



YAMIM NORAIM 5787 • HIGH HOLIDAYS 2026



Seeds of Renewal

Torah Reflections for the Jewish New Year

Welcome to *Seeds of Renewal* – a collection of Divrei Torah written by Ohr Torah Stone faculty and alumni for the upcoming *Yamim Noraim* (High Holidays).



At the end of each reflection, there is a question designed to inspire you in enhancing your connection with God, your community, the Jewish nation, and the world at large.

From our table to yours – *ketiva v'chatima tova* – may you and your family be inscribed for a happy, healthy and peaceful New Year.

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Becoming the Prayer

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander



Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of **Ohr Torah Stone**, a Modern Orthodox movement of 33 global programs bringing the light of Torah to today's world through education, advocacy, outreach and leadership.

Prior to joining OTS in 2018, Rabbi Brander served as Yeshiva University's Vice President for University and Community Life, and before that as the senior rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue, overseeing its explosive growth from 60 to more than 600 families.

Assuming an almost mythical place in the holiday liturgy is the *U'Netaneh Tokef*, one of the most majestic prayers recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

As told by Rav Yitzchak of Vienna (1180-1250) in his famous work *Ohr Zarua*, the *U'Netaneh Tokef* was established by Rav Amnon of Mainz. Indeed, the story accompanying the prayer for the past 800 years tells us how, in his campaign to convert all the Jews, the Bishop of Mainz decided to start with his friend and advisor, Rav Amnon. Trapped in a predicament from which there was no escape, Rav Amnon asked for three days to meditate upon the request.

Rav Amnon was so distraught at having even given the impression that he would consider betraying God that he sequestered himself in his home for three days of intense fasting and prayer. The third day arrived, and Rav Amnon did not return to the bishop. Not one to be ignored, the bishop had him arrested and brought to the court, where he was expected to accede to the bishop's request. Steeling himself in preparation for the punishment he was sure to receive, Rav Amnon proposed that his tongue should be cut out for even suggesting the possibility that he could consider converting. Furious at this response, the bishop replied that it was not Rav Amnon's tongue that would must be punished, but rather his arms and legs that must be amputated, for it is their fault that Rav Amnon did not return as promised.

Becoming the Prayer (CONTINUED)

“There are occasions in our tradition when a person is identified as the author of a prayer because he or she embodies the prayer’s message.”

According to the story, Rav Amnon’s mutilated body was returned home a few days before Rosh Hashana; he requested to be brought to the synagogue and placed beside the *chazan* (cantor). As the congregation recited the kedusha prayer, Rav Amnon mustered his last ember of strength and uttered the sacred words of the *U’Netaneh Tokef* – at which point he took his final breath and perished.

Especially fascinating is compelling research that indicates a different origin for the *U’Netaneh Tokef* prayer. Although attributed to Rav Amnon for nearly a millennium, evidence suggests that the ancient words were most likely written by the great poet Yannai, who lived in Israel sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries, 500-700 years before Rav Amnon of Mainz.

Why would the *U’Netaneh Tokef* be proactively attributed to Rav Amnon of Mainz by people who had knowledge of the prayer’s actual author and origin?

Rather than crumble at the notion that this sacred prayer is built on a fiction, I offer the following idea. There are occasions in our tradition when a person is identified as the author of a prayer or rabbinic idiom, but in fact, not its actual composer. Rather, the person is described as the author because he or she is so closely identified with the prayer, and thus embodies the prayer’s message.

One example of this is found in a statement attributed to the humble Tanna, Shmuel HaKatan. Accordingly,



Shmuel HaKatan is quoted (*Avot* 4:19) as having stated, “In the downfall of your enemy, do not rejoice.” While this is surely a beautiful sentiment, it was notably first stated by King Solomon thousands of years earlier in *Proverbs* (24:17). But perhaps it is attributed to Shmuel HaKatan because he personified the dictum’s ideals through his deeds and actions, as recorded several times in the Talmud.

Similarly, the Chanukah prayer of *Al Ha’Nissim* finds Matityahu referred to as a Kohen Gadol, a High Priest, though he never officially served in this capacity. Rather, our tradition attributed this honorific to him because he modeled the deeds and actions of a High Priest by virtue of his seminal leadership during the Hasmonean rebellion.

In parallel, Rav Amnon personifies the conduct attributed to him in the *U’Netaneh Tokef* prayer. Remembered with a name that clearly derives from the word *emuna*, faith, Rav Amnon is memorialized in the ancient prayer as a tribute to the countless Jews who paid the ultimate sacrifice during the horrific years of the bloody Crusades. Rav Amnon may not have composed the words of the *U’Netaneh Tokef*, but he most assuredly “established” them through his outlook and actions.

Adding a contemporary dimension to the unfolding story of the *U’Netaneh Tokef* is the tune composed for the prayer by the famous Israeli composer Yair Rosenblum during his stay at Kibbutz Beit Hashitah in 1990. Known as the community that had lost a greater proportion of its

“We, too, have
the opportunity
to become the
‘authors’ of
the prayers we
read and the
Torah we study.”

Becoming the Prayer (CONTINUED)



REFLECT, REPAIR, RECONNECT:

*How can I ensure
that my prayers remain
more than words on a
page, becoming
instead a guide for the
way I live my life?*

sons in the Yom Kippur war than any other, Rosenblum's musical memorial to the fallen soldiers of Kibbutz Beit Hashitah is especially poignant when overlaid on the sacred and timeless words of the *U'Netaneh Tokef*. During the High Holiday season, Rosenblum's melody is heard constantly on the radio and used in synagogues throughout Israel.

Such is the magic and majesty of the *U'Netaneh Tokef*. Written by Yannai, cloaked in the personality of Rav Amnon, and adorned by the melody of Yair Rosenblum, the words of the prayer capture the pathos and the promise of an ancient people who have been called upon time and again to pay the ultimate sacrifice as a reflection of our commitment to the higher ideals of our faith and the eternality of our peoplehood.

Like Rav Amnon of Mainz, Yair Rosenblum, Shmuel HaKatan, and Matityahu HaKohen, we, too, have the opportunity to become the "authors" of the prayers we read and the Torah we study, through internalizing their messages personifying their ideals, and becoming true representatives of the vision of Judaism that we wish to celebrate.

May we merit to be inscribed for a wondrous path of purposefulness throughout the coming year.

A Loving Relationship with God*

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin



Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of **Ohr Torah Stone**.

A gifted orator, trailblazing educator, prolific author, and respected *halakhic* authority, Rabbi Riskin served as the founding Chief Rabbi of the city of Efrat, and continues to be an inspirational voice to countless people around the world.

**This article was adapted from a chapter on Rosh Hashana in Rabbi Riskin's recently published book, Judaism: A Love Story.*

The *Musaf* (Additional) service on Rosh Hashana sets forth our most fundamental Jewish beliefs and aspirations. The *Malkhuyot* (Sovereignties) section of this prayer speaks of God's kingship, of an entire world under God. What this means, in effect, is that the only laws that can be promulgated for all of humanity are those that are in consonance with God's laws: the laws of the Ten Commandments, and the seven Noahide ethical laws that are biblical universal laws of morality, which the Bible calls "compassionate righteousness and moral justice."

There may be lesser rulers, whether they are called kings, emperors, prime ministers, or presidents, but they must likewise be subject to the moral laws that God has taught. He, after all, is the King of kings, the one Master God over the entire world. This also means that there is no room whatsoever in the world for a totalitarian or despotic leader who rules by force or terror and literally enslaves at least some significant number of the populace under his control. The absolute prohibition of slavery – that no human being is permitted to subjugate another – was taught by the Bible to the world when God Himself took the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and that prohibition clearly wells up from the words of the Bible informing us that God created every human being in His image.

On Rosh Hashana, *Malkhuyot* is introduced by the *Aleinu* prayer. *Aleinu* concludes with the verse, "On that day [of the acceptance of God by the entire world] the God of

A Loving Relationship with God (CONTINUED)

“The God of
Love will rule
the world,
against all
totalitarianism
and despotism.”

Love will truly be One and His name One” (Zechariah 14:9). The God of Love will rule the world, against all totalitarianism and despotism. In the meantime, says the *Aleinu* prayer, we Jews came into the world accepting this concept of a universal God demanding compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Therefore, our role is to teach this idea to the world because we are mandated by God to be a “kingdom of teachers and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

First and foremost, we must teach that God loves everyone, and so we must love everyone, too. That fundamental understanding is what will bring peace on earth – a world of wholeness, a world of love. This is the romance between God, the Jews, and the world. God, in His love, appointed us to deliver His message to the world: the loving parenthood of God must lead to the loving siblinghood of human beings. From this perspective one begins to understand that democracy is built into the very fabric of the Torah. A government imposed autocratically by means of power and submission is antithetical to the kingship of God that we declare in *Malkhuyot*.

While *Malkhuyot* speaks of God and humanity, the next section of *Musaf, Zikhronot* (Remembrances), places before us God’s special covenantal relationship with Israel, the mutual faithfulness and commitment that eternally unites us. The Jewish people promise that we will always keep the commandments, and God promises that we will always live as a nation and a



separate peoplehood, return to Israel, and ultimately redeem the world (Genesis 15; Isaiah 2).

God's specific love for the Jewish people is part of *Zikhronot's* theme, quoting several verses that describe the great passion with which God initially embraced the Jewish people when He took them out of Egypt, and the ardor with which the Jewish people gave God their love. However, *Zikhronot* goes much further, describing God's loving relationship with all of creation, and emphasizing the notion that not only is the Jewish nation called upon to come close to God, but the nations of the world are also called upon to cast their lot with the one God. *Zikhronot* proclaims that God is mindful of all individuals and nations, each of whom will have a unique mission to fulfill on the road to redemption. *Zikhronot* proclaims that all individuals and nations are remembered by God on this day, and judged according to their actions.

The third and final segment of the *Musaf* service is *Shofarot* (Sounds of the Ram's Horn). This portion makes the connection between the two moments in history when the sound of the heavenly shofar was and will be heard: one event at Sinai when God revealed to us His Torah, which we accepted for all generations freely and joyously; and the second sound of the shofar – which will yet be heard and accepted not only by Israel, but also by the entire world – that will announce the ingathering of the exiles to the Land of Israel, and the final Redemption.

“Everyone will
be joined in a
loving
relationship
with our
universal God.”

A Loving Relationship with God (CONTINUED)



REFLECT, REPAIR, RECONNECT:

*In what ways
can I strengthen
my own Jewish
commitment while
also serving as a
source of blessing to
the wider world?*

The God of *Malkhuyot* (Sovereignities) is first and foremost the God of creation of all of humanity and the world. The God of *Zikhronot* (Remembrances) is primarily the God of revelation and especially in His unique love relationship with Israel, expressed in a Torah that was originally meant for the entire world. The God of *Shofarot* is ultimately the God of redemption, when everyone will be joined in a loving relationship with our universal God of Love in a perfected and liberated world.

The Universal Message of Hope

Rabbi Shaul Robinson



Rabbi Shaul Robinson is a *musmach* of Ohr Torah Stone's **Joseph and Gwendolyn Straus Rabbinical Seminary**, and today serves as Senior Rabbi at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York City.

Before leaving for the US, Rabbi Robinson served as Director of the UK Centre for Rabbinic Development, and as Executive Director of "Encounter" – the organization that runs the UK's largest Orthodox Adult Education Event.

In these difficult and uncertain times for Jewish communities throughout the world, as intolerance, hatred, and antisemitism continue to grow, many Jews feel increasingly marginalized, pushed to the edges of respectable society.

The *Yamim Noraim* place before us a profound challenge. Although it may sometimes feel as though humanity is giving up on us, we must never – not for a single moment – give up on humanity.

The famous *piyyut* "*Ve'ye'etayu kol le'ovdecha* – And they will all come to serve You" is in fact one of the most emotional and, with the right *chazan*, uplifting and joyous prayers that we recite on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

As we approach *Aleinu*, at the very heart of the Rosh Hashana *Musaf*, we joyously imagine a time when all humanity comes to serve the one true God. Those who dwell throughout the earth will recognize His greatness, abandon their idols, and come to offer Him the crown of kingship.

This universal vision lies at the heart of Rosh Hashana. Again and again, the prayers remind us that the mission of the Jewish people is never directed solely toward ourselves.

Indeed, the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana concludes with the covenant between Abraham and Avimelech. Many assume these verses merely bridge the birth of Isaac and the *Akeida*. In fact, they carry a message of their own.

The Universal Message of Hope (CONTINUED)

“Although it
may sometimes
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give up on
humanity.”

After making peace with Avimelech, the Torah tells us that Abraham planted an *eshel* tree in Beersheva and proclaimed there the name of Hashem, God of the universe. Rabbeinu Bechya explains that Abraham was publicly proclaiming the unity of God and teaching that all humanity is the creation of one benevolent Maker. Even after securing his own family's future, Abraham immediately turned outward. His mission was never simply to build a family or a nation. It was to bring knowledge of God to the world.

The same theme finds perhaps its most striking expression in the Book of Jonah, read on Yom Kippur afternoon.

Jonah is commanded to travel to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and call its inhabitants to repentance. Instead, he flees toward Tarshish. The Sages explain that Jonah feared the consequences of success. If Nineveh repented, Israel would appear all the more stubborn, and God's mercy might be extended to one of Israel's greatest enemies. Jonah rejected the notion that he had a prophetic mission to the Gentile world.

Yet the entire Book of Jonah teaches precisely the opposite. As Rabbi Soloveitchik observed, it reminds us that Judaism – and our own *teshuva* – is never concerned only with our individual or national destiny. It is always directed toward humanity as a whole.

The irony reaches its climax at the end of the first chapter. Jonah declares, “*Ivri anochi* – I am a Hebrew,” and asks to be thrown into the sea to save the ship. The storm immediately subsides. The sailors are overwhelmed with



awe, offer sacrifices to the God of Israel, and make vows to Him.

Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer goes further still, teaching that these sailors later came to Jerusalem, circumcised themselves and their households, converted, and lived as righteous Jews.

What a remarkable paradox. Jonah fled because he did not want to bring God's message to the nations. Yet by simply living his faith and accepting responsibility, he inspired his Gentile companions to abandon idolatry and embrace the God of Israel.

That irony speaks powerfully to our own generation.

Judaism was never meant to define itself merely by the struggle against antisemitism, nor was our message ever intended for Jews alone. Rabbi Norman Lamm expressed this memorably when he said that Israel "was not meant to be the *Neturei Karta* of the nations." If we have nothing to say to the world, we should stop talking. But if we possess something of enduring importance to say – even if we still struggle to articulate it – we must never stop trying. We are called to be a light unto the nations.

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin, *yibadel lechayim tovim*, likewise teaches that the message of Jonah is that God's concern embraces the entire world. Our responsibility extends far beyond our own four cubits.

Perhaps no one expressed this more eloquently in our own day than Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, ztz"l. As antisemitism reemerged during the first years of this century, he repeatedly warned against allowing hatred to

“Judaism was never meant to define itself merely by the struggle against antisemitism.”

The Universal Message of Hope (CONTINUED)



REFLECT, REPAIR, RECONNECT:

Where and when is my Jewish identity defined not by the hatred I face, but rather by the values I share and the light I bring to others?

define Jewish identity. As the Jewish world was turning inwards, he argued, that was precisely the wrong way to go. In a lecture delivered in 2010 he urged:

“Let us turn outwards. Let us not define ourselves as the people that dwells alone. Let us define ourselves as the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.”

That sentence captures one of the great religious challenges of our time. We must certainly confront antisemitism wherever it appears. We must defend ourselves and protect our communities. But we must never allow hatred to redefine our purpose.

The prayers of Rosh Hashana, the example of Abraham, the story of Jonah, and the teachings of our greatest modern Jewish thinkers all point in the same direction. Even when the world seems to be turning away from us, we must never turn away from the world. We remain the heirs of Abraham, who proclaimed God’s name to all who would listen; of Jonah, whose reluctant witness transformed those around him; and of generations of Jews who believed that their covenant carried a blessing not only for themselves, but also for all humanity.

The vision of “*Ve’ye’etayu kol le’ovdecha*” is not a dream we abandon when times become difficult. It is precisely in difficult times that we are called to hold onto it most tightly. Even when others lose faith in us, we must never lose faith in humanity or in the possibility that one day all people will recognize the sovereignty of God and join together in His service.

The Power of Communal Prayer

Dr. Tamar Ross



Dr. Tamar Ross teaches in many academic and religious settings in Israel and around the world, including Ohr Torah Stone's **Maria and Joel Finkle Overseas Program** at **Midreshet Lindenbaum**, Jerusalem.

Dr. Ross is Professor Emerita of the Department of Jewish Philosophy at Bar Ilan University, and is a specialist in religious feminist philosophy.

In recent years, Jews throughout Israel and the Diaspora have gathered with unusual intensity to pray. Following the October 7th massacre and the ensuing war, special prayer services were organized, *Tehillim* recited daily, and even many who did not ordinarily attend synagogue felt drawn to public expressions of prayer on behalf of soldiers, hostages, and the State of Israel.

In moments when the Jewish people feel especially vulnerable, the impulse toward communal prayer appears almost irresistible. Yet for many modern Jews, that impulse raises an uncomfortable question: What exactly do we think we are accomplishing when we pray together?

I am reminded of a former colleague who, several days before dying of cancer, remarked: "I don't pray because I believe in God; I believe in God in order to pray." His words have stayed with me. They separate the significance of prayer from any guarantee that our pleas will alter events in a supernatural sense. They also bypass the familiar responses offered when prayers appear to go unanswered: that God's ways are beyond our understanding, or that sometimes His answer is simply "no."

What interests me in this remark is its more fundamental implication: Prayer may arise not because we feel certain regarding divine intervention, but rather because human beings need to pray.

To many modern people, the very notion of petitionary prayer presents a difficulty. We inhabit a world shaped by

The Power of Communal Prayer (CONTINUED)

“Prayer may arise not because we feel certain regarding divine intervention, but rather because human beings need to pray.”

scientific habits of thought. The idea that God suspends the ordinary course of events in response to our requests often seems difficult to sustain. Yet even for those who carry such doubts, prayer may remain a profound religious act.

Perhaps, however, the simplest account of why we pray is also the truest. We pray because we need to. Bound by the limits of our own perspective, we instinctively direct our fears, hopes, gratitude, and longings toward a transcendent Other. The language of the *siddur* does not always correspond precisely to our own theological convictions, but it remains the language of our people. It provides a shared vocabulary through which private anxieties are transformed into collective expression.

When we recite *Tehillim*, gather for communal prayer, or plead for the welfare of Israel and its defenders, however, we are doing more than asking God to intervene. We are turning to the sanctified language of our tradition in order to express vulnerability, hope, gratitude, and responsibility. We remind ourselves that our lives form part of a larger story. We affirm our solidarity with one another and publicly acknowledge our indebtedness to those who place themselves in danger on our behalf. The very act of praying together strengthens bonds of mutual responsibility and shared purpose.

Chazal teach that “a prayer offered together with the community is never rejected” (Brachot 8a). Whatever precisely they meant by that assurance, it points to an intuition deeply embedded in Jewish tradition: Something happens when private concerns are joined to the



hopes and fears of the *tzibbur* (public). But beyond this natural understanding of communal prayer lies a more expansive spiritual vision.

Some strands of Jewish mysticism suggest that the impulse to pray reflects not only a desire to be heard by God, but a yearning to transcend the narrow confines of the self. We ordinarily experience ourselves as isolated individuals, each preoccupied with personal fears, needs, and aspirations. Prayer begins within that framework. We address ourselves to a divine Other and seek His attention and compassion.

Yet the act of prayer can also move us beyond ourselves. The more our concerns become bound up with those of the community, the Jewish people, and ultimately the world as a whole, the more we loosen the boundaries that separate us from one another. In this view, communal prayer is not merely a practical means of fostering solidarity. It is a spiritual exercise in expanding consciousness.

This notion bears a deep resemblance to Rav Kook's understanding of religious life as a progressive widening of identification – from concern for the individual self, outward to the family, the community, the Jewish people, humanity, and ultimately all existence. The significance of prayer, on this account, lies not only in what we ask for, but also in what we become. By directing our attention beyond ourselves, we learn to inhabit larger circles of belonging and responsibility.

Despite its theistic language, prayer may thus be understood as an attempt to connect the finite with the infinite,

“Faced with suffering, uncertainty, and the limits of our own power, we instinctively seek ways of transcending our isolation.”

The Power of Communal Prayer (CONTINUED)



REFLECT, REPAIR, RECONNECT:

Which distractions or habits are preventing me from becoming the person God is calling me to be?

the particular with the universal. The moment of opening outward itself becomes an act of faith. By attaching our personal hopes and fears to realities larger than ourselves, we participate, however briefly, in a broader vision of existence.

This may help explain the extraordinary resurgence of communal prayer in times of national crisis. Faced with suffering, uncertainty, and the limits of our own power, we instinctively seek ways of transcending our isolation. Prayer does not eliminate those limits. But it allows us to confront them together.

This is also, I would suggest, one meaning of *teshuva* – and one that speaks with particular force during the *Yamim Noraim*. Rav Kook understood *teshuva* not merely as repentance for particular failings; rather, he saw it as a return to a deeper and fuller self. The High Holidays invite us to move beyond our habitual preoccupation with ourselves and reconnect with wider circles of belonging – with our community, our people, and ultimately with God. Prayer and *teshuva* become, in this season, two names for the same movement of the soul.

Whether or not prayer changes the course of events, it changes us. It reminds us that our lives are intertwined with those of others and that our deepest hopes are rarely private possessions. In joining our voices together, we become, if only for a moment, larger than ourselves – and closer to that more encompassing reality that Jewish tradition calls *ein od milvado* – there is none besides Him.

What Is Atonement?

Rabbi Avraham Stav



Rabbi Avraham Stav is a Jewish Studies Educator at Ohr Torah Stone's **Neveh Channah High School for Girls**. Before that, he taught Talmud at the **Robert M. Beren Machanaim Hesder Yeshiva**. He also teaches at the Shaarei Zion Beit Midrash in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Stav contributes to Modern Orthodox scholarship aimed at accessible *halakhic* guidance, co-founding the *Assif Torah Journal* for Hesder yeshivot.

One of the most striking descriptions of human beings in the Yom Kippur liturgy is that we are “*seekers of atonement*.” The longing for atonement is among humanity’s deepest motivations. People devote years – even entire lifetimes – to making peace with past mistakes. Literature across cultures is filled with this quest, from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* to countless other works exploring guilt, repentance, and redemption.

Yet this yearning is accompanied by a profound frustration: No matter what we do, the past remains unchanged. The sin, failure, or wrong is still there. So what, exactly, do we mean when we speak of “atonement”? What happens to our sins? What happens to us?

The first appearance of the concept of atonement in the Torah occurs when Jacob prepares to meet his brother Esau after years of estrangement. Fearing Esau’s anger, Jacob sends gifts ahead of him, saying: “*I will appease him with the gift that goes before me.*” The Hebrew verb used is “*achapra*” – “I will atone” or “cover.”

Classical Jewish commentators offer three distinct understandings of this word, each illuminating a different dimension of Yom Kippur.

What is Atonement? (CONTINUED)

“Through the holiness of the day, we reconnect with that inner reality and discover that the past need not define our future.”

Atonement as Cleansing

Rashi explains that atonement means to wipe away or cleanse. Sin is treated like dirt that can be washed off. This understanding is reflected in Isaiah’s words: “Your guilt shall depart and your sin shall be atoned for.” Even in ancient Near Eastern languages, the root *k-p-r* carried the meaning of scrubbing or cleaning.

According to this approach, Yom Kippur offers the possibility of genuine renewal.

Much of the Temple service symbolized death and rebirth. The High Priest completed his sacred duties, immersed himself in water, and emerged transformed – free from the burdens of the past. Likewise, we pray to become as pure as a newborn child.

This vision suggests that beneath our accumulated failures lies a deeper self that can begin again. Through the holiness of the day, we reconnect with that inner reality and discover that the past need not define our future.

Atonement as Redemption

Nachmanides (Ramban) disagrees. He argues that atonement does not erase sin; rather, it resembles a ransom or redemption payment. The biblical term is related to *kofer nefesh* – a payment made to redeem one’s life.

In this view, the focus shifts from the sin to the sinner. The individual deserves consequences for wrongdoing



but seeks to redeem himself. This idea is reflected in the custom of *kapparot* before Yom Kippur and in prayers that ask our sacrifices and self-denial to serve as substitutes for punishment.

But Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes an obvious difficulty: how could a single chicken, charitable donation, or 25-hour fast possibly compensate for a year's worth of failures?

His answer is profound. These acts are not the full payment; they are the first installment. Like the down payment on a house, they represent the beginning of a long process. Yom Kippur marks the moment when a person stops running from responsibility and begins confronting it honestly.

Sin ceases to be merely a source of shame and becomes a catalyst for growth, repair, and commitment. As King David writes: "My transgressions are always before me." Not because he is trapped by them, but because he is determined to learn from them.

Atonement as Reconnection

A third interpretation emerges from an earlier appearance of the same Hebrew root. When Noah is instructed to build the ark, God tells him "*vekaparta ota*" (with pitch). The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra explains that the root *k-p-r* here means "to cover."

According to this understanding, atonement does not erase sins or compensate for them. Rather, it covers them.

“Sin ceases
to be merely
a source of
shame and
becomes a
catalyst
for growth,
repair, and
commitment.”

What is Atonement? (CONTINUED)

At first glance this seems unsatisfying – almost like sweeping problems under the rug. Yet Proverbs offers a deeper insight: “Love covers all transgressions.”

When one person wrongs another, the relationship may be damaged. But when the relationship is rooted in deep love, the offense does not define the whole connection. The wrongdoing remains real, but it is overshadowed by a bond that is deeper and more enduring.

The Zohar describes Yom Kippur in precisely these terms. The day is portrayed as a reunion between God and Israel, a restoration of intimacy. As the relationship is renewed, joy returns, and the sins that once dominated the landscape lose their power. They are not denied, but they no longer stand at the center.

This idea is reflected in the English word “atonement,” often understood as “*at-one-ment*” – the process of becoming one again after separation.

Three Paths, One Goal

These three interpretations of atonement – cleansing, redemption, and reconnection – reflect different spiritual movements that run throughout the prayers and rituals of Yom Kippur.

At times they seem contradictory. Careful self-examination and accountability appear to conflict with the belief that we can begin anew. Both seem at odds with the call to focus less on our failures and more on restoring love and connection.

“As the
relationship
is renewed,
joy returns.”



Yet human life requires all three.

We need the ability to turn a new page and refuse to let past mistakes permanently dictate our future. We need the humility to acknowledge our shortcomings and commit ourselves to repair and growth. And we need the courage to seek the deeper bonds that survive even after disappointment and failure – the place where love remains possible.

For individuals and for societies, true healing requires all three dimensions. We must learn to renew, to repair, and to reconnect. Only then can atonement become not merely the forgiveness of the past, but also the foundation for a better future.



**REFLECT, REPAIR,
RECONNECT:**

*What is one
concrete step
I can take this
year to begin
making amends
for something
I have done or
left undone?*

The Unyielding Promise of Forgiveness

Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz



Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz is an alumna of the inaugural cohort of Ohr Torah Stone's **International Halakha Scholars Program (IHSP)** – a four-year remote learning program for Orthodox Jewish women who are educators, scholars, and communal leaders in the US, Israel, and around the world.

She currently serves as Associate Principal of SAR High School in the Bronx, New York City.

This year, as I sat in shul listening to the Torah reading for *Parshat Shelach*, I was struck by the words of Hashem's response to Moshe in the story of the spies: "*Vayomer Hashem salachti k'dvarecha* – And Hashem said, I pardon as you have asked" (Numbers 14:20). We recite these words as a refrain during *selichot* in the lead up to, and over, the *Yamim Noraim*. However, they don't mean what we think they mean, or at least what we use them to mean in *tefilla*; words of reassurance, a testament to Hashem's complete forgiveness. In fact, they appear in the context of Hashem saying that He will not *fully* forgive the Jewish people. Instead, the generation of the spies will carry their sin and eventually die in the desert.

In this context, the forgiveness being granted is more like mitigation: the meting out of punishment over time, rather than completely destroying the Jewish people in the moment. It's hardly the embracing warmth of Divine love, and it isn't even the comprehensive cleansing that we pray for. It is, at best, a suspended sentence.

There's something of the same in our invocation of other sources about *Teshuva* – Repentance – and forgiveness that appear in the context of the Golden Calf. While Moses in some measure secures forgiveness for that sin (after all, Hashem gives the Jewish people another set of *luchot*, the second Tablets of Stone), Rabbi Yitzchak (Sanhedrin 102a), cites the verse: "*Ubeyom pakdi, ufakadati aleyhem chatotam* – But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins" (Exodus 32:34).



This verse tells us that the sin of the Golden Calf remains to be accounted for, with some measure of culpability for it doled out in the punishment for each of the Jewish people's subsequent sins. The words from these narratives that we include in our *tefillot*, that most of us probably take to be reassurances of Hashem's forgiveness, are in fact a reminder of Hashem as "*poked avon avot al banim ve'al bnei banim* – visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations." This is a disquieting thought, and one that demands further exploration.

The Abarbanel, who as someone expelled from Spain in 1492 knew a thing or two about living through periods of Jewish communal suffering, reads the passage in interesting ways. He understands *salachti k'dvarecha* as a statement about the past. It's as if Hashem is saying to Moses, "In the past, there were many times that I forgave as you asked. And I didn't like how it turned out. They continued to sin against me." He then invokes a strikingly physical metaphor for how Hashem, as it were, experiences the pain of the Jewish people's betrayal "as a needle jabbed into living flesh." For the Abarbanel, *salachti k'dvarecha* is thus not an acceptance of Moses' plea, but rather a reason to set aside Moses' plea.

Nevertheless, all hope is not lost. The Abarbanel continues to remind us that Hashem invokes the *Brit Avot* – the covenant with our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – to convey Hashem's promise to give the Land of Israel to *all of their descendants*, and not

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The Unyielding Promise of Forgiveness (CONTINUED)



REFLECT, REPAIR, RECONNECT:

This year, am I looking only to be absolved of my mistakes – or am I prepared to embrace the accountability that enables genuine transformation?

specifically to the generation that left Egypt. If it's not these descendants who will inherit the land because of their sin(s), it will be other ones, a later generation.

There is, perhaps, reassurance to be found here, even as there is also accountability. Continued offenses against Hashem result in continued consequences. And yet Hashem will never fully abandon the promise to the Jewish people that they will ultimately live in the Promised Land.

In that sense, it is much more akin to the verse that appears in the *Tochecha*: “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I am Hashem their God” (Leviticus 26:44).

The eternity of the Covenant – no matter what we do, no matter what we have done, no matter what Hashem has done to us – may not be a warm and cozy reassurance, but it is an unyielding and unshakeable covenant. No matter what. No matter when. *Salachti k'dvarecha*.

Torat Chesed – a Win-Win Game

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau



Rabbi Yitzchak Blau is a rebbe at Ohr Torah Stone's **Midreshet Lindenbaum**.

In addition to being a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Orayta, Rabbi Blau is an associate editor of the journal *Tradition* and the author of *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada*.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906-1980), longtime Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivas Chaim Berlin in New York, was a profound thinker who chose to convey his thought through *sichot* – discourses – on the *chagim*. These talks were ultimately collected and published under the title *Pachad Yitzchak*. R. Hutner had deep psychological insight and was a poetic soul, extremely sensitive to language. He frequently cites Maharal (R. Yehuda Loew from Prague) who also employed the festivals as a venue for Jewish Thought. We shall encounter all of these aspects of R. Hutner's writing in one *sicha* on Rosh Hashana.

Our rabbinic author categorizes the first four essays in *Pachad Yitzchak* on Rosh Hashana under the rubric of *Kuntras Hacheses* (A Notebook on Benevolence). When God created humanity on Rosh Hashana, that act of creation was the greatest performances of kindness in history. God did not create the world because He lacked anything. The universe added nothing to His perfection. Creation was a pure act of giving – the gift of existence itself.

One of the Torah's most enduring challenges is that we strive not merely to believe in God, but also to emulate Him. This means that we are commanded to emulate our Maker in the realm of compassion, too. Indeed, the third essay (section 2) of *Kuntras Hacheses* mentions the mitzva to imitate God's benevolence.

The second essay begins with a language point. *Mishlei* (Proverbs 31:26) uses the phrase “*Torat chesed*,” which

Torat Chesed – a Win-Win Game (CONTINUED)

we are familiar with from singing that chapter of *Mishlei*, referred to as *Eshet Chayil*, on Friday night before the Shabbat meal. R. Hutner notes that *Torat chesed* differs from Torah and *chesed*. In the latter case, I am doing both things, but not integrating the two. In the former, the compassion somehow modifies and becomes part of the identity of that Torah. What does this *Torat chesed* consist of?

His essays may wander but R. Hutner always keeps his eyes on the prize. He starts his answer with an innovative interpretation of Maharal (*Gevurot Hashem* 6). After the war with the four kings, God reassures Avraham that He will protect him saying “*anokhi magen lakh*” (Genesis 15:1). Though protect/shield is the simplest translation of “*magen*,” Maharal suggests it relates to a Talmudic word meaning *chinam*, nothing (see Onkelos on Exodus 21:11 and *Bava Kama* 85a). This understanding conveys that Avraham’s successful military venture did not subtract at all from his anticipated reward.

R. Hutner relates this to the daily recited mishna (*Peah* 1:1) about those *mitzvot* that supply fruit in this world with the principal enduring till the World to Come. Note that *gemilut chasadim*, compassionate behavior, appears on this list. When God created the world *creatio ex nihilo*, the compassionate act did not cause any diminution. This became the paradigmatic example of kindness and humanity can emulate God in this regard. Of course, our tradition associates Avraham with the trait of *chesed*.

“Creation was a
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The more physical an item, the less this can be accomplished. If I give you a piece of cake, I no longer have it. However, more spiritual entities lend themselves to this divine mode of giving. When I share wisdom with you, I still retain that knowledge. Not only do I not lose, I often end up with more than I started with since teachers learn much from their students (*Ta'anit* 7a). This has certainly been my experience in thirty-three years of teaching. Bestowing insight does not subtract; it adds considerably to a storehouse of wisdom, and thus resembles God's compassion.

We can now return to the opening question and explain what the integration of Torah and *chesed* consists of. A person can do acts of *chesed* within many contexts – visiting the sick, giving *tzedaka*, and more. Most of these leave the giver with measurably less – time, money, etc. In the unique realm of wisdom, however, benevolence only generates increase, and involves no loss to recipient or giver. This becomes a defining character of such compassion, not Torah and *chesed* but *Torat chesed*.

May we succeed in acquiring wisdom, sharing that wisdom, and enjoying the benefit to both parties.



**REFLECT, REPAIR,
RECONNECT:**

How can I better reflect the Divine example of benevolence by giving of myself – my time, wisdom, compassion, or encouragement – to others this year?

New Beginnings, New Connections

Rabbi Eliahu Birnbaum



Rabbi Eliahu Birnbaum is the founding Director of Ohr Torah Stone's **Beren-Amiel and Straus-Amiel Emissary Training Programs**, whose hundreds of alumni are serving as educators and spiritual leaders in Jewish communities around the world.

Known as the “Rav Olami” (Global Rabbi) because of his travels and research into Jewish communities and lost tribes around world, Rabbi Birnbaum recently accepted the Jeusalem Unity Award on behalf of the Straus-Amiel and Beren-Amiel Institutes. This honor reflects Ohr Torah Stone's decades-long commitment to strengthening ties between Israel and Diaspora Jewry.

Although life is one continuous journey, it is also filled with new beginnings – births, schools, marriages, homes, professions, and more. New beginnings challenge us to renew our lives, our relationships, our families, and our communities. Every healthy relationship requires renewal. Individuals, organizations, and societies that refuse to adapt to changing realities ultimately stagnate. Just as businesses must innovate to thrive, so, too, must people continually grow. Renewal is the key to personal and communal vitality.

There is something deeply moving about every new beginning. It fills us with hope and strength for the future, while also demanding the courage and effort to embrace change.

One of the most beautiful ideas in Judaism is, in fact, the opportunity to begin again. Every day we wake up with the chance to do better. Every week we are physically and spiritually renewed through Shabbat. And every year we begin anew with Rosh Hashana.

For many Jews around the world, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – the *Yamim Noraim* – are more than holy days; they are defining moments of Jewish identity. Millions flock to synagogues to hear the shofar, to sing the haunting melodies of yesteryear, and to conclude Yom Kippur with a joyous “Next Year in Jerusalem!”

Many of those who fill our synagogues on the *Yamim Noraim* are not traditionally observant. Yet on these days,



religious and secular Jews, those who walk to synagogue and those who drive, even those distant from Jewish practice, sit side by side. Many come not simply to pray, but to reconnect – with the Jewish people, with their heritage, with memories of parents and grandparents, or with a sense of belonging and purpose. They come because they have chosen to preserve their Jewish identity. This raises an important question: What draws Jews who are otherwise distant from religious life to synagogue on the *Yamim Noraim*? Why does the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei* speak so powerfully, even more than the joyous celebrations of Simchat Torah?

One defining feature of modern Jewish life is loneliness. Some Jews belong to close-knit communities, while many others live disconnected from Jewish communal life. Although they may live in vibrant cities, many Jews around the world, especially today, are experiencing a profound sense of isolation. They are looking to become part of something larger than themselves. They want to strengthen their personal identity through the embrace of the Jewish collective. Even if they do not actively pray, they long to stand together with the community. For many, the twenty-five hours of Yom Kippur are not only the holiest day of the Jewish calendar; they are also the day that most powerfully affirms who they are as Jews.

On Yom Kippur, each individual stands before God, yet never alone. We confess our sins in the plural – “We have sinned” – because repentance is not only a personal

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New Beginnings, New Connections (CONTINUED)

journey, but also a collective one. However, if unabashed egocentricity in today's world has taught us anything, the relationship between the individual and the community is one of the great challenges of our lives: and there is no more fitting time to reflect upon it than on the holiest day of the year.

Another reason so many come to synagogue is the search for spirituality. Across the modern world, people are searching for meaning that transcends ritual and religious practice alone. Many seek a spiritual path into Judaism – not to diminish it, but rather to elevate it. This search helps explain the growing interest in new spiritual movements, neo-Hasidism, the revival of Breslov Hasidism, and even the attraction many feel toward Eastern spiritual traditions.

Religion and spirituality are not identical. One can be religious without being deeply spiritual, and spiritual without being religious. Ideally, the two should complement one another, but they do not always do so. Spirituality is personal and inward; religion is communal and rooted in practice and obligation. Religion provides commandments and structure. Spirituality invites us to ask questions, seek understanding, take responsibility, and discover truth through our own journey.

Religion can sometimes divide people; spirituality has the power to unite them.

Ultimately, spirituality is about touching the soul. It is an ongoing search for meaning that keeps us from becoming

“We can learn
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indifferent to the world around us. Yom Kippur offers that opportunity for every Jew, whether deeply observant or far removed from tradition.

If we can learn to speak the language of a spiritually meaningful Judaism – one that fosters belonging, purpose, and relevance – we can bring many more Jews closer to their heritage, both in Israel and throughout the Diaspora. Throughout the year, and especially during the *Yamim Noraim*, we must strive to listen carefully to the diverse voices of the Jewish people and to speak a Jewish language – intellectual, spiritual, and deeply human – that can touch every Jewish heart.



**REFLECT, REPAIR,
RECONNECT:**

*What is one
relationship –
with God, with
another person,
with the Jewish
people, or with
myself – that I
most hope to
renew this year?*

Our Complex World Needs a Torah Community to Light the Way

Torah

Anchoring our learning in the timeless Jewish sources that speak to a generation asking deeper questions than ever before.



Leadership

Training rabbis, educators, and communal leaders to bring *halakhic* wisdom and compassion to the realities of Jewish life today.

Peoplehood

Strengthening Am Yisrael through IDF service, *shlichut* throughout the Diaspora, and initiatives that bring Jews together across communities and divides.



Responsibility

Turning Torah values into transformative action through *aguna* advocacy, social justice, and compassionate care that ensures every person is seen, heard, and valued.



Torah that Changes People. People that Change the World.



Ohr Torah Stone is a Modern Orthodox movement of 33 global programs rooted in Torah, building the leaders and communities that strengthen Israel and unite the Jewish people.

This publication went to print during a period of tremendous challenges for the State of Israel and the Jewish people. While circumstances continue to evolve, the reflections within these pages speak to enduring truths about community, compassion, and hope, and the strength of prayer and connection in times of uncertainty.

As always, our tefillot are with those who defend our people and with their families.

May the New Year bring protection, clarity, and strength to *Am Yisrael*.

