooting-of-black-man> For the UK: Black Lives Matter: We need action on racism not more reports, says David Lammy. *The Guardian*, 15.06.20. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53049586>

⁶⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/aug/10/qa-whats-the-real-story-behind-recent-uk-refugee-arrivals>
⁶⁹ <https://climateemergencyeu.org/>

⁷⁰ Israel made peace with Egypt on 26 March 1979, returning the Sinai peninsula captured in the Six Day War' (5-11 June 1967). Israel made peace with Jordan on 26 October 1994. Most recently, Israel signed a deal with the United Arab Emirates, the 'Abraham Accord' on 13 August 2020.

⁷¹ Maimonides, *Hilchot T'shuvah*, Laws of Repentance, 3:4, *Mishneh Torah*.

⁷² *Kiddushin* 40b.

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Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue
