

**JEWISH LITERACY**  
**Michael Lotker**  
**The High Holy Days**

**From a High Holy Days Sermon:**

*Unetake tokef kedushat hayom* “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; it is awesome and full of dread. For on this day Your dominion is exalted, Your throne established in steadfast love; there in truth you reign. In truth You are Judge and Arbiter, Counsel and Witness. You write and you seal, You record and recount. You remember deeds long forgotten. You open the book of our days, and what is written there proclaims itself, for it bears the signature of every human being. .... This is the Day of Judgment! ... On Rosh Hashanah, it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.”

Let me ask you, on what level do you understand this?

- As hopelessly outdated liturgy designed to scare the simple and/or superstitious
- As poetry designed to put us in the mood for repentance and introspection
- As a metaphor for some kind of actual judgment going on somewhere
- As the truth -- That on some level, God is actually deciding our fate during this season.

In other, words --- what is going on with this prayer? and, for that matter, with Rosh Hashanah and with the High Holy Days?

**1. Why people only come these days.**

- In some ways, this is the low point of the Jewish calendar, yet this is when everybody shows up >>> like Christian Easter and Christmas (but at least these are happy Christian holidays)
- Let's take a deeper look at the holidays and this liturgy. It's really some interesting liturgy.
- Most of all, I want to address those of you who don't get much out of the High Holy Days, who, to be frank,
  - don't get much out of synagogue membership,
  - who, (to be even more honest) don't get much out of religion and Judaism,
  - and who (let's be really frank) don't get much out of your relationship with God.
  - The message is: to get something out of this HHD experience, you need to put something in (and, of course to get something out of synagogue membership, religion and Judaism and your relationship with God -- you have to put something in). Don't expect to just sit back and get your annual spirituality injection which will last you until next year ----- without making some effort.

**2. Most of us are aware of Jewish holidays -- we watch with amusement as they occur early some years, later others. What many of us miss is that they fall into a wonderfully integrated whole.**

- A word about Pesach will shed light on the HHD: One of the things we know about the Passover Seder is that it's supposed to be more than a reenactment; it's supposed to be an experience. We are supposed believe that we were personally liberated from Egypt. This is why we taste slavery and tears (bitter herbs and salt water and matzos), why we play act our freedom (by reclining), etc. This play acting extends to the other Jewish holidays. On Shabbat, we pretend that the world is perfect. We don't do any work because there's nothing to do! On the HHD, there is also a play that we are to take part in. On the HHD, we are on trial for our very lives.

**3. HHD as a trial for your life, especially YK as experience of death**

- On some level, we long to be judged. We want to know that our actions count. H. Kushner's story of unexamined paper. The HHD is the trial at which our lives are judged. You can see it in the liturgy. Last night and today, God is placed on His throne. We praise God in poems. We declare Him "Avinu/Father" (i.e., sovereign of our personal lives) and Malkenu/King (sovereign of our public lives). We long for the Master of the Universe to know us and love us as well as a parent would. We acknowledge that God is in control over life and death in the haunting una tanne tokef prayer.
- We are entering a trial for our lives. We will be judged. We will contemplate our mortality and experience our own death. We will therefore re-examine what it means to be alive. Try taking this seriously. Imagine that you are on trial for your life. What would you be thinking about as you entered a trial for you life? What would you think about the week before the verdict, the night before the verdict? What would you think about the week before the sentence, the night before the sentence?
- Not about lunch. Not about your bills or the work piling up on your desk. You'd probably be thinking about the stupid things you've done. How you wish you could go back and un-do it. You'd be wondering if the judge and jury believed you. You'd wonder if they were inclined to be lenient.
- ON RH it is written, on YK it is sealed. You want to get something out of the HHD, imagine, pretend that the trial began last night. **DISCUSS ACTING AND SUSPENSION OF REALITY.** Today, on RH, an interim verdict will be issued in the case of God vs. me. During the next 10 days, the Court Supreme will reconsider the verdict. And on YK, the final decision will be written. And God is the Judge, Jury and Witness and all of the Appellate Courts.
- The HHD are an antidote for complacency and self-congratulation. "We interrupt your wonderful life to ask you to examine it." Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living."
- What is it that will cause you to focus on your life with urgency >> your own mortality. We cannot be mature adults until we encompass a sense of our own

mortality. If we were truly immortal, there would be no urgency to repent, to “clean up our act.” There would be no urgency to do anything!

- Our loves, our friendships our lives only have meaning because they are finite! The 90th Psalm (verse 12) sings: “So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom.” From the *Gates of Prayer*, “Mortality is the tax that we pay for the privilege of love, thought, creative work -- the toll on the bridge of being from which clods of earth and snow-peaked mountain summits are exempt.”
- The HHD cry out to us “Evaluate your life -- what if you were on your death bed (as you will be someday)? Look at your life from that vantage point --
  - What do you think of it?
  - What was the meaning of your life?
  - Do you long to be able to change some things?
  - Well, guess what, you can! You have time (that most precious of all gifts)! Just go and do it! These are the good old days that you will one day long for! God knows and understands the things you’ve done that you’re not proud of and will work with you to make things OK.
- Viktor Frankl quote: “Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now.” Except now, you have the opportunity to change it.
- The goal is not to frighten but to stimulate growth and renewal and improvement. It’s not the threat of punishment for sin, but the focus on self-examination -- Look at the year you have just written into the book of life. Is this your true self? Is this the self you would want to look back upon at the close of your life? If not, the next 10 days are the time in which the Judge is evaluating your case. This is the time for your appeal. Remember “it is not the death of sinners that God wants, but that they should turn from their ways and live. Until the last day, God waits for us, welcoming us as soon as we turn to God.” During the next 10 days, *teshuvah*, *v’tefilah u’tsdakah* -- repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment’s severe decree.

#### **4. Jewish perspective on repentance & forgiveness.**

- The fundamental Jewish message is redemption -- of the world and not just your soul. The world is not the way it should be and it is up to us to change it. It’s up to us to fix it! The Talmud tells us “don’t kid yourself, you won’t complete the task. But you are not exempt from participating in the solution.” And, like the rest of creation, we are not the way we should be and it is up to us to change us. But we only have our lifetime to complete the task. And who knows how long that will be?
- On the nature of sin. In Christianity, sin is a state of being. In Judaism, the word *chet* comes from archery “to miss the mark.” A sin is something you did, hopefully your sorry, and you’ll try not to do it again. It does not change the state of your soul. It does not, in and of itself, determine your after-worldly fate. God, the Righteous and Merciful Judge determines this --- and only God.

- God forgives for sins against God, God can only forgive sins against a person if the person forgives. (Major difference with Christianity).
- Rabbi Eliezer said: “Repent one day before your death.” His disciples asked: “Does anyone know on what day he will die?” “All the more reason to repent today,” answered Rabbi Eliezer, “in case you die tomorrow, and thus a person’s whole life should be spent in repentance.” (T.B. Shabbat 153a)
- Maimonides: You should consider that your life and the world is balanced between good and evil. Your next sin or good deed shifts the balance of your life and of the entire world.
- Maimonides formula for teshuva
  - regret: name your sin, confess --PAST
  - rejection: ask for forgiveness and undo the wrong if possible, stop doing it, actions speak louder than words --PRESENT
  - resolution: don’t do it again - FUTURE
- Talmud: where the repentant sinner stands, even the wholly righteous cannot.

## 5. Looking ahead to Yom Kippur

- On YK, we will get the final judgment. To put us in the proper frame of mind, we will experience a small measure of our own death, by fasting.
- The fast denies us the activities of life, food, drink, bathing, sex.(note the Torah only says “you will afflict your souls.”). For a Jew, afflicting your soul means denial of food, sex and worldly goods.
- Traditional Jews wear a white kittel - a burial shroud
- Ultimately we drop all defenses and throw ourselves on the mercy of the court.
- Let’s do some pretending. What if you knew that you had a limited time, say 10 days to live? What would you do in the next 10 days?
  - Would you watch a lot of TV sit-coms to literally “kill time” --- or would you treat each moment as precious?
  - Would you continue to nurture the hurt and anger you feel for your spouse, parent, child, ex, friend --- or would you hurry to heal the wounds that exist and make peace?
  - Would you continue to feel shy and reserved about showing love for those you love? -- or would you rush to tell them how you feel?
  - Wouldn’t you want to savor the way they look, the sight of sunlight on their hair, the way their face transforms as a smile just begins to flow across their lips and eyes, the way they feel (and the way you feel) when you hug them, the texture of their skin when you kiss them, the way they react when you tell them you love them?
  - Wouldn’t you want to set things right with all of the important people in your life?
  - Well, play the game. This is exactly what you should do in the next 10 days, and in the days and months that follow. Life is precious because it’s finite. Who knows how much time we have? There’s a story

about a Rabbi concluding a funeral service.....”Rabbi, I almost told her...”

- On YK, we will spend the entire day in prayer. After the morning service, we will have a discussion group (small, but I hope not too small) that will allow us to dig deeper into our thoughts and feelings about Yom Kippur and the High Holy Days. At about 3:30 PM, we will have an afternoon childrens’ and family service
- Following this, we have yizkor (remembering our beloved departed family helps us focus on death and mortality and also allows us to pray for God’s mercy in their names).
- The final service with its wonderful imagery that the gates of heaven and repentance are closing is the culmination of this 10 day experience, culminating as it does with the long *tekiah gedolah*.. This year, try staying the whole day. It’s a Monday. If you rush off to a half day of work on Yom Kippur, don’t blame God or the synagogue or the Rabbi that you didn’t find anything meaningful in the High Holy Days. Stay and pray as the trial ends --- as the Gates of Heaven close.

#### 6. Invitation to play along

- Yitz Greenberg writes that to be a kosher Jew, you need to be a bit of a ham.
- May we have the spiritual playfulness, intensity and courage to play along during this High Holy Day season.
- To embrace the deeper spiritual levels of meaning of this season of repentance and renewal.
- Think of what you are willing to do to get into the spirit of many things:
  - Halloween
  - Favorite professional sports teams
  - School and local sports
  - plays, New Year’s Day, etc.
- Invest a little of this same enthusiasm and passion in cleansing and reconstructing your soul and your earthly and divine relationships.

**Next Class: Chanukah Purim, Pesach, Shavuot & Sukkot**

Lotker: readings 70-79

Handbook: readings 65-92, 363-377, 395-399,406-407