

Rosh HaShanah Drash

בס"ד

Shira Chadasha

א' תשרי תשפ"ה

Kehillat Shira,

Here we are at a beginning. Where to begin?

Perhaps it is with a caution. When grappling with what to bring to you on this first day of Rosh HaShanah, on the first day of *this* Rosh HaShanah with an ever-changing reality and its accompanying variations in emotion, I reminded myself of the *chachma/wisdom* from Reb Eliezer HaCohen – more popularly known as Leonard Cohen – ‘forget your perfect offering.’

Perhaps we begin with place. Today we meet on the land of the Boonwoorung and Wurrundjeri peoples of the Eastern Kulin nation who are its Traditional Owners and Custodians. I pay respect to their Elders past and present.

Or another idea of place?

Here we are, together, on א' תשרי תשפ"ה; the first day of the year 5785. Regardless of where we are situated, Jews entering a shule this Rosh HaShanah will invariably be in search of: the familiar, a half-remembered melody, the sacred, an assuaging of guilt, kindredship, the transcendent, a reckoning, a knowing, refuge, the arrival of a possibility as yet unknown.

Rosh HaShanah, the Head of the Year, opens into a year that inevitably follows from another's closure. In our *tefillot*, the *chag* is referenced as *Yom Hazikaron*, Day of Remembrance. A day then, of the future and the past, but also one which we inhabit in a present traditionally marked and made palpable by celebration, prayer, and wishes for sweetness, circularity and blessings.

Here we are at this particular moment of today. The new year follows the one that has just passed so recently that we can still feel its presence in the room, its scent lingering in the air – this year that plunged us vertically through time and suffering. These thoughts made the idea of standing before you with this offering particularly fraught. Given Rosh HaShanah celebrates the birth of humanity, it might have been helpful if the Torah revealed the psychological terror of G-d on the cusp of creation, working out of *tohu va'vohu*. But it does not.

And so because it is my habit, at times of distress, angst, joy and most other states, I reach for a book to accompany or guide me. This time I found it in an old-new one. The *machzor* translates to ‘cycle’, its root lies in the word ח-ז-ה ‘return’. In existence for nearly a century, the *mazchor* is a collection of *tefillot* and *piyyutim*/liturgical poetry. The Koren edition, translated and commented on by Rabbi Sacks, explores realms of spirituality, law, language and history. Rereading this not yet well-worn *machzor* of mine, a particular truth struck me in the way it does each time I experience it fully; that we bring our selves – triumphant, flawed, blossoming, fractured, preoccupied, burgeoning, scorched selves – to our reading. One of the first notes I made was, ‘There are *tefillot* we will pause on this year, they will burn in us differently.’

And so they do.

The first reverberation emerged with *אחות קטנה*, a *piyut* composed in thirteenth century Girona by Rabbi Avraham Hazan which appears in last night’s liturgy. Its title, ‘Little Sister,’ is a phrase for the Jewish people employed in *Shir HaShirim/Song of Songs*.

*אחות קטנה* is marked with a refrain at the end of each haunting stanza  
*תכלה שנה וקללותיה.*

*Bring an end to the year and its curses.*

This invocation, a howl of sorts, shifts into a register of hope at its closing stanza

*תחל שנה וברכותיה.*

*Begin the year and its blessings.*

My *machzor* positions it as: ‘A cry from the heart of Spanish Jewry during the age of the Crusades ... The poem ... is a plea for Rosh HaShana to mark a turning point in the fate of Jewry.’<sup>1</sup>

*A plea for Rosh HaShana to mark a turning point in the fate of Jewry*

As I read *אחות קטנה*, I am simultaneously deeply in this present imagining a turning away from a year of curses and in the present of the *piyyut*. Or in the near-enough present to it, being located in time 200 years before Hazan writes it, and in geography 4 days walk from Girona to Provence where a woman named Sarah Hamoutal Todros seeks refuge. This setting feels intimate to me because of a surviving letter written by this extraordinary woman. This document, initially housed by the Cairo Genizah, would inspire Flemish author Stefan Hertmans to write his novel *The Convert* out of that time of curses about which Hazan writes.

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<sup>1</sup> Koren Sacks *Machzor*, p. 44-5

Continuing to read my *machzor*, I note that if today was a Sunday, we would have recited in *Shir Hayichud*, Songs of G-d's Oneness, written by Rabbi Samuel Ben Kalonymus He-Hasid of twelfth century Germany, this

Kintsugi-like phrase  
מזבח אבנה בשברון לבי

*I shall build an altar out of my shattered heart.*

We shall do this, we shall build altars out of our shattered hearts, even though today is not a Sunday.

In the commentary further on Rabbi Sacks claims that the differentiation between science and faith lies in song. 'Science describes creation in speech, faith evokes it in song. Science is prose, faith is poetry ... Faith sings, because music is the language of the soul.' (367)

In the language of the soul, liturgy flows like this fragment of a *piyut*, written by the earliest known composer of this form, Yose ben Yose, יוסי בן יוסי, who lived in the Land of Israel, it is thought during the fifth century.

אור עולם באוצר חיים, אורות מאפל אמר ויהי

*Endless light in a treasure-house of life./ Lights from obscurity – He spoke and they became.* (354)

This fragment hurls us backwards to the first day of creation. In *Mishnah Chagiga* Rabbi Elazar tells us that in a world that predated the sun's creation, the presence of light was spiritual, illuminating the world from end to end. Upon seeing the Generation of the Flood that was to come, G-d decided to hide this light from the wicked, so that it could not be misused. My *machzor* notes Rav Kook's belief 'that from time to time there are great men whom G-d blesses with a vision of that hidden light. They see the world filled with the radiance of G-d ...[Kook] believed great artists were sometimes able to convey this in their work.' (354)

Is this why certain works of art have been a kind of salvation over the past year and at other times of distress?

Golden lanterns revealing a hidden light.

One of the most prolific and early paytanim Rabbi Eleazar be-Rabbi Kalir, whose *piyyutim* we read today, wrote the following verse

מלך דר בנהורא / עוטה אורה / משפטנו יוציא לאורה

*O King/ who lives in light/ and clothes Himself with light/ He shall bring forth our judgement into light* (996)

There is an incandescent nature to the lines, almost as if they have brushed up against the clothes of light he conjures.

In a Rosh HaShanah video on the National Library of Israel's website, the lens focuses on a fragment of a *machzor*. Having survived from between the 11th to 12th centuries, also preserved in the Cairo genizah and now housed in the National Library, it contains its own particular incandescence. I cannot tell you if what is written on it is this *piyut* about the King who clothes himself with light but it is from the same composer.

It strikes me that it is this form of light that is evoked for me by Jewish-American poet Alicia Ostriker in her poem, 'The Light',

*What is the birthplace  
of the light  
that stabs me with joy*

Perhaps we all contain internal *genizahs*, in which we house our sacred selves; ones vulnerable to air and mishandling. Perhaps these days of Rosh HaShanah are ones in which we might open them without risk of injury.

The Biblical name of this *chag* is *Yom Teruah*, Day of the Blowing of the Shofar. For many, this sound that begins in breath, and then makes its way through bone, only to pierce the breast bone of the listener and to enter the psyche, the soul, is one of the most profound of Rosh HaShanah experiences.

In *Mishnah Rosh HaShanah* there is a discussion of Shofar blowing, with descriptions of the sounds including the תרועה as being akin to three יבבות 'whimpers', שברים are broken blasts or גנוחי גנוח 'moaning'

In his Rambam/ Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah* further explores the issue of uncertainty regarding what constitutes a *teru'ah*:  
'Does it resemble the wailing with which the women cry when they moan, or the sighs which a person who is distressed about a major matter will release repeatedly? Perhaps a combination of the two - sighing and the crying which will follow it - is called *teru'ah*, because a distressed person will sigh and then cry? Therefore, we fulfill all [these possibilities].'

Online I find an artwork titled *100 Sounds of the Shofar* by Avraham Lowenthal, an artist and Kabbalist based in Tzfat. It is a kaleidoscopic sonic diagram of rich violet hues, of oranges, of cornflower and turquoise blue, each triangle depicts an upwards movement. Lowenthal frames the sounds as:

'The whole long sound of *tekia* expresses inner joy and thankfulness. The three broken cries of *shevarim* express brokenness.

The sound of *terua*, so broken it is whole, is the prayer from the depths of our heart revealing the always flowing divine goodness. ...  
[the] *tekia gedola* ... represents unconditional love and oneness.'<sup>2</sup>  
According to Lowenthal, the shofar sounds 'represent 100 aspects of love within ourselves.'<sup>3</sup>

I hope that this Rosh HaShanah the sounds of the shofar and not of sirens, will be ringing out in the hills of Tzfat, in the villages of the North and everywhere else in Israel. Particularly the sound of the *tekia gedola* denoting 'unconditional love and oneness.'

On a night in November 2016, visual artist Yoram Raanan and Meira his wife drove away from their house and Yoram's studio in the Jerusalem Hills, fleeing a forest fire in which over fifteen hundred of his paintings, forty years of work, were destroyed. Later, he would come to see it thus:

*I never really found the words to articulate how these two recognitions - destruction and celestial softness - could coexist for me in the same time. But when I began painting again my new paintings said what I couldn't.*

*On one hand they were full of dark tones, sometimes even black and ashy. This was unlike anything I'd painted in the past. But at the same time they were filled with gold, a color I'd never felt necessary beforehand. It was as if the darkness of my loss had somehow opened me to a deeper truth, a new light.'*<sup>4</sup>

At the end of this past August, as part of SJWF, I moderated a panel titled 'Genesis of a New Jewish Matriarchy'. I closed the session by referring to a contemporary Rachel, speaking of how Rachel Goldberg-Polin had then been crying out for 321 days for her son Hersh (z'l) and for all the hostages in Gaza.

I suspected then and still now that she would reject being referred to as heroic or mythic. But each time I watched her, it was partly with a sense of wonderment for even in her extreme distress, she refused to stop bearing witness not only to the lives of those who were taken but also to our capacity for humanity.

When addressing the United Nations in Geneva last December<sup>5</sup>, in the midst of the state of desolation she had described, Rachel conjured the strength to speak of choosing life and then, in a radical act, she recited *One Tiny Seed*; her poem composed for an unnamed woman in Gaza, a woman she knew. The poem's imagery is of tears shared, a sea of tears, that might

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<sup>2</sup> Avraham Lowenthal, <https://www.kabbalahart.com/gallery/100-sounds-of-the-shofar/>

<sup>3</sup> Avraham Lowenthal in '100 Sounds of the Shofar'

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgNYJCLbjgw&list=PL0DmhLKqkbuVnv2kYumUxz\\_8XHRji5\\_mA&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgNYJCLbjgw&list=PL0DmhLKqkbuVnv2kYumUxz_8XHRji5_mA&index=4)

<sup>4</sup> Yoram Raanan, <https://www.yoramraanan.com/story>

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Goldberg-Polin, speech to the UN, December 2023

become the water source for a future. I noted in August, that listening to Rachel's voice was akin to listening to a woman's voice that works like the sound of the Shofar; a reminder of our ability for transcendence and for the power of love and poetry.

May Shira Hadasha, this *kehilla* that places song at its centre, be blessed with much *shir*.

May this be a year of return: of the hostages to their homes, of the world to the possibility of a humanity that remembers or discovers the luminous sacred. I wish Israel a year of peace and may the spirit of peace unfurl into the future. I wish the people of Gaza and Palestinians the same. I wish our community, the Jewish people, and all of humanity, a year of a turning point, one flecked with unexpected gold.

.תחל שנה וברכותיה.

*Begin the year and its blessings*

Naomi Shemer phrased it another way in her beloved song

בראש השנה, בראש השנה  
ליבנו ענה בתפילה נושנה  
שיפה ושונה תהא השנה  
אשר מתחילה בשיר

On Rosh HaShana, on Rosh HaShana  
Our hearts answered with an ancient prayer  
May it be beautiful and different  
This year that begins with song<sup>6</sup>

לשנה טובה תכתבו ותחתמו

Tali Lavi

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<sup>6</sup> Naomi Shemer, *B'Rosh Hashanah*, 1971