

Glimmers of Light:

Reflections on Hope for the Days of Awe 5785



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On the cover:

The Esslingen Mahzor (MS New York 9344). See page 6.

Introduction

DR. SHULY RUBIN SCHWARTZ, Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History, JTS



I am delighted to share with you JTS's 5785 High Holiday reader entitled *Glimmers of Light: Reflections on Hope for the Days of Awe*.

This year we invited contributors, including JTS faculty, administration, alumni, and students, to reflect on how the liturgy of the Yamim Nora'im are helping them navigate present-day challenges. You will read poignant texts and inspiring interpretations to help focus your thoughts and actions during this High Holiday season.

I'm deeply grateful for the compassion and wisdom the authors provided throughout this guide. They have fearlessly shared their concerns, worries, and struggles, and paired them with teachings, actions, and sources that sustain them during the Yamim Nora'im. I hope that their insightful contributions help you find and bring light to the New Year.

I am immensely thankful to Shelly and Larry Gross, who most generously supported this initiative, enabling us to share this wisdom with you.

Shanah tovah u-metukah.

Let the New Year and Its Blessings Begin

RABBI AYELET S. COHEN, Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS



אחות קטנה תפלותיה	A little sister prepares her prayers and
עזרכה ועונה תהלותיה	proclaims her praises.
אל נא רפא נא למחלותיה	Oh God, please heal her ailments.
תכלה שנה וקללותיה	Let the year and its curses be over

Across the Mizrahi and Sephardic world and now adopted by many other communities, these words open the service on the first night of Rosh Hashanah. This piyyut, Ahot Ketanah (Little Sister), by the 13th-century Spanish rabbi Abraham Hazan Girondi, was written in a time when the community, vulnerable to religious persecution and disease, had known great suffering in the year that was en.

We can relate. In a year that was marked by so much loss, fear, and division, it feels difficult to greet a new year with optimism and excitement. We wonder if anything will really be different. And yet we still come to synagogue on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, the sanctuary decorated in white like a new page that has just been turned, and we pray for a new beginning.

Ahot Ketanah occupies a parallel place to Kol Nidrei, before the start of the formal evening liturgy, sung just as the sun begins to set, in the liminal moment between light and darkness where transformation seems possible. The piyyut centers on the metaphor of the little sister, a vulnerable yet resilient figure who inspires us to feel protective.

She has endured much hardship in the waning year, and we pray with her and for her so that as the year ends, so will its curses. As the piyyut traces the hardships our “sister” has experienced, we may reflect on our own year. We recall each season and what we experienced and witnessed in our lives and relationships, in the world around us, in Israel and Gaza, and in our home communities. The pain of this past year was profound. Many of us felt deeply isolated and vulnerable in ways that felt like the realization of our worst fears. As the New Year begins, we may wonder how to move forward.

The words of this piyyut are not about false optimism or empty promises. They give voice to the grief and loss of the previous year, while making room for hope.

The words of this piyyut are not about false optimism or empty promises. They give voice to the grief and loss of the previous year while making room for hope.

The last stanza allows us to imagine a new beginning. It invites us to open ourselves to the joy that would come if we were able to rally around those most vulnerable, and to acknowledge and heal the vulnerable parts within us. If we fulfill our part of the covenant to not succumb to despair and to work toward justice, we might find God there.

חזקו וגילו כי שד גמר Be strong and rejoice, for the trauma is ended.
 לצור הוחילו בריתו שמר Hope in the Rock; fulfill the covenant.
 לכם ותעלו לציון ואמר You will ascend to Zion and say:
 סלו סלו מסלותיה Pave the way!
 תחל שנה וברכותיה Let the New Year and its blessings begin.

Ahot Ketana

Rabbi Abraham Hazan Girondi
 Spain, 13th century

תפלותיה אחות קטנה Little sister—prepares her prayers and proclaims her praises.
 תהלותיה עורקה ועונה Oh God, please heal her ailments. *Let the year and its curses be over.*

למחלותיה אל נא רפא נא

תקלה שנה וקלותיה

לך תקראה בנעם מלים With pleasant words she calls upon You, and with songs of
 כי לך נאה ושיר והלולים praise, as befits You.
 עינך ותראה עד מה תעלים For how long will You avert your eyes? Look! Enemies devour
 נחלותיה זרים אוכלים her inheritance! *Let the year and its curses be over.*

תקלה שנה וקלותיה

ארויות זרו רעה את צאנך Tend your sheep, which the lions dispersed, and pour Your
 באומרים ערו ושפך חרונוך wrath upon those who say ‘Destroy;’ They have breached the
 פרוצו וארו וכנת ימינך vine at your right hand and plucked [its fruit], not even
 עוללותיה לא השאירו leaving her tiny grapes. *Let the year and its curses be over.*

תקלה שנה וקלותיה

לראש ממלכת הקם משפלות Raise her up from degradation to lofty majesty, for in the pit
 נפשה נתכת כי בבור גלות of exile her soul had been melted. When the basest are
 לבה שופכת וכרם זלות elevated her heart was poured out, empty; among the poorest
 משכנותיה בדלי דלות of the poor are her dwellings. *Let the year and its curses be over.*

תקלה שנה וקלותיה

בתך מבור מתי תעלה When will You lift up your daughter from the pit; and from
 עליה תשבר ומבית כלא her imprisonment, [will You] break her yoke? May You act
 בצאתך כגבור ותפליא פלא wondrously when You go out, heroic, to finally end her
 מכלותיה להתם וכלה sufferings. *Let the year and its curses be over.*

תקלה שנה וקלותיה

כי שד גמר חזקו וגילו Be strong and rejoice for the trauma is ended; place hope in
 בריתו שמר לצור הוחילו the Rock and fulfill the covenant. You will ascend to Zion and
 לציון ואמר לכם ותעלו say: Pave the way! *Let the year and its blessings begin.*

מסלותיה סלו סלו

תחל שנה וברכותיה

Crying With God

On Hayom Harat Olam (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 158, 162, and 166)

RABBI GORDON TUCKER, Vice Chancellor of Religious Life and Engagement, JTS



In an essay some years ago, the Israeli teacher and poet Sara Friedland ben Arza asked us to focus on the prayer Hayom Harat Olam (Today the World Stands as at Birth) in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. She asks why, in a religious tradition that moved away so notably from ancient mythological motifs, is there a rare reference to the “birthing” of the world? And why is that short prayer placed just after the shofar is blown? In fact, she makes another very perceptive observation. The imagery of the conception and birthing of children, so unusual in a liturgy that is mostly about God’s sovereignty and judgment, is actually at the very heart of every one of the scriptural readings for this holiday: Sarah and Isaac, Abraham and Ishmael, Hannah and Samuel, and Rachel and her exiled children. What, in the end, is this focus on the wish for, and fears for, children all about? Ben Arza’s answer is that by analogizing our relationship to God to the relationship of parents and children and using these vivid narratives to evoke spiritual and ethical depth on these days, the tradition is trying to direct our thoughts to God through things that we already know in the human realm.

The decision to birth children is an anticipation of joy accompanied by risk—we hope that our children will walk a road of goodness and righteousness and that we will be able to provide for them and protect them from the dangers of the world. What joy there is when all these hopes are fulfilled, and what inconsolable grief there is when they are not, when children go astray, or when we are unable to keep them safe. And so it is with God, whose decision to birth a world was from the beginning an act of love and delight in creation, but also—this poem teaches us—fraught with the very same perils that we face in our lives and families.

When those terrible fears for children (ours and God’s) become real, we weep. The Talmud tells us that God repairs to a secret place in order to cry for the corruption of the world by God’s children. And parents whose children hurt others or are hurt by others, who are unable to keep their children from harm, or even death, cry a shattering cry. Those sobbing sounds are the broken and breath-snatching sounds of the shofar’s *shevarim* and *teruah*.

This year, we heard these wailings from the loved ones of the victims of October 7, from the families of Israeli hostages and of fallen IDF soldiers, and from the tormented parents in Gaza, children who are described in our Tanakh with the words, “Little children beg for bread, but none can give them a morsel” (Lam. 4:4). Can one imagine the anguish the heavenly Parent must feel seeing the tiny caskets being interred on both sides of a border that divides territory but not human nature?

That is perhaps why, immediately after those sobbing and wailing sounds of the Shofar, Hayom Harat Olam deliberately gives us the bold image of God’s womb that conceived us. Perhaps by turning our thoughts to the pain felt by the Creator, we might be able to arouse compassion in our human family so as to end the nightmares we fear for those whom we have conceived in love.

The JTS Library is home to the largest collection of rare Judaica in the Western Hemisphere. Pieces from this collection offer insight into historical moments and communal response, showcasing moments of transition, community engagement, and evolving traditions. These selections were adapted from the forthcoming book *Discovering Great Treasure* written by Rabbi Marcus Mordecai Schwartz, PhD, Henry R. and Miriam Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections of the JTS Library.

The Esslingen Mahzor (MS New York 9344)

The Esslingen Mahzor (MS New York 9344). The word *Melech* (King) on this page would have been visible throughout the small congregation, providing a physical reminder of God's sovereignty.

In the winter of 1290 in Esslingen, a small market town in southwest Germany, a talented Jewish scribe named Kalonimos ben Yehudah completed his one surviving credited work, *The Esslingen Mahzor* (MS New York 9344), the earliest-dated Hebrew book made in Germany. It is a large-format prayer book created for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

An iconic image appears on the opening of the morning service for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. A central archway forms a full-page frame around a few enlarged Hebrew words. What catches the eye most is the huge word in the middle of the page, *Melech* or *King*, taken from a liturgical poem (*piyyut*) for Rosh Hashanah: “O King, girded with might / Great Your name with might / Yours the arm with might.”

King refers to God, but why is this word so large? To understand, we need to consider the prayer hall where this *mahzor* was used. Synagogues were small, square structures. Few in the room had individual prayer books for the Rosh Hashanah service, but everyone could see what was on the reader's central table. So, a worshipper's eye would naturally rest on the largest word, which communicated the theme of the day: God is King. This work captures the reverence of the holiday and demonstrates one of the ways people came together through communal prayer.



A Way Forward After Trauma

On the Rosh Hashanah Torah Readings (Day 1: *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 100–102; Day 2: *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 103–105)

RABBI ELLIOT COSGROVE (RS '99), Rabbi, Park Avenue Synagogue, Manhattan, and Author of *For Such a Time as This: On Being Jewish Today*

In a year marked by trauma, war, and enmity, we approach the holiday season in search of a language of reconciliation. The story of our people's first family, as told in the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings, provides the beginnings of a new vocabulary by which even the most intractable conflicts can begin to thaw.

The Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah relays the story of the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Hagar and her son, Ishmael. Plucked from obscurity by God, Abraham and Sarah are commanded to give life to a people, be a blessing to all of humanity, and go to the Land of Canaan. But Sarah is barren; she can't bear children. Who will receive the blessing? Who will inherit the land? The promise must be fulfilled, so Sarah finds a concubine for Abraham, Hagar, a woman whose name literally means "the stranger." Hagar gives birth to a son, Ishmael, and—although everyone enters the arrangement with the best of intentions—the sting, for reasons all too human, is too much for Sarah to bear. Even after Sarah is eventually blessed with her own son, Isaac, the tensions mount. In Ishmael, Sarah sees both a physical and economic threat to her son; Ishmael's continued existence presents a challenge to Isaac's claim to the land. As for Hagar, she sees in Isaac the promise once destined for her son, Ishmael, slipping away. Things come to a head, and at Sarah's behest, Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham's home—their lives saved by the intercession of a well-timed angel and the appearance of a life-giving well, in Hebrew, a *be'er*. There is no record of Abraham and Ishmael ever speaking again; their relationship, understandably, would never be the same.

The Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah relays a story no less traumatic—the tale of the binding of Isaac. The same Abraham who pleaded on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, who put himself on the line to save his nephew Lot, somehow sees fit to heed God's command to set Isaac on the altar, a near-death experience again averted only by the intercession of another well-timed angel. Sarah was so horrified, the Rabbis explain, at her husband's willingness to sacrifice their only son that she herself dies of heartache. So traumatized was Isaac by the whole experience that he never again spoke to his father. That angel may have saved Isaac's life, but the relationship between father and son was sacrificed at the top of Mt. Moriah.



It is a tragedy of generations, filled with distrust, violence, heartache, and the hardening of hatreds, a tragedy whose ripple effects play out to this very day.

Given that Isaac and Ishmael go on to give life to two nations, one Jewish and one Arab, this telling cuts close to home—especially this year. Two brothers share a lineage and share a claim to a land. Two brothers are estranged from one another, estranged from their parents, and estranged from God’s promise. It is a tragedy of generations, filled with distrust, violence, heartache, and the hardening of hatreds, a tragedy whose ripple effects play out to this very day.

Bleak as our story is, the Rabbis offer a sliver of redemption and the possibility of reconciliation. As noted, following the trauma of Mt. Moriah, Abraham and Isaac never speak again. The father and son who went up the mountain together go down separately. Abraham returns to Be’er Sheva. But where did Isaac go? The answer comes shortly thereafter in the scene where Isaac meets his bride, Rebecca: “And Isaac returned from Be’er-lahai-roi, for he had settled in the region of the Negev” (Gen. 24:62). “Where is Be’er-lahai-roi?” the Rabbis ask, “And what was Isaac doing there?” It was, according to the Midrash, the home of Hagar—that same well, that *be’er*; that saved Hagar when she almost perished. Why would Isaac—who no doubt suffered the posttraumatic effects of nearly being killed by his father and who was still mourning the death of his mother, Sarah—go to see Hagar, the woman whom, by a certain telling, he had every right to resent? Because, the Rabbis teach, Isaac wanted to reunite his stepmother, Hagar, with his father, Abraham.

Despite all the trauma, bitterness, and pain, these people somehow get it together and find hope in the darkness.

It is an astonishing turn of events. The very thought that Isaac’s first act of personal agency in the wake of his own trauma was to reunite his father with Hagar. What courage it must have taken for Isaac to approach Hagar. Even more incredible is to consider Hagar. How brave it must have been for her not only to receive Isaac, but to follow him back. The hatred she must have had to wrestle, considering that from her perspective, it was Isaac’s birth that prompted her exile. But, according to the Rabbis, that is exactly what happened. After all those years, Hagar returns and remarries Abraham. Our broken first family becomes less broken. Despite all the trauma, bitterness, and pain, these

people somehow get it together and find hope in the darkness.

History may not repeat itself, but biblical history does rhyme—at least for rabbis—especially when it comes to the eponymous forefathers of our present-day nations. We would do well to muster within ourselves, individually and as a people, a little bit of our forebearer Isaac. A survivor of trauma who, nevertheless, built a vocabulary for the future. Remember the hurt and hold the pain, and yet find a way to put one foot ahead of the other. It is not everything, it might not even be much of something, but maybe it is a place to start. And God knows, we are all in need of a place to start.

HAFTAROT OF THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

Pour Out Your Hearts

On the Haftarah for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah
1 Samuel 1–2:10 (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 108–110)

RABBI JOEL SELTZER, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement, JTS

The haftarah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah centers around Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel. Elkanah, a man of the hill country of Ephraim, had two wives: Peninnah, who had children, and Hannah, who was childless. In a moment of overwhelming challenge, Hannah approaches the Temple in Shiloh to offer a personal prayer: “O Adonai Tzeva’ot, if You will look upon the suffering of your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to Adonai for all the days of his life” (1 Sam. 1:11).



Watching Hannah’s prayer from a distance, Eli the priest mistakes her for a drunk, and he rebukes her: “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” (1:14).

Hannah quickly corrects his mistake explaining: “Oh no my lord . . . I have drunk no wine . . . but I have been pouring my heart out to Adonai” (1:15).

Hannah provides a powerful paradigm of prayer for us on these Days of Awe. Are we concerned with how we may appear when we are in prayer? Do we shy away from moments of visible supplication, such as when the clergy bow and touch the floor during the Aleinu and the Avodah service? Does that make us feel too conspicuous in a sea of congregants? How many of us would have our davening mistaken for disorderly conduct? Have we become too staid? Too self-conscious?

Perhaps an answer comes in the words of Eli’s mistaken rebuke: “Sober up!”

This is not a moment for rote performance. This is not a time for spiritual self-restraint—these are the Days of Awe, the gates are open, and, just like Hannah, our job is to cry ourselves straight through the door.

**Are we concerned
with how we may
appear when we are in
prayer?**

Seeking Those Who Do Not Know Us

On Keter Melukha
(*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, 150)

MARC HERSCH, JTS Rabbinical Student

וידרשוד עמים לא ידעוך

“Nations that knew You not will seek You” (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, 150).

The line of the *piyyut* Veyetayu, known colloquially as Keter Melukha by its refrain, has puzzled me over time with its expansive vision of the Messianic era. It yearns for a world not just in which God is praised extensively, but also in which each person pledges loyalty to God.



How can there exist a world in which religious and political differences are put aside to agree on the unity of God? Furthermore, even when we believe in the same God, how do we reconcile our valid differences of interpretations for this greater purpose? Having lived in Jerusalem for the past year, I watched my hope for this kind of bliss become diluted with fear and doubt. As I witnessed the effects of the war in Gaza deeply impact my classmates at Machon Schechter (our Israeli partner institution) and the hostage crisis wreak havoc on an entire nation, I grew ever more skeptical of prayers like this one.

This result is only possible, says Rashi, when we reaffirm our belief in God, the same God who first called us, the people Israel, together.

The source of this line is the prophet Isaiah, who proclaims, “So you shall summon a nation you did not know” (Isa. 55:5). I cannot help but identify here with the people’s struggle to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy, as much then as now. Rashi provides much-needed clarification through added context. Rashi highlights the act of summoning: God brought us into relationship and dialogue. Now the people first must affirm their faith “to the name of the Lord that is summoned upon you” (Rashi, ad loc).

This result is only possible, says Rashi, when we reaffirm our belief in God, the same God who first called us, the people Israel, together. God brought us into relationship and dialogue. Now, says Isaiah, is the time for us to do the same.

It is difficult to live up to the vision of dialogue when, at the time of this writing, we have marked more than 300 days of war and captivity for more than 100 individuals. As if to give us hope, Isaiah precedes this vision with a reminder of the covenant that God made with David, who was born on Tishah Be’av. Although born on the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, David would ultimately represent the lasting bond between God and the Jewish people. “Do not give up,” says Isaiah (Isa. 55:3). “Remember how God called you in,” says Rashi. “Use this year for good,” says the *piyyut*.

May these Yamim Nora’im give us the strength to work for peace for the people we know and don’t know.
Shanah Tovah!

Sha'ar Bat Rabim

(MS New York 10663)

Sha'ar Bat Rabim (MS New York 10663).
Hand-drawn copy of the original title
page, re-created in 1716.

Sha'ar Bat Rabim is an extraordinary manuscript/printed-book hybrid that vividly illustrates the concept of the “lives of books.” This volume, originally printed in Venice, serves as a prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur according to the Ashkenazic rite. It is notable for both its printed text and the numerous manuscript pages inserted throughout. One particularly striking feature of the manuscript is the elaborate ornamental title page, hand-drawn to replicate the original printed design. This title page bears the dates 1711 and 1716, reflecting the complex history of the manuscript’s compilation and usage. The volume, originally printed in two parts, was later expanded and rebound in 1824 to accommodate the additional leaves and annotations.

The manuscript’s handwritten additions, which span several generations of cantors in the Ashkenazi synagogue of Padua, provide a fascinating record of the evolving liturgical practices within the community. For instance, the annotations include instructions for modifying the service and adding specific *piyyutim*, which reflect the dynamic nature of Jewish liturgical traditions.

Throughout the manuscript, one can find numerous examples of the intricate interplay between printed and handwritten text. The printed sections, executed in black ink, are complemented by the handwritten annotations in brown ink, creating a visually striking contrast. This blend of print and manuscript highlights the manuscript’s role as a living document, continually adapted and expanded by its users. The printed text forms the core, serving as a foundation upon which multiple generations added their insights and adaptations.

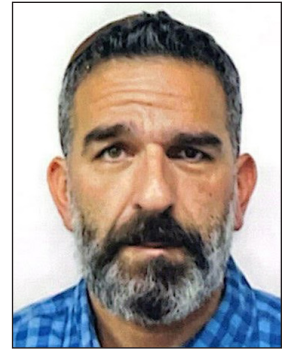
In thinking about the history of this book, consider how we can adapt our High Holiday services to make them more meaningful for ourselves and our communities.

Adapted from the forthcoming book Discovering Great Treasure.



We Choose Life

RABBI LEOR SINAI (RS '09), Co-CEO, Alexander Muss High School, Israel



The Days of Awe, Yamim Nora'im, are a time of reflection and choices. In Parashat Nitzavim, God suggests to the People of Israel prior to entering the Land “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life.” (Deut. 30:19). And in the Laws of Repentance (*teshuvah*), Moses Maimonides suggests, “Man is capable either of rising to noble heights or of falling into a life of sin—the choice is his.” And finally, William Shakespeare suggests, “To be, or not to be, that is the question.”

On the morning of October 7, 2023, Simhat Torah 5784, Am Yisrael woke up to the news of Hamas’s brutal invasion of Israel, which resulted in the longest ongoing war we have faced as a modern nation-state. Though broken, Am Yisrael chose to act; we chose life.

Yet within 24 hours of the invasion, we saw glimmers of light. Israelis, Jews around the world, and our allies chose to act.

Following my ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary in 2009, my wife and I chose to fulfill our dream of making aliyah in 2011. Our move to Israel was a dream come true—not just our dream, but the dream of our ancestors. On October 7, the dream became a nightmare as darkness spread all over. Yet within 24 hours of the invasion, we saw glimmers of light. Israelis, Jews around the world, and our allies chose to act. Many headed to southern Israel in support of the evacuated families and soldiers. Many took part in food and clothing drives. Many donated precious resources. Many volunteered to help save the agricultural sector. And many of you came to physically bear witness—to be in

Israel during her greatest hour of need.

A friend and I heard about a gathering of hostage families at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (later known as Hostage Square / Kikar Hahatufim) in Tel Aviv. We decided to go to the square on that first Friday evening, erev Shabbat, to be with the families. We lit Shabbat candles, sang “Shalom Aleichem,” and recited Kiddush. What we witnessed at that time was incredible, tearful, joyous, and hopeful. We have been here ever since, not missing a single erev Shabbat since October 7. We pray and sing with both secular and religious Jews—with and without kippot—and with non-Jews from across Israel and the world who have come because the heart yearns for healing, unity, and hope. For us, erev shabbat at Hostage Square has become hallowed land, a Beit Hamikdash, symbolizing a new covenant among people who choose life.

This year, 5785, we enter the Days of Awe an ocean apart, though we stand together at the intersection of life. My hope for you, for us all, is that in 5785 we choose to be, we choose life, and by doing so we embody the value of *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* “All of the Jewish people are responsible for one another.” Together we will heal what hurts, we will repair our rifts, and we will envision better days ahead for us and for our children everywhere.

Shanah tovah u-metukah!



Rabbi Leor Sinai (far right) in Kikar Hahatufim

What Is Your *Shelihut*?

RABBI ANNIE LEWIS, Director of Recruitment and Admissions for Religious and Educational Leadership, JTS

After this past year full of grief and devastation unrolled, we are still trying to catch our breath. I find myself remembering an afternoon in a performing arts school in the center of Jerusalem at the end of October. After October 7, the pro-democracy movement in Israel reorganized overnight into a volunteer outfit supporting the needs of displaced civilians and soldiers called up to serve. Schools and community centers were transformed into control centers. Along with fellow clergy and lay leaders of the Conservative Movement, I joined a mission to Israel with the Fuchsberg Center. We stood with volunteers of all ages and backgrounds in a black box theater—packing groceries, toiletries, underwear, and uniforms. Our hands and hearts were ready to do something, anything, to help and to heal. I prayed, “*Ribono shel olam*, Master of the Universe, I am here. Help me to be of service—to You, to my beloved Jewish people, to this broken and beautiful world.”



Each of us is put into this world to till and to tend to it, and each of us has our own part to play. As we begin a new year, we are given the gift of reconnecting with our passion and our purpose. We ask, “How can I be of service? What is my *shelihut*? What is my holy assignment for this life, for this moment, for this singular body, for this soul?”

In his book of essays about the High Holidays, titled *Yemei Zikaron (Days of Remembrance)*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik includes an essay on this very theme. He marvels that God sends Moses to confront Pharaoh in the Exodus story. It is shocking that an all-powerful, eternal God would appoint a mere mortal messenger to be a copartner in the miracles of redemption. Soloveitchik teaches that we can understand this choice by considering that God created humanity in the Divine image (*betzelem Elohim*). “Each one of us is a messenger of the Creator,” Soloveitchik writes. “Each human life has a distinct mission (*shelichut*).” We are here, each exactly as we are, in this particular place and moment, for a reason.

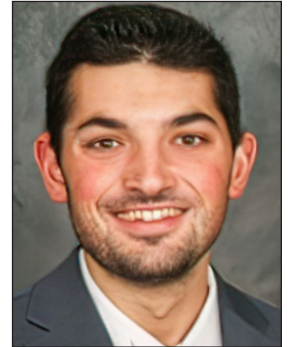
On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we ask our Creator to remember us. We allow ourselves to be seen by God, who knows us inside and out, who knows our essence. In intimate moments of prayer and contemplation, we can catch a glimpse of ourselves as God sees us. These holy days invite us to experience anew that we are, each one of us, created in the Divine image and to discern once again the calling of our *shelihut*: How am I meant to use my gifts to bring more goodness into the world?

Every one of us is a *shaliah*, a representative of the Divine tasked with repairing the world. In my work as director of Recruitment and Admissions for Religious and Educational Leadership at JTS, I have the blessing of sitting with individuals who see their *shelihut* as sharing the light of Torah by becoming rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators. It is an honor to support our inspiring students and prospective students who seek to serve and to lead in these crucial and dizzying times. This season, may we listen deeply to the blare of the shofar and to the still small voices within us. May we hear our unique call to service. May we respond, “*Hineni*. I am here.”

Renewing Your Judaism

DANIEL CAPLAN, Student Body President, List College, JTS

The High Holidays focus on *teshuvah* and starting anew; however, as I reflect on the explosive past year that the Jewish people have faced, neither of these traditional Rosh Hashanah values offer me much comfort or guidance on how to move forward. When I return to Columbia University's campus this semester, am I supposed to forgive my peers for making me feel unwelcome at my own college? Sure, Judaism teaches us to forgive others—but only after an apology has been given. Yet it also doesn't feel very "Jewish" to hold onto these feelings of resentment.



This tension between forgiving and holding onto feelings of frustration and hurt is something I imagine many Jews are grappling with this new year, regardless of their perspectives on the state of Israel. This past year has been stained by the perpetual rise in antisemitism at both the community level and on a global scale. I lost friendships because of my connection to Israel; I was held to different academic standards by professors than my non-Zionist peers, and I felt I had to be quiet about my identity. Other college students faced greater challenges—being spit on, facing violence, or abandoning their campuses before the semester was over. And yet, it would be extremely unproductive and harmful for any of us to hold onto these experiences and allow them to feed feelings of fear or anger.

As we enter this next year, we shouldn't see it as a blank slate, but rather look at Rosh Hashanah as our chance to renew our covenant with God and Judaism. Taking the experiences, conversations, and knowledge of the past year gives us the background to recommit to our Judaism with a more holistic perspective. While you reflect on your actions in 5784, I urge you all to consider what it means to renew yourself to the covenant in 5785. In doing so, you are committing yourself to an ethno-religion that impels you to strive to repair the world, lead with kindness, and encourage deep questioning. I learned this past year that the connection between our religion and Israel is not easily understood or easily explained. However, to successfully combat the implicit, subconscious antisemitism that has been spreading through America, we must have the strength and patience to have difficult conversations, to help others understand. And while this is no easy task, it can be remedied by returning to our core Jewish values, working to goals of mutual respect and understanding. As we face what may be another difficult year for the Jewish people, it is important to hold these values in mind as we work towards a more caring, understanding society.

You are committing yourself to an ethno-religion that impels you to strive to repair the world, lead with kindness, and encourage deep questioning.

HAFTAROT OF THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

Hope Through Tears

On the Haftarah for the Second-Day Rosh Hashanah
Jeremiah 31:2–20 (*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 111–113)

RABBI JOEL SELTZER, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement, JTS

The haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah echoes both the violence and the promise of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, as Israel is described as “the people escaped from the sword” (Jer. 31:2), while God promises, “There is hope for your future—your children shall return to their country” (31:17).

The haftarah is also well known for its descriptive image of the matriarch Rachel weeping bitterly for her children: “Thus said Adonai: A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children who are gone” (31:15).

Let us also take comfort in the words of this haftarah, promised to the Jewish people over a millennium ago: “There is hope for your future—your children shall return to their country.”

Our liturgy is a constant—our lives are forever the variable. This year, it feels like our haftarah speaks to the indescribable sorrow following the horrific attack on Israel of October 7. More than 1,200 people—soldiers and civilians, mothers and fathers, children and grandparents—were not saved from the sword, and more than 100 hostages remain captive in Gaza. We, the Jewish people, are in a persistent state of loss, bitterness, and despair.

As I write this, 10 months have passed, and many of us feel like Rachel, still weeping, still unable to find comfort over the loss of so many innocent souls. Some of us mark the

bitterness with pieces of tape, counting each day of captivity. Others wear dog tags or ribbons, daily reminders of the pain of our people.

While acknowledging the pain, let us also take comfort in the words of this haftarah, promised to the Jewish people over a millennium ago: “There is hope for your future—your children shall return to their country.”

Despite the aching pain of this year for Israel, for the Jewish people, and for all the innocent who suffer, we are alive in a miraculous era of Jewish history, one which has seen Rachel’s children return to the Land. Through our tears, let us also find *tikvah* in God’s promise for a better future.

The Toledo-Constantinople Bible

(MS New York L6)

Like all Masoretic texts, *The Toledo-Constantinople Bible* includes precise Hebrew and Aramaic text, vocalization, and accents of the 24 books of the Hebrew canon. The colophon¹ of this Bible reveals a statement of profound resilience. The scribe wrote:

“This book, which has the 24 holy books of scripture, was written by the learned Rabbi Abraham Khalif . . . in the city of Toledo which is in Spain. And it was finished in the month of Nissan, in the five thousandth, two hundred and fifty-second year since the creation of the world, for the most sage R. [Jacob Abayub] . . . son of . . . R. [Samuel]. God will grant him the privilege to recite them, he and his seed and his seed’s seed for ever. And on the seventh of the month of Av, in the same year, the exiles of Jerusalem which were in Spain went forth dismayed and banished by the king’s command. May they come back with joy, bearing their sheaves. And I Hayim Ibn Hayim have written therein part of the Massora and lists of variants in the year 5257 in the City of Constantinople. May salvation be at hand.”

We learn that Rabbi Abraham Khalif began writing the biblical text in Toledo in 1492, but the Jews were forced to leave Spain before he could finish. Hayim Ibn Hayim completed it by writing the Masoretic notes and lists in Constantinople in 1497. This book was not laid aside; it was picked up and completed. It is a powerful testament to our textual tradition and shared learning.

This book was acquired by Elkan Nathan Adler in 1888 near Constantinople. According to Adler, this Bible stayed within five miles of the spot where it was completed for four centuries. When he bought it, the name of the original owner had been erased, but with a solution of tannic acid, he reclaimed this part of the story.

Adapted from the forthcoming book Discovering Great Treasure.



The Toledo-Constantinople Bible (MS New York L6). The colophon text written in beautiful calligraphy details the story of this book beginning in Spain before the Inquisition and ending in Constantinople five years later. The script below the colophon notes the book’s ownership.

¹ A statement at the end of a book, typically with a printer’s emblem, that gives information about its authorship and printing.

The Importance of Showing Up

HILLARY GARDENSWARTZ (KGS, DS '07), Director of Student Experiences, Civic Spirit, and Board Member, JTS



What might be a compelling reason to think and act beyond oneself?

“You are not obligated to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it” (Avot 2:21).

“If I am only for myself, what am I?” (Avot 1:15).

These teachings from Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of Our Fathers) emphasize one’s individual responsibility to the collective. Our singular actions affect others; we each have an obligation to positively impact our greater communities. But with so much happening in these unsettling and unstable times, it is reasonable to want to simply check out and stay in our personal bubble. The issues are seemingly endless: antisemitism, political instability, misinformation, climate change, social media saturation, the loneliness epidemic, and on and on. When simply getting out of bed some days is a victory, why add the obligation to show up for others?

When simply getting out of bed some days is a victory, why add the obligation to show up for others?

Our deep well of Jewish tradition and wisdom, alongside our rich and complex American history, provides inspiring guideposts on how to navigate this sense of obligation. Jewish ritual life is built upon the presence of a community. We literally cannot complete certain obligations without a minyan, especially those obligations connected to the celebration and commemoration of seasonal, annual, and life-cycle events. Our tradition demands that we be counted and that we take count

of others, which includes everything from daily prayer to knowing who is sick or grieving or celebrating a milestone. Being counted in community means one shows support for those who need our presence without needing to do anything more than share the same space. Our mere physical presence positively impacts another’s ability to experience a life event with communal support.

Showing up and being counted in the civic space is just as important as it is in Jewish spaces. Being civically engaged fulfills that same sense of obligation to others; you are part of a larger community, and therefore your voice not only matters but is necessary to create progress and change. Showing up in the civic realm—whether attending a community board meeting, voting, paying taxes, or participating in a park cleanup—matters. It matters, and it also takes practice. We cannot expect our children or our students to understand what it means to be civically committed if we do not show them. We must model the skills of being responsible members of the community: engage in respectful dialogue with others (especially with those who hold opposing views), know our local representatives and issues, and build relationships with different members of our community. In his speech “Democracy and Education,” educator Booker T. Washington said, “Character, not circumstances,

makes the man. It is more important that we be prepared for voting than that we vote, more important that we be prepared to hold office than that we hold office, more important that we be prepared for the highest recognition than that we be recognized.”

As we enter 5785, may we take our obligation to bolster our various communities seriously. May we find strength in each other and power in our actions to make positive change. May we create civic and Jewish spaces that foster authentic relationship-building across differences and allow democracy to flourish.

Feel Everything

On Joel (Haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah,
Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,
Ashkenazi Tradition)

DR. YAEL LANDMAN, Assistant Professor of Bible, JTS

During this time of ongoing, unendurable communal pain, I think of a few verses from the book of Joel, one of the biblical minor prophets. Amid bleak warnings of overwhelming catastrophe, “Most terrible—who can endure it?” (Joel 2:11), the prophet cites God’s call for *teshuvah*: “Yet even now . . . turn back to Me with all your hearts, / and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting” (2:12). Joel then demands, “Rend your hearts / rather than your garments!” (2:13). In incredibly difficult times, it is sometimes easier to focus on going through the motions of ritual, but Joel challenges us



to feel everything, full-heartedly, however unbearable that may seem.

**In Joel’s “Who knows?”
I hear echoes of pain and
desperation, but also
an expression of divine
possibility.**

Despite a sense of intense despair in this prophecy, Joel invokes God’s attributes of mercy, reminding his audience that God is “gracious and compassionate, / slow to anger, abounding in kindness, / and renouncing punishment” (2:13). These attributes, variations of which we repeatedly recite throughout the High Holidays, may start to feel formulaic to the point of numbness. But after this list of attributes Joel adds, “Who knows but [God] may turn and

relent” (2:14). In Joel’s “Who knows?” I hear echoes of pain and desperation, but also an expression of divine possibility. Today, let us rend our hearts as a community, in pain and in prayer, clinging to the hope that we shall also find ways to mend.

Sacred Words in Liturgy and Life

On the Uvekhen Prayers
(*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 87, 149, 258,
and 321)

DR. SHIRA BILLET, Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and Ethics, and Director of the Hendel Center for Ethics and Justice, JTS



In a 1958 lecture² on prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “It takes two things for prayer to come to pass—a person and a word. Prayer involves a right relationship between those two things. But we have lost that relationship . . . We do not think about words, although few things are as important for the life of the spirit as the right relationship to words.”

Beyond the realm of prayer, this elusive “right relationship” between persons and words is central to our ability to have relationships at all. “Words have become clichés, objects of absolute abuse. They have ceased to be commitments. We forget that many of our moral relationships are based upon a sense of the sacredness of certain words.”

This High Holiday season is an ideal time to work on reclaiming our relationship with words, beginning with the liturgy in our *mahzor*.

What Heschel worried about in 1958 is even more concerning in 2024. Human communication, the commitment to taking words seriously, is further imperiled in an age where our words are mediated through the technologies of social media and artificial intelligence, and the crippling social phenomena of political polarization and widespread mistrust.

Heschel argues that taking seriously the words in our liturgy is part of a broader process of reclaiming the

gravity of words. From prayer and liturgy, Heschel believed this morally important relationship to words would permeate our lives more broadly.

This High Holiday season is an ideal time to work on reclaiming our relationship with words, beginning with the liturgy in our *mahzor*. I want to call attention to a liturgical poem that appears in the Amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a series of three paragraphs that begin with the word *uvekhen* (ובכן). Typically translated as “so then,” according to an old Jewish tradition, ובכן is in fact a name of God, or alternatively, the alphanumerical equivalent of a phrase that refers to the divine-human relationship itself.

² This lecture can be found in *The Insecurity of Freedom* (pp. 254–261).

These paragraphs were introduced into Jewish liturgy in the period of the Babylonian Talmud. The first paragraph begins “*uvekhen ten pahdekha*” (ובכן תן פחדך). It was this very paragraph, where we envision a human world completely united in its awe and fear of God, that inspired Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto, who spent Yom Kippur 5672 (1911) in a Jewish synagogue in Morocco, to describe the Yom Kippur liturgy as “a liturgy unusually rich” in hymns that express his concept of “the numinous”—the profound, nonrational experience of the presence of God as a tremendous mystery.

In this paragraph, it is the fear and awe of God that leads “all of God’s creatures” to collectively submit to God, and to become “bonded together as one” to do God’s will “with a full heart.” For Heschel, this very paragraph in the High Holiday liturgy reflects the broader essence of prayer itself, which is an effort “to make God immanent,” to bring God’s presence into this world.

Heschel writes:

The true motivation for prayer is . . . the sense of not being at home in the universe. Is there a sensitive heart that could stand indifferent and feel at home in the sight of so much evil and suffering, in the face of countless failures to live up to the will of God? . . . God Himself is not at home in the universe. He is not at home in a universe where His will is defied and where His kingship is denied . . . To pray means to bring God back into the world, to establish His kingship for a second at least.

The payoff comes in the next paragraph: “*uvekhen ten kavod*” (ובכן תן כבוד). After coming together to bring God’s presence back into this world, we feel a sense of dignity (*kavod*) and hope (*tikvah tovah*) for the future; there is “happiness in the land and joy in the city.”

Let this new year, 5785, be a year in which we recommit to taking seriously the sacred value of words. We can learn this value through attention to the words we say in prayer and their meanings, which reflect, in turn, the very essence of prayer. Let us pray the words in our siddur and *mahzor* with seriousness.

Let 5785 be a year of speaking and writing words that are carefully considered—words that we can truly own and stand behind.

From the High Holiday season back into daily life, let 5785 be a year of speaking and writing words that are carefully considered—words that we can truly own and stand behind. This involves engaging in deep and extended conversation, not the kind mediated through social media—with words that are our own, whose authorship has not been outsourced to technology. This involves listening carefully to the words of others, assuming goodwill, asking questions for clarification, and expressing disagreement frankly and honestly, but also thoughtfully and respectfully, in a way that preserves relationships. When we do this, we can hope that others will do the same for us, and over time, if we continue to take words seriously both in prayer and in daily relationships, we can become a unified community, even across differences. Perhaps we will experience again that hope, dignity, and joy that we see in the Uvekhen prayers—for the Jewish people together with the broader community of humanity.

HAFTAROT OF THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

More Than the Motions

Haftarah for Yom Kippur Morning
Isaiah 57:14–58:14 (*Mahzor Lev
Shalem*, pp. 284–286)

RABBI JOEL SELTZER, Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement, JTS

There comes a point each Yom Kippur morning when I start feeling pretty good about myself. I'm in shul, wearing my white kittel, *mahzor* open, stomach growling, the perfect image of the pious Jew, doing just what God wants me to do.

And then I read the haftarah for Yom Kippur morning, and suddenly I don't feel so good.

The haftarah, from Isaiah chapter 57, was chosen precisely to prevent the type of self-congratulatory behavior that we humans exhibit when we play the “dutiful child,” while simultaneously managing to miss our larger purpose.

Here we are, deeply committed individuals, laser-focused on the spiritual goal of the day—reflection and repentance—so that we might be granted another year in the Book of Life. But the words of this morning's haftarah are meant to make us question whether that goal is the ultimate goal that God is seeking from us.

God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, shakes us and says: “Is such the fast that I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when Adonai is favorable?” (Isa. 58:5).

And now I see that I am the child, seeking approval from a heavenly parent for suddenly making my bed, when all the while they've been desperate for me to take responsibility for cleaning the entire house.

“Wait? Are we not doing the right thing? How is it possible that in this moment of piety, I am made to feel inadequate?”

“No, this is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked to clothe them and do not ignore your own flesh” (Isa. 58:6–7).

And now I see that I am the child, seeking approval from a heavenly parent for suddenly making my bed, when all the while they've been desperate for me to take responsibility for cleaning the entire house.

May our personal acts of righteousness on this Day of Atonement be inexorably linked with our understanding of duty to the other—to the poor, the needy, the enslaved—and to our families, our communities, and ourselves, as well.

A Call for Responsibility

On the U-netanah Tokef
(*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, pp. 143–144,
315–316)

RABBI MARCUS MORDECAI SCHWARTZ, Henry R. and Miriam Ripps Schnitzer
Librarian for Special Collections of the JTS Library



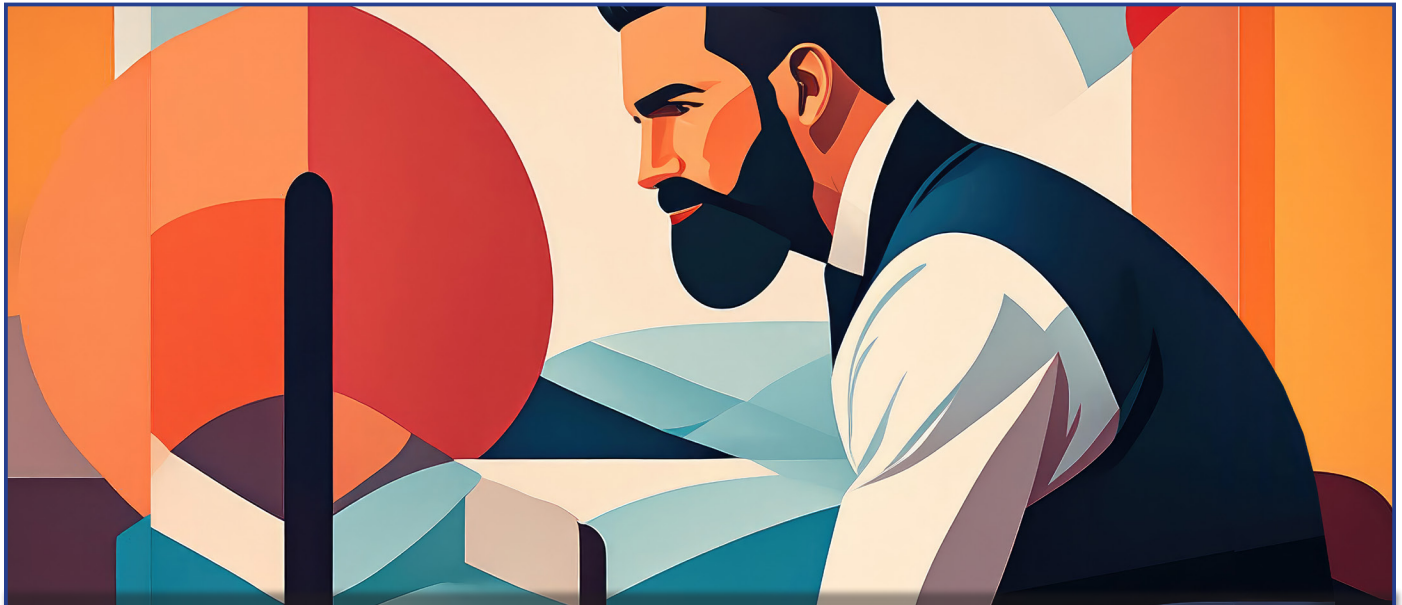
U-netana Tokef is a prayer deeply rooted in the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah. It proved so popular that this Rosh Hashanah-themed prayer became standard on Yom Kippur, as well, despite its clear foregrounding of judgement (Rosh Hashanah) rather than forgiveness (Yom Kippur). Its power lies in its direct confrontation with the themes of judgment, mortality, and the role of human agency in shaping fate.

The *piyyut* begins by establishing the significance of the day: God sits in judgment, weighing the deeds of all humanity; all beings pass before God, their fates recorded. The imagery is stark and unflinching—life and death, peace and turmoil, prosperity and hardship—all are laid out as potential outcomes for the year ahead. While the origins of U-netanah Tokef are often linked to a popular legend about the martyrdom of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany, in the 11th century, modern scholarship has revealed that the text of U-netanah Tokef is more than four centuries older than Rabbi Amnon and originated with the liturgical poet Eleazar ben Kalir in the Land of Israel.

Known for its famous lines, “Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water?” it’s a sobering reminder of the unpredictability of life and the many forces beyond our control. Yet, it also affirms that our actions—specifically, repentance, prayer, and charity—can mitigate the harshness of any decree. While the future is uncertain, our choices and behavior can influence the course of our lives. Fate is ours to make.

In contemporary Jewish practice, U-netanah Tokef resonates with many, regardless of background or level of observance. It forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about our mortality and the uncertainty of life. The prayer’s emphasis on repentance, prayer, and charity aligns with a broader commitment to justice, compassion, and ethical responsibility. It challenges us to consider how our actions, both individual and collective, shape the world and the future. As we recite these words, we are invited to engage deeply with our own lives, to reflect on our deeds, and to consider how we might contribute to a better world in the coming year. U-netanah Tokef is not just a reflection on divine judgment; it is a call to human responsibility.

While the future is uncertain, our choices and behavior can influence the course of our lives. Fate is ours to make.



Save the Date for

Zionism: Today, Tomorrow, and Beyond

OCTOBER 29–30, 2024, JTS

During this two-day convening, experts will discuss the evolving relationship between North American Jews and Zionism, examining diverse expressions of Zionism and how these have been influenced by evolving historical circumstances. We will also address the challenges of teaching about Israel and Zionism and explore a mutually beneficial relationship between the North American Jewish community and Israel. A distinguished lineup of speakers, including JTS faculty, scholars, authors, clergy, and non-profit leaders, will offer their insights and perspectives.

ON OCTOBER 29, 2024, AT 5:00 P.M. ET, we will also be offering the Henry N. and Selma S. Rapaport Lecture featuring Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove.

Reflecting on his soon-to-be published book, *For Such a Time as This: On Being Jewish Today*, Rabbi Cosgrove helps navigate and understand the landscape of a post October 7 reality, turning over questions that have no clear or easy answer in the way only a very good rabbi can. Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the Rabbinical Assembly and USCJ, will also provide comments.

Livestream and in-person attendance are available.

Support for the High Holiday reader is made possible by Shelly and Larry Gross, in loving memory of their parents Lillian and Louis Konheim (z”l) and Joseph Gross (z”l).

