



Yeshiva University

THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

Challenge Yourself: Ten Days of Growth

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Dear Friends,

In an effort to enhance the meaning of the Ten Days of Repentance, the *Aseret Ymei Teshuva*, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Sacks-Herenstein Center has prepared this guide of every-day challenges to help you grow spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and even aesthetically.

Enjoy these insightful essays on timely themes, accompanied by thought-provoking daily questions inspired by Rabbi Sacks, and beautiful, meditative works of art. The *Divrei Torah* were composed by our new Sacks Graduate Research Scholars and the Center's staff. The photography was contributed by Debra Shaffer Seeman, who is a Network Weaver for Prizmah's Center for Jewish Day Schools.

Debra writes of the strong spiritual bonds that photography creates for her: "You find yourself behind the lens of the camera and the world comes into focus. You become aware of that which your eyes take in. Your breath slows, your mind quiets, you pay attention to how God's light interacts with His creations. You choose to center the wings and allow yourself to take flight; you discover the brook's melting ice, and your inner walls replicate the deliquescence. The connection opens further, enabling you to see that which is before you, that which surrounds you, refracted through that which is within you. The lens protects, reveals, invites, reflects."

May this collection enrich your introspection and personal development during this time of religious significance.

Shana Tova U' Metuka,
The Sacks-Herenstein Center

The Déjà Vu of Rivers

Rabbi Tzvi Benoff (RIETS, Kollel Elyon), Sacks Research Scholar

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus argued that no person “can step in the same river twice” because the river is always changing, always flowing. *Parshat Vayeilekh* begins with Moshe telling *Bnei Yisrael* that God had told him, “You shall not cross the Yarden (Jordan) River [into the Land of Israel],” suggesting that Heraclitus was right but with a critical difference.

Except that’s not exactly what the Torah says.

The Torah actually says “*haYarden hazeh*” [this Yarden]. Interestingly, “Yarden” is one of the only proper nouns in *Tanakh* that is modified by the word “this”; whenever a historic crossing is referenced, the word “*zeh*” is invoked. When Yaakov returns from Haran, he recounts how he miraculously crossed “this Yarden” with only his stick. Generations later, God instructs Yehoshua to lead *Bnei Yisrael* into the Land of Israel by crossing “this Yarden.” Why does the Torah consistently add the word “this” to the Yarden?

The Torah seems to be “correcting” Heraclitus. You can’t step in the same water twice, but you can step in the same river twice. Despite the constantly new water that flows into it, it is still *this* Jordan River. The same river that Yaakov, Moshe and Yehoshua all encountered on their journeys.

The Tzemah Tzedek wrote that just as the Jordan River serves as the physical boundary between the Diaspora and Israel, it also represents the boundary between humanity and the promised land of spiritual achievement. And this boundary isn’t stationary. A person’s spiritual horizon is always moving. When we’re striving to reach a certain spiritual goal, it becomes our Promised Land, our *Eretz Yisrael*. It takes a tremendous amount of effort to overcome the trials and hurdles of the Yarden in order to reach it. But once we get there, we’ve grown. What was once an ideal and aspiration then becomes the status quo, and enables us to set new boundaries and markers for ourselves, enabling us to reach another, even greater achievement. There’s a new *Eretz Yisrael* to reach with its very own Yarden to cross.

This new Yarden is not a completely new hurdle, a never-before-seen set of challenges. There are, of course, all sorts of hurdles and obstacles that come with a new set of goals, much the way rivers have unexpected depths and eddies, rivulets and tributaries. But in

reality, these differences, while genuine, are superficial. It's still the same river. Many of the fundamental skills and techniques we need to overcome challenges remain the same; it's only the details that have changed. Deep down we encounter the same river moments, years, and even generations later.

That's why the Yarden River is prefaced by the word "*zeh*"; as the threshold to the Promised Land of spiritual achievement, it's constantly changing. And when faced with rushing current of a superficially unfamiliar Yarden, a person can lose heart and wonder how God possibly expects us to succeed at something we've never faced before. To that the Torah encourages us, "*ha Yarden hazeh*." Don't forget. You have been here before.

We believe that God brought each of us down into the world for a specific purpose that only we are able to accomplish. And if that's true, then everything we've ever done and confronted in our lives has prepared us for this new Yarden. Thus, God reminds us that there's no need to fear because we have the tools to cross the river; we crossed the same river yesterday!

The word *shana* [year], is related to the word *shinuy* [change]. But it's also related to the word *mishne* [to repeat]. As the old year comes to a close and a new one begins, many things will change. New opportunities and new challenges will present themselves—each with their own *Yardens* to cross. It's still the same Yarden. God has already prepared us for what comes our way as we cross into next year.

Challenge #1



Name a river you must cross this year? Which challenges in your life require fresh perspectives to overcome them?

“Crises happen when we attempt to meet the challenges of today with the concepts of yesterday.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*

A Season of Second Chances

Neti Penstein (GPATS, Revel), Sacks Research Scholar

We all need second chances.

The Torah offers us many examples of people who were given opportunities to redeem themselves. The time period on the Jewish calendar that we find ourselves in now, for example, has a striking historical parallel: it was this time of year when Haggai, a prophet during the return of exiles to Israel - the *Shivat Tzion* - delivered his central prophecies. The first was delivered on *Rosh Chodesh Elul*,^[1] and the next one on the 21st of *Tishrei*.^[2]

Abarbanel points out that we are not usually told the exact dates of prophecies. The fact that we know these dates is, in and of itself, noteworthy. He wonders why Haggai is an exception and suggests that the dates themselves must have been what “inspired the prophet”^[3] on each of these occasions. Haggai’s prophecies can provide a meaningful framework for our own experience of the *Elul-Tishrei* period.

Haggai’s opening prophecy is an exhortation to the Jewish people, *Bnei Yisrael*, to continue building the Second Temple, a project they had abandoned out of fear of their surrounding enemies. But Haggai urges them to focus on the broader spiritual vision rather than on their physical comfort: the people say “the time has not yet come to build the House of God,” but the prophet challenges them and asks, “has the time then come for you to sit comfortably in your paneled houses while this House is in ruins?!”^[4]

This prophecy was given on the 1st of *Elul*. Abarbanel explains that Haggai was moved by the realization that on this date hundreds of years earlier Moshe had ascended Mount Sinai to receive the second set of Tablets, the *Luhot*, after shattering the first in response to the Golden Calf. Because the people had been given a second chance then, they should be given a second chance now to rebuild. Just as there was a second set of Ten Commandments, Haggai understood that there could also be a second Temple; the *Beit HaMikdash* could be rebuilt in his days. God, it seems, is perpetually waiting for His people to return.

[1] Haggai 1:1

[2] Haggai 2:1

[3] Abarbanel, Commentary to Zeharia 1:1

[4] Haggai 1:2-4

This is the mindset that we ought to have on *Rosh Chodesh Elul*. We, too, should wonder why we hide ourselves in our paneled homes while our spiritual aspirations waste away. We should remind ourselves of second chances and what they often represent, namely, the ability to rebuild anew after tragedy. All that is required of us, is to heed the words that Haggai repeatedly told the people of his day: “take heed of your actions” and align them with your heart.[5]

The people take Haggai’s words seriously (an anomaly in Prophets) and resume construction of the Temple. And two months later, on *Hoshana Rabbah*, Haggai addresses the people once again. Abarbanel explains the significance of this date: when the First Temple stood, this had been a day of unparalleled joy and celebration, and the elders, who remembered this, could not help but compare it to the pale shadow before them. With only a fraction of the population present to celebrate, and without the original grand structure, “the Second Temple appeared as nothing in their eyes.”[6] Haggai wanted to comfort them: he told them that God was with them. God was proud of their efforts, and it was still possible that the glory of this Temple would surpass the first.[7]

We often experience a similar disappointment as *Sukkot* comes to a close: we reflect on the aspirations with which we began on *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and everything that we have accomplished dwarfs in comparison to that grand vision. But Haggai’s prophecy comforts us: God is with us in our efforts, He rejoices in whatever we *have* rebuilt, and the possibility of *גְּדוֹל יְהוָה! יְהוָה כְּבוֹד הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה הָאֲחֵרֹן מִן הָרִאשׁוֹן* - the glory of *this* house is greater than the glory of the first - remains ever-present.[8]

[5] The phrase *שימו לבבכם על דרכיכם* appears twice in this prophecy – 1:5, 1:7

[6] Abarbanel, Commentary to Zeharia 1:1

[7] Haggai 2:9

[8] Ibid.

Challenge #2



When has your disappointment in yourself led to positive self-improvement?

“Judaism is the systematic rejection of tragedy in the name of hope.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*

Prayer on the *Yamim Noraim*: A Remedy for the “Homesickness of the Soul”

Alyssa Zeffren (Azrieli), Sacks Research Scholar

Prayer is the cornerstone of the *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* experience. In *Ten Pathways to God*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that, “In prayer God becomes not a theory but a Presence, not a fact but a mode of relationship. Prayer is where God meets us, in the human heart, in our offering of words, in our acknowledged vulnerability.”[9]

Prayer, and more generally, *conversation* with God, is the defining characteristic of the human relationship with God throughout the Torah, evident from the very act of creation. In creation, God speaks the world into existence, but Adam and Eve, the pinnacle of the story, are the only creations capable of speaking back to God.[10] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik describes prophecy and prayer as existing on a continuum: where prophecy is God’s call to humanity, and prayer is humanity’s call to God.[11]

Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the creation of the world, and the Creation story itself is a microcosm of the *Rosh Hashana* experience. Adam, the very first human being and representative of God’s covenant, breaches that covenant when he eats from the Tree of Knowledge. It is significant that the very first story of humankind in the Torah is one of sin and the human attempt to hide from responsibility and culpability. God calls out to Adam, with the famous question: “*Ayeka?!?*” “Where are you?!” Yet, with the very first sin, man was also introduced to the opportunity for *teshuva*, redemption, and heeding God’s call.[12]

While on *Rosh Hashana*, the Day of Judgement, we tend to focus on God’s judgment of us, it is important to remember that the act of praying is itself an act of judgment. The word “tefillah” and specifically the Hebrew word “*lehitpallel*,” is a reflexive verb that means “to judge oneself.”[13] Through prayer, we are invited into the process of judgment.

[9] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Prayer,” *Ten Days, Ten Ways: Pathways to God* (The Rabbi Sacks Legacy, 2007), 8.

[10] Rabbi David Bashevkin, 18Forty Podcast: Exploring Big Jewish Ideas, Dovid’l Weinberg: The Song of Prayer [Prayer & Humanity 2/5].

[11] Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965).

[12] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, www.parsha.net (Rosh Hashana 5770), cited in [OLAMI Resources](#) / [Olami Morasha Syllabus](#) / [Jewish Calendar](#) / Rosh Hashana I: Meeting Our “Author.”

[13] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Rosh Hashana: The Anniversary of Creation,” *Ceremony & Celebration* (New Milford CT: Maggid Books, 2017), 25.

As Rabbi Menachem Tenenbaum writes: “While we are davening, there is an aspect of judging ourselves, not harshly, but rather in a motivating way. Part of our intention is to clarify how we are doing and what we need to move forward in life.” [14]

The role of judgment in the *teshuva* process during the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, is to be able to take stock of our lives—through self-reflection and self-judgment—and to answer that eternal call of “*Ayeka?!?*” Where are we in our own lives? Who are we? The great gift of *teshuva* and atonement is to be able to move forward with life.

Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of Creation—the creation of the world and specifically the creation of humankind. While there is a oneness to all of Creation, humanity is distinctly described as being created in the “image of God.” Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook describes all of creation as being in a state of longing to connect to God: “All beings long for the very source of their origin... Human beings suffer constantly from this homesickness of the soul, and it is in prayer that we cure it. When praying, we feel at one with the whole creation, and raise it to the very source of blessing and life.”[15]

This idea that the soul longs to reconnect with its Creator is parallel to Attachment Theory in developmental psychology, which posits that at the core of human development is a need for connection and relationship.[16]

The powerful imagery of a “homesick soul” can help us identify the goal and role of prayer on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. Prayer is the remedy to the homesickness of the soul that creates a feeling of distance between ourselves and our Creator. Prayer is our call back to God, and when done right, we open ourselves up with vulnerability and authenticity. We tap into the redemptive power of prayer and discover the remedy for the homesickness of the soul when we once again heed God’s eternal call.

We are often our own worst critics. But as Rabbi Sacks writes: “On *Rosh Hashana*, we stand in judgment. We know what it is to be known. And though we know the worst about ourselves, God sees the best; and when we open ourselves to Him, He gives us the strength to become what we truly are.”[17] Through prayer, we not only can find God, but we can also find ourselves.

[14] Rabbi Menachem Tenenbaum, *Three Steps Forward: Unlocking the Shemoneh Esrei and Our Connection with Hashem, based on Rav Yonasan Eybeschutz* (2023), 35.

[15] Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, “Olat Hariyah, Commentary on the Prayer Book,” cited in “Prayer,” *Ten Days, Ten Ways: Pathways to God* (The Rabbi Sacks Legacy, 2007), 10.

[16] Rabbi Yakov Danishevsky, *Attached, Connecting to Our Creator: A Jewish Psychological Approach* (Mosaica Press, 2023), Foreword by Dr. David Pelcovitz.

[17] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Rosh Hashana: The Anniversary of Creation,” *Ceremony & Celebration* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2017), 25.

Challenge #3



How can you judge yourself both honestly and favorably when you pray? Experiment with one new framework, practice, or approach to *tefilla* during these ten days.

"I am valued for what I am. I learn to cherish what I have, rather than be diminished but what I do not have."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*

Teshuva: It's the Thought that Counts

Tamar Koslowe (GPATS), Sacks Research Scholar

For those studying on the *Daf Yomi*, the daily cycle of Talmud, this season of *Elul* brings an intermingling of the laws of marriage in tractate *Kiddushin* and the process of *teshuva*. There we find the proper formulation for a proposal (BT *Kiddushin* 49b). A man who betroths a woman generally uses the standard language of “behold you are betrothed to me.” The Talmud also explores statements of *kiddushin* that are dependent on certain conditions. One such example is when a man tries to betroth a woman by saying על מנת שאני צדיק; she is to be betrothed to him on the condition that he is righteous.

Without investigating this man’s character, she should still consider the proposal seriously because “Even if he is a totally wicked person, she is betrothed to him, perhaps he considered repentance in his mind” -

אפילו רשע גמור - מקודשת שמא הרהר תשובה בדעתו

He may be a truly wicked man at the time, but the betrothal is nevertheless effective because he *may* have thought about repenting. This alone makes him a צדיק, a righteous person.

A 19th century rabbinic commentary, the *Minhat Hinukh*, discusses the steps necessary to repent. He cites Maimonides’ definition of the act of *teshuva* as a person’s admission of his sins, following a specific formula. The *Minhat Hinukh*, however, suggests, rejects this view. To him, *teshuva* may be achieved even without formally verbalizing or confessing one’s sins. He believes that fundamentally, “If he regrets with a full heart, God accepts his repentance:”

אם מתחרט בלב שלם, הקב"ה מקבל תשובתו

If individuals simply admit past errors openly and honestly before God, they have done *teshuva*. Although the technical commandment of repentance requires a specific action, fulfilling the imperative to return to God, in this view, just demands a person’s desire to change.

This perspective speaks to the fundamental nature of repentance. The Talmud supports this view: prayer cannot live only within a person's mind but שיחתך בשפתיו, it must be pronounced in one’s mouth (BT *Brakhot* 31a). It is *teshuva*, the most intimate reflection within a person, that is substantial even without an identifiable action. *Teshuva* is a process that alters the very nature of the individual and begins when a person contemplates that he or she is ready to repent.

In life, we may feel that the burden of our past is too heavy to carry, that the path to repentance is too onerous, and it is fraught with failure. The process of critically evaluating our own shortcomings can lead us to feel that the goal of true change is unattainable. Nevertheless, we should feel reassured that the desire to improve is already the first step back to God. Even the thought of change is considered a form of repentance. The Minhag Hinukh affirms this in his understanding of our initial question and explains just how radical repentance and its legal significance is. *Teshuva* can express itself not only in action but even in anticipation.

Challenge #4



When did you contemplate changing something specific about your approach or your actions but were unable to master it? What small step can you take this year to help you actualize that change?

“Teshuva tells us that our past does not determine our future. We can change. We can act differently next time than last. If anything, our future determines our past.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration*

Zikhronot: God Remembers Our Youth

Asher Willner (RIETS), Sacks Research Scholar

We invoke God’s memory often on these Days of Awe, but what does God remember? To answer this question, we turn to *Mussaf* on *Rosh Hashana*, which is divided into three thematic sections that are each supported by citing multiple verses. One of the three major sections of the *Rosh Hashana Mussaf* prayer is *Zikhronot* or Remembrances. In the paragraph focused on prophetic writings, the *mahzor* quotes three verses:

“Thus said God, I remembered to your favor the devotion of your youth.” (Jer. 2:2)

“Nevertheless, I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth.” (Ezek. 16:60)

“Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, my thoughts would remember him still.” (Jer. 31:20)

Interestingly, all three verses deal with the theme of youth: God remembers the Jewish people in the context of childhood. This is what God remembers. The French medieval commentator, Rabbi David Kimche, tries to explain this repeated choice by offering us three different ways, or levels, in which God uses “youth” in His judgment.

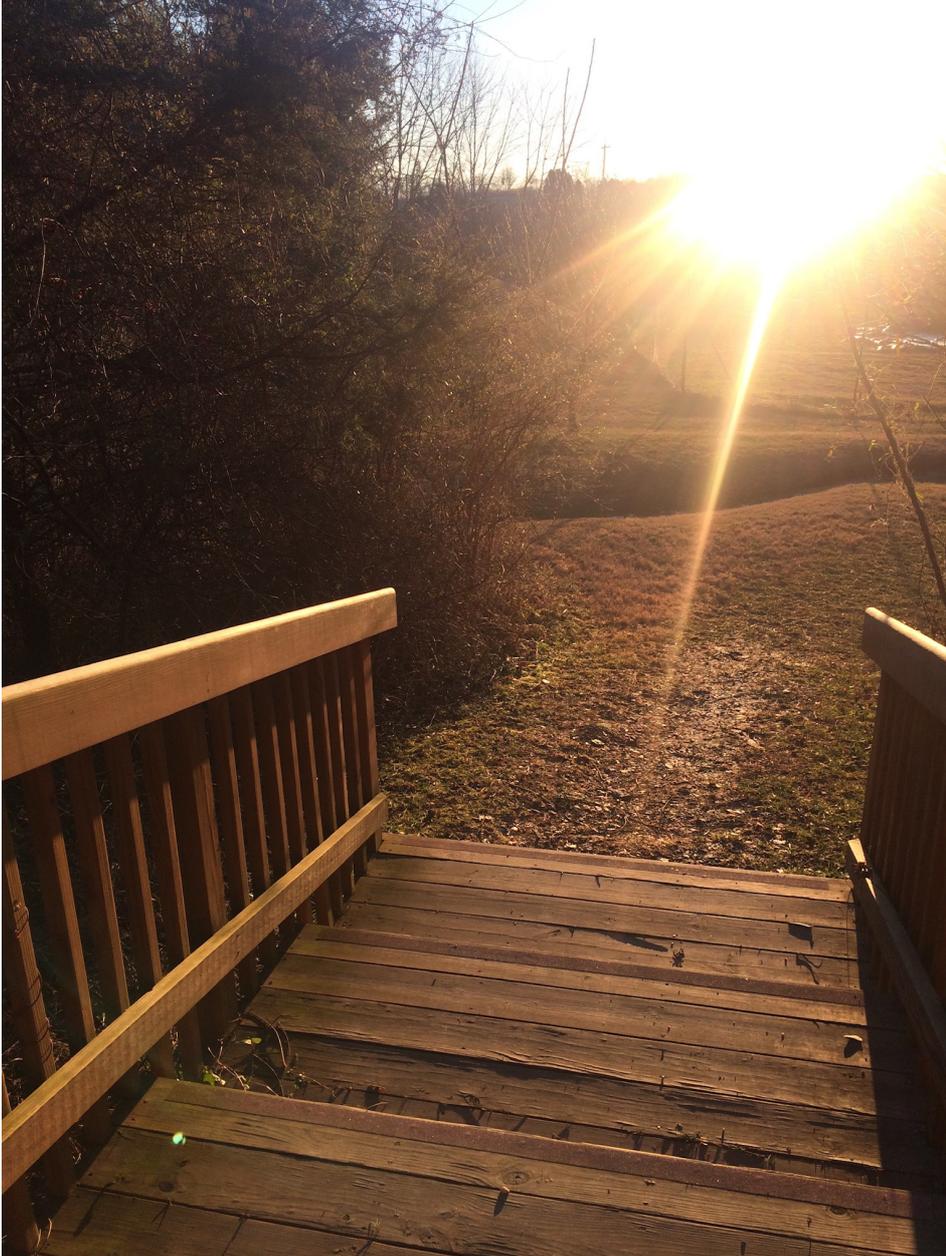
On the first verse, Radak notes that although in the moment the Jewish people acted poorly and deserved punishment, God lightened the penalty because of a long-standing relationship that began in our very infancy as a nation. He “remembers the favor of their youth.” We trusted and followed God from Egypt into the desert. On this level, God relates to the Jewish people holistically yet firmly. God punished us for wrongdoing but lessened the judgment out of memories of affection and earlier merit.

In the second verse, however, God backs away from punishment altogether. Radak notes that God “remembers the covenant of their youth;” even though we violated that covenant, God still upholds His word. In a case of strict judgment, when one side violates a contract, the other can too. God, however, still honors the covenant he made with us even when we fail and fall short. This is an enduring comfort.

There is also third level to our relationship. On the third verse, Radak notes that God calls us a “dear child.” He overlooks our mistakes as if we committed no wrongdoing. Even though we continue to sin time and again, God looks at us the way parents look at a child with pure love. They overlook blame. They forgive. They want a strong relationship more than anything. This does not mean the sin does not exist, but that love overwhelms the distance that sin creates.

God remembers our actions and judges us on *Rosh Hashana* on these three levels: by putting the sin within a context of a warm and enduring relationship, by keeping His end of the covenant, and by loving unconditionally. When standing in front of the Divine Judge on *Rosh Hashana* in prayer, perhaps God wants us to feel the dialectic of trepidation and love. We face the consequences of our actions, yet, at the same time, we experience God’s unconditional love.

Challenge #5



What specific good did we do this year that we want God to “remember” and include in the Book of Life?

“Judaism is a religion of law – not because it does not believe in love (“You shall love the Lord your God,” “You shall love your neighbour as yourself,”) but because, without justice, neither love nor liberty nor human life itself can flourish.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus*

Jonah's Pain and His Prayer

Dr. Erica Brown, Vice Provost, Director, Sacks-Herenstein Center

The urgent cry of suffering, the wide smile of thanksgiving, or the deep bow of humility are physical gestures that demonstrate our capacity for petition. The body holds the score. Only then do the simple articulation of words surface in prayer; the very choosing of words can turn prayer itself into an act of repentance. I am not who I want to be. I speak my truth and my dissatisfaction or my despair. I seek change and ask for the discipline to be virtuous, to be pious, to be kind – in short, to be all that I know I can be if open to possibility. Give me the capacity to celebrate, to judge and to improve.

Such is the moment when the biblical prophet Jonah was bodily constrained in a large fish. The very physicality of his plight forced him into a state of self-confrontation. Finally, finally he allowed words to surface after his wordless flight from God. His *tefilla*, his prayer, is the great understudied text of the book of Jonah. There are scholars who believe it to be a later addition, fashioned after the style of psalms, particularly Psalm 69, since it is so out of keeping with the otherwise narrative style of the other three chapters. The scholar Theodore Gaster suggests that the prayer actually provides a pause in the story's narration to invite "audience participation" in the singing of a hymn.[18]

These readings almost dismiss or bypass the significance of language in Jonah's petition. His prayer traces his physical downward motion into the sea. First, he hit the breakers on the sea's surface. Then, as he sank lower, his head was covered with water and seaweed. By the time Jonah spoke, he was at the ocean's very bottom, looking up at its sand bars and formations. Not yet dead, Jonah was also not fully alive until the great sea monster appeared with its unexpected salvific powers. In this space, Jonah's prayer began in earnest: "I thought I was driven away out of Your sight. Would I ever gaze again upon Your holy Temple?" (2:5). Buffeted by harsh waves, he understood that running away from God meant he would never serve God again.

But then something remarkable happened. When Jonah hit rock bottom, there was nowhere to go but up: "I sank to the base of the mountains; the bars of the earth closed upon me forever. Yet, You brought my life up from the pit" (2:7). Nowhere did Jonah mention Nineveh in his prayer. His prophetic role was secondary to his relationship with God.

[18] Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 655.

In his prayer, Jonah finally realized the dreadful implications of running away from his mission: it snatched away his intimacy from God. Jonah only then recognized that he desperately wanted that relationship. God saved his life not only so that Jonah could go to Nineveh and execute his task but also, and more importantly, so that Jonah and God could be reconciled.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his analysis of the Jonah story in his *Haggada*, writes, “The religious vision is not about seeing things that are not there. It is about seeing the things that are there and always were, but which we never noticed, or paid attention to. *Faith is a form of attention. It is a sustained meditation on the miraculousness of what is, because it might not have been*”.[19] The enclosure of the great fish helped Jonah pay attention to and recognize with greater clarity and commitment, his own deepest yearnings.

Sometimes the demons inside of us and, in the case of Jonah’s fish, outside of us, need not permanently debilitate and imprison us. They can become the means by which we change and grow. In the words of the Jewish mystics, our descent is for the sake of ascent. Intentional prayer helps remind us of our deepest yearnings. What are we here to do? What do we most desire? As Jonah learned, the highest form of prayer aims to right and reset our relationship with God. Just as the end of *Yom Kippur* nears, and we feel the full weight of our wrongdoing, do we hear the chant of Jonah’s prayer, like a deep breath of hope hovering above the waters of time.

[19] For an excerpt, see Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Unasked Question,” *Covenant and Conversation* (April 1, 2014) <https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/unasked-question-taken-koren-sacks-haggada/>

Challenge #6



What responsibility or relationship are you running away from right now? Can you take a big step towards it?

“What we lose and are given back we learn to cherish in a way we would not have done had we never lost it in the first place. Faith is about not taking things for granted.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Unasked Question,” *Covenant and Conversation*

Precontemplation and the Need for Hope

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman, Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, Leadership Scholars Faculty

Hope, according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is a particularly Jewish virtue. Ancient Greek culture focused on tragedy. Once our fate is sealed, there is nothing we can do to change it. Judaism teaches about repentance and forgiveness. Rabbi Sacks clarifies, however, that Judaism preaches hope, not optimism. The difference being that “optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one.”[20]

This element of hope is an active ingredient in the *teshuva* process. As Rabbi Sacks notes in *Ceremony and Celebration*, “At the heart of *teshuva* is the belief that we can change. We are not destined to be forever what we were.”[21] In order to change, we need to nurture the hope that the opportunity of *teshuva* engenders, internalizing the belief that we have the power to improve.

The biggest impediment to change is not believing that change is possible. The first stage in Drs. James Prochaska and Carlos DiClemente’s *Stages of Change Theory* is precontemplation. In this phase, a person is not even contemplating the possibility that he or she should change. People in this stage are actively resistant to change, often as a result of failed attempts to change in the past, which resulted in continual disappointments. “Some precontemplators are so demoralized,” they write, “that they are resigned to remaining in a situation they consider their ‘fate.’”[22] Once they give up, their initial problem usually spirals, putting them in an even worse condition than before. Not believing in our ability to change leads us to get trapped in our ways.

The curses that Moshe delineated in the Torah reading of *Ki Tavo* were meant to serve as deterrents to abandoning God and turning to other gods. Later, in the sedra of *Nitzavim*, Moshe addresses a subtype of individuals who hear the threat of curses but react with indifference: “When such a one hears the words of these sanctions, he may fancy himself

[20] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken, 2007), 166.

[21] Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony and Celebration*, 87.

[22] Prochaska, James O., John C. Norcross, and Carlo C. DiClemente. *Changing for Good*. (New York: Avon Books, 1994), 75.

immune, thinking, ‘I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart’” (*Devarim* 29:18). Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm (*Derashot Ledorot: Deuteronomy*, pp. 109–113) identifies two streams of thought within the Aramaic translations of this verse, each pointing to a different possible explanation for why someone would ignore such warnings.

The first stream, which he calls “Immunity Theory,” is based on a first century Aramaic translation of the Torah, the Targum Onkelos, which is then elucidated by Rashi. This explanation indicates a person who is obstinate and confident that he will not be harmed by the curses. He believes he can act immorally and with impunity. He considers himself above the law and is thus impervious to its consequences.

The second stream – what Rabbi Lamm deems the more common explanation – is based on an alternate Aramaic translation, the Targum Yonatan, and is what Rabbi Lamm calls “Despair Theory.” The person acts not out of arrogance, but out of hopelessness. He does not believe in his own ability to change. He has no human agency. The evil inclination has him bound to repeat his behaviors. As is taught by the great Hassidic masters, and later echoed by Prochaska and DiClemente, this despair will lead to even more wrongdoing.

Teshuva serves as the antidote to this type of despair. Repentance “is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach . . . it is not in the heavens . . . [n]either is it beyond the sea . . . Rather it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it” (*Devarim* 30:12–14, according to Ramban). While it is not always easy, *teshuva* is always an option. Nothing, our Sages tell us, can ultimately impede repentance. Even the apostate Elisha ben Avuyah (known as *Aher*), who heard a Heavenly voice saying that “everyone can return except for *Aher*,” should have realized that even he could still return.[23] There is always hope.

One of the goals of these Days of Awe, the *Yamim Noraim*, is to help us move from being precontemplators about our flaws to being contemplators, which will pave the psychological path to actual change. To the extent that we have bad habits or behaviors that we have given up on changing, it is imperative that we shake ourselves out of this despair. We must believe that there is always hope. Nothing can stand in the way of repentance.[24]

[23] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks* (Toras HaRav Foundation, 2002), 193–199.

[24] Adapted from *Psyched for Torah* (Kodesh Press, 2022)

Challenge #7



What sins, mistakes, or character flaws have you given up on repairing? Is there one you are ready to tackle again? What measures are you putting in place to be successful?

“Penitence, prayer and charity avert the evil decree,” goes one of the most famous Jewish prayers. There is no fate that is inevitable, no future predetermined, no outcome we cannot avert. There is always a choice... The choice of freedom brings the defeat of victimhood and the redemptive birth of hope.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*

Tehillim 27: Faith and Doubt

Dr. Shira Weiss, Assistant Director, Sacks-Herenstein Center

Tehillim 27, *L'David*, recited in prayer during the period of introspection from *Rosh Hodesh Elul* through *Shmini Azeret*, expresses the human struggle in one's relationship with God. The psalm encompasses multiple forms including praise, thanksgiving, and complaint, while describing the oscillation between faith and doubt as a result of the dialectical awareness of God's Presence and elusiveness.

This duality of humanity's status before God can be understood through the progression of verses in the chapter. The first half (v. 1-6) evokes feelings of closeness and trust in God, uninterrupted by any doubt. "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" (v. 1). The psalmist conveys confidence in God's protection and in the future defeat of enemies, "For He shall hide me in His tabernacle on the day of evil...And now my head shall be lifted over my enemies who surround me" (v. 5-6). Certain of victory, the psalmist concludes the first half of the *mizmor* with thanksgiving sacrifices, song and praise for God's salvation. "And I will offer in His tabernacle sacrifices with trumpet-sound" (v. 6), referring to God in third person with no urgent need to appeal to Him directly.

But the human relationship with God shifts in the second half of the *mizmor* (v. 7-13) when the psalmist calls out to God in distress. "Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me and answer me" (v. 7). No longer conveying the earlier sense of security, the psalmist desperately pleads with God in second person, "Do not hide Your face from me. Do not turn Your servant away in anger... Do not abandon me and do not forsake me... do not deliver me to the desire of my enemies." (v. 9, 12) These verses describing God's anger, remoteness and abandonment are in stark contrast to the former depiction of God's compassion, care and salvation; the psalmist's immanent victory now seems less assured.

The final verse of the *mizmor* serves as a conclusion to the entire text. The psalmist no longer speaks about himself in first person, but appeals to the reader/listener to hope in God both when He seems near and far, as alluded to in the repetitious language: "Have hope in the Lord; be strong and He shall give courage to your heart; and hope in the Lord" (v. 14). Rashi interprets the unique meaning of each of the repeated expressions of hope: "Hope to God, and if your prayers are not fulfilled, return and hope again." [25]

Robert Alter comments on this verse, "This last exhortation- whether of the speaker to himself or to an individual member of his audience - is an apt summary of the psychology that informs this psalm. It begins by affirming trust in God and reiterates that hopeful

[25] Rashi, Commentary on Psalms 27:14

confidence, but the trust has to be asserted against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies,” whoever those enemies may be.[26]

Human relationships with God often oscillate between overwhelming faith when God's presence is palpable and inevitable doubt when challenging realities can lead to a feeling of abandonment by God. In such a complex relationship, one may struggle to maintain a faith that is continuous. God, at times, seems hidden, as the psalm indicates, when a person is in crisis, faces enemies, or cannot overcome the inclination to sin. The concluding verse encourages the maintenance of hope in God, even amidst such doubts. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “Faith does not mean certainty. It means the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as he does not let go of us.”[27]

[26] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (NY: WW Norton & Co., 2007), 94

[27] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken, 2007), 197.

Challenge #8



How do you deal with doubt? What measures can you take to strengthen your faith?

“For Judaism, faith is cognitive dissonance, the discord between the world that is and the world as it ought to be.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*

Harnessing Hope

Rabbi Marc Eichenbaum, Sacks Research Associate

Rosh Hashana invites us into a perplexing emotional paradox. On the one hand, *Rosh Hashana* precipitates fear and anxiety and is traditionally known as the Day of Judgment. God scrutinizes our actions over the course of the past year. It is also the day our fates are decided, as hauntingly portrayed in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer: “*who will live and who will die.*” Yet, despite the gravity of the holiday, many of the rituals of these days put us into a notably positive mood.

Most of us have the custom, based on sources dating back to the Second Temple period, of enjoying festive meals and wearing our finest clothing. When we walk into synagogue, we’re greeted with bright smiles, upright postures, and enthusiastic blessings of “*Shana Tova.*” We believe that these are solemn Days of Judgement, yet we are inexplicably confident and hopeful. On this holiday, we celebrate.[28] We do not cower in crippling fear for what may become of our transient lives.

In a world with increasing rates of anxiety and fear of an uncertain future, how do we remain so confident on *Rosh Hashana* and embrace the uncertainty of our fate with happiness and joy? One answer lies in a body of psychological research that describes hope in a way that also embraces difficult truths. “Grounded hope,” as it is called in this literature, calls upon us to be rooted in reality but with a hopeful eye towards the future. Hopeful people generally experience greater psychological and physical well-being than non-hopeful people, according to hope researcher, CR Snyder.

Snyder conducted a study in which community leaders were asked to name the most hopeful people they knew. The results showed three commonalities: goals, pathways (or plans), and a belief in human agency.[29] Hopeful people aren’t those dealt a more favorable deck of cards. They are the people who are able to withstand the most difficulty because their goals and their belief in human agency propel them to focus on their suffering less. Because they keep their eyes on the light at the end of the tunnel and have a strategy to get there, they do not live with constant worry.

[28] There is considerable discussion regarding whether there is a *mitzvah* of *Simha* on *Rosh Hashana*. See Rambam *Hilkhot Hanukkah* 3:6, *Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6:17, and *Hagaot Maimoniot* (cited in Magen Avraham, Introduction to chapter 597). See also *Shulhan Arukh, Orekh Hayim* 597:1.

[29] Snyder, C. R., Rand, K. L., & Sigmon, D. R., “Hope theory: A member of the positive psychology family,” In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 257-276.

These three components of hope - goals, pathways, and agency- align with a framework of the 18th-century Kabbalist Rabbi Moses Haim Luzzato. In a novel observation about language, R. Luzzato observed that the Hebrew word for hope, tikva, shares the same Hebrew root as the words kav, a line or path, and mikvah, a purification bath. The mekave (the person with hope) creates his own kav (path) which turns out to be his mikvah (purification bath), explains R. Luzzato.[30]

Grounded hope is not the same as magical thinking. It motivates people to act because they feel empowered to traverse the pathways that exist to accomplish their goals. It is no coincidence that the national anthem of the state of Israel, the country that continues to innovate and thrive despite the constant presence of both internal and external threats, is *Hatikva*.

The purification of *tikva* is the purification of *Rosh Hashana*. We are not oblivious to the harsh realities of the Day of Judgment, but we are able to live with them because we know that we can create a different path forward with our own agency. *Rosh Hashana* affirms that when we have a vision worth living for and goals to achieve it, we will see better, more hopeful days ahead.

[30] MH Luzzato, "Homily on the Topic of Hope" [Derush B'inyn Hakivui], Otzarot Ramhal (Sefriyati, 1986), 246.

Challenge #9



Describe a time you lost hope in something or someone. Were you able to recover it? Did you give up too easily?

“Optimism is the belief that things are going to get better. Hope is the belief that we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope is an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it does need courage to hope.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*

Leaning into *Teshuva*

Rabbi Ari Rockoff, David Mitzner Community Dean for Values and Leadership

How long does *teshuvah* take?

The Talmud describes the depraved sinner, Elazar ben Durdaya, who, in his final days, underwent a surprising change of life direction and began on the path of repentance (BT *Avodah Zara* 17a). Although he did not complete the process of *teshuvah* delineated by Maimonides of regret, confession, and commitment to change, his earnest efforts were accepted. A *Bat Kol*, a heavenly voice, declared his place in the World to Come.

Hearing this, Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, exclaimed, “*Yesh koneh olamo b’shaah achat*” [Some can acquire their place in the world to come in one moment]. For others, it takes an entire lifetime.

This story challenges our traditional understanding of repentance. *Teshuvah* is typically a deliberate and time-consuming process, as Maimonides outlines. How could a sinner like Elazar ben Durdaya achieve full repentance in a single moment? Can all past transgressions just vanish so instantly?

To answer these important questions, we turn to the story of the first sinner in the Torah, Cain. He and his brother Abel were competitive. Each offered sacrifices to God. God favored Abel’s gift offering over Cain’s, thereby upsetting Cain. The Torah says:

וַיִּשְׂע יִקְוֶה אֶל־הַבֶּל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ; וְאֶל־קַיִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׂעָה וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו:

God paid heed to Abel and his offering. But to Cain and his offering, God paid no heed. Cain was much distressed, and his face fell. (Gen. 4: 4-5)

Crucial here is the Hebrew word *sha’ah*. Here it signifies not a unit of time but a turn of attention. Rabbi Yehuda’s exclamation, “*Yesh koneh olamo b’shaah ahat*,” [there are those who acquire the world to come in just a moment] perhaps implies that achieving such a treasured place is not achieved in one moment but in one turn. The gesture towards God does not mean that the relationship is total or consuming, but that it is beginning in earnest. We turn towards some people. We turn away from others. The turn is what matters.

Because Abel turned to God with a superior sacrifice, God turned to Abel with full attention and acceptance. But God did not turn to Cain because of his inferior sacrifice. In the case of Elazar ben Durdaya, he turned back. His *teshuva* was not complete, but his direction was fixed anew. And that was enough.

This does not imply that repentance is a quick fix or that a simple turn is sufficient. *Teshuva* takes time. Repentance is no more instant than the acquisition of wealth, knowledge, or well-being. But crucial for any of these goals is a decisive turn in the right direction.

Applying this to the Talmud, Rabbi Yehuda's statement means that we can make the proper turn towards repentance and secure our place in the World to Come. But there are no shortcuts. On *Yom Kippur*, our task is to ensure that we are turning in the right direction. If we are completely off course, we might have to turn 180 degrees; if we are only slightly off, minor adjustments might suffice.

On *Yom Kippur*, we have a unique opportunity for introspection and realignment. One turn can put us back on to the right path from which we have strayed. This turn only sets us off on a journey that is just beginning. Reaching our destination may take time and effort.

Repentance is fundamentally about returning to the proper course—*lashuv*. The notion that we might acquire the world in just a moment stresses the significance of the days that lead up to *Yom Kippur*, reminding us that one decisive turn can start us on the right path. This approach spurs us to commit to that small and singular goal - "*sha'ah ahat*" - a single, decisive turn that may help us secure our place in the Book of Life for the year to come.

Challenge #10



What small step can you take the day *after Yom Kippur* to turn in a better direction?

“Every act of forgiveness mends something broken in this fractured world. It is a step, however small, in the long, hard journey to redemption.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Dignity of Difference