Voices for Prophetic Judaism

Booklet for the Aseret Y'mei T'shuvah Ten Days of Return 5786 – 2025

www.voicesforpropheticjudaism.uk

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Introduction

Voices for Prophetic Judaism is an initiative led by Progressive Jewish clergy in Britain which aims to reclaim the Jewish legacy of ethical teachings by establishing a platform for prophetic voices and prophetic action, championing justice, peace, equality, human rights, and tikkun olam (repair of the world).

Launched with an online Tikkun Leyl Shavuot, a night of study, on 1-2 June 2025, a core feature of Voices for Prophetic Judaism is our website where you will find:

- a page providing the recording of the Tikkun Leyl <https://voicesforpropheticjudaism.uk/tikkun-leyl-2025/>;
- a 'Resources' page of sermons, articles, and other materials <https://voicesforpropheticjudaism.uk/resources/>; and
- a 'Partners' page, which highlights Jewish organisations, projects and initiatives in Britain, and Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian initiatives in Israel-Palestine, that promote social justice, equality, LGBTQ+ inclusion, human rights and eco-action <https://voicesforpropheticjudaism.uk/partners/>.

The aim of this booklet for the aseret y'mei t'shuvah, the 'ten days of return' between Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, is to offer prophetic perspectives rooted in the themes and teachings of the yamim nora'im, the 'awed days'.

Whether you read it as a day-by-day guide for your own journey through the ten days, or choose to focus on particular readings, we hope you find within these pages spiritual nourishment and inspiration, as we all continue to grapple with the ethical challenges of our age.

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber and Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

September 2025/ Elul 5785

Don't they know it's the end of the world?

Rabbi Dr Barbara Borts

The shofar sounds, our spines tingle, and then we sing - *hayom harat olam*, today the world came into being. Each day of creation was crowned in Torah by 'it is good', each particular day with its seas and seasons, its grasses and trees, with its various animals, with its human beings, was beautiful, and complete. God admonishes Adam, the human being, in this well-known midrash, to gaze around: "and God said: 'See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, I made for you.'" And then God reminds them: "Be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world - for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it." <Kohelet Rabbah 7:13>

And yet, spoiling and destroying God's world is the year-by-year gift we give to the world. The Climate Clock <https://climateclock.net/> shows the hours, minutes and seconds left before it is too late. And the European Geosciences Union states baldly:

If governments don't act decisively by 2035 to fight climate change, humanity could cross a point of no return after which limiting global warming below 2°C in 2100 will be unlikely... The research also shows the deadline to limit warming to 1.5°C has already passed, unless radical climate action is taken. <https://www.egu.eu/news/428/deadline-for-climate-action-act-strongly-before-2035-to-keep-warming-below-2c/>

Happy birthday, world.

How did this all come about? Some people blame the Torah itself, where it is written that God told the first humans that they were to rule over the world and subdue it. The word 'כבש' does sometimes have negative connotations, as in 'conquer' or 'subdue'. But it can also mean 'to restrain' or 'to preserve'.

We have a choice, then, in how we view the human connection to the natural world: to conquer and defeat it, or to preserve the world, restraining ourselves; to be the custodians or to be the vanquishers; to realise that the earth and all that is on it belongs to the Eternal, in the words of Psalm 24, and not, “the earth and the fullness thereof belongs to me, and to this generation, alone”.

For us as Jews, that means two things. One, that we recognise the aspect of the divine in the world, that the world, too, was created by God as were we, and that, as the midrash teaches us: “Even those creatures you deem superfluous in the world - like flies, fleas, and gnats - nevertheless have their allotted task in the scheme of Creation” <Exodus Rabbah 10:1>; that we were put into the garden to tend and care for it, as God’s partners. It means recognising our own place as created beings in a world in which we are linked to all creation.

Two, it means recognising our bonds with other humans, present and future. It means sacrifice, deciding not to do certain things because the cost of doing them is one that, even if you do not pay, someone will pay. It has been proposed that we are the most uncaring, selfish generations to live on earth. Can we ever say no, recognising that our desires can be destructive and that, in making different decisions, we say yes to others and to the future?

We cannot on our own solve the enormous problems that have now brought us to the brink of climate catastrophe. As one activist wrote: “If we do the math, we’ll discover that our little acts of wastefulness at home turn into cultural trends with global consequences.” It means changing how and to where we travel. It means altering how we shop and what we purchase. It means rethinking what we eat. It means keeping up with the latest news about our gadgets. It also means holding companies and corporations and governments to account, taking them to court and demanding action.

Hayom harat olam, today is the birthday of the world.

Two stories lie before us. We must choose.

In The Beginning: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and God saw all that God had created, and behold, it was very good.

Or...

In The End: In the end, man and woman destroyed the heaven and the earth. The earth had been tossing and turning, and the destructive spirit of human beings had been hovering over the face of the waters.

And people said: Let us have power over the earth. And it was so. And they saw that the power tasted good, and so they called those that possessed power wise, and those that tried to curb power weak. And there was evening, and there was morning, the seventh day.

And humans said: let us make God in our image. Let us say that God thinks what we think, that God wants what we want, that God commands what we want God to command. And people found ways to kill, with pollution and waste and global warning, those that were living, and those that were not yet born, and they said: this is God's will. And it was so. And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day.

And then on the last day, a great sun shone over all the face of the earth, and there was a great thunder over all of the face of the earth, and there was a great cry that reached up form over all of the earth, and then humanity, and all of their doings, was no more. And the earth rested on the last day from all of humanity's labours, and the universe was quiet on the last day from all of humanity's doings, which people in their folly had wrought. And there was void. There was no more evening, and there was no more morning - there was no more day.

Beyond universalism and particularism and back again

Rabbi Dr Judith Rosen-Berry

"'They encamped in the wilderness.' The Torah was given in the wilderness. For had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the nations of the world: 'You have no share in it.' But now that it was given in the wilderness publicly and openly, in place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept it."[1]

"Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true and the other is false. It maybe, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality."[2]

Most progressive Jews understand that Judaism originated as a 'religion'[3] within a particular tribe (the Israelites). That this 'religion' unfolded in a particular place (in the land we today call Israel), and that this unfolding occurred in a particular historical moment (approximately 3000 years ago). And that Jews today continue to celebrate their traditions, rituals and sacred text in two very particular languages (Hebrew and Aramaic). That's a lot of particulars (and there are many more) which is partly why we hear quite a bit about Jewish Particularism.

But progressive Jewish self-understanding doesn't stop there. There are crucial moments when this understanding transcends its

[1] *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Bachodesh* 1, trans. M. Hirshman, quoting Exodus 19:2

[2] Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense: A Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture*, 2010

[3] Judaism itself is the religious component of a wider Jewish culture, that is often secular. But the division between the religious and secular is a modern construction, not a pre-modern one.

celebrated particularity and embraces that dimension of Judaism that has universal meaning, the consequence of which is that the Jewish community - without hesitation or discrimination, makes itself and its Torah accessible and open to everyone. This approach may lack some consistency and over time there have probably been different iterations of 'universality' found within the Jewish community, but it is nevertheless a trope that is deeply embedded within it. Borne, discussed and reflected on over the course of a 3000 year history the universal impulse within Judaism originates in and revolves around a profound relationship with a Reality that is continuously revealing *Itself* as Sacred Oneness. A Sacred Oneness that is the source of all Creation, the well-spring of Goodness, and the Inspiration that guides the Jewish people towards living 'ethically' and with integrity alongside and among all others - whilst appreciating their own distinctiveness in parallel with an openness (ideally) to the difference of others.

What is interesting is that for progressive Jews their understanding of universalism (on the whole) is not in conflict with their particular lived experience. Universalism and particularism are not perceived as irreconcilable opposites, so both of these worldviews can be inhabited symbiotically. There is an understanding then that the paradigms of universalism and particularism are in relationship with one another, and that it is the fruitful *tension* that this relationship creates that reverberates throughout Jewish thought and being.

This is not to say that there haven't been moments, or specific historical contexts when one or other of these paradigms has not taken precedence over the other. The particular Rabbinic genius that is Halacha, for example, necessarily departs from the universal teachings of Torah. And although Jewish universalism became untenable within the Halachic framework, it then took precedence over Halachic particularity two thousand years later, when universalism found new expression within Reform Judaism.

Celebrating, as Abraham Geiger stated, that "the essence of Judaism was its religious universal element. All the remainder was the fruit of historical conditions."[4]

But now I wonder if the discussion has reached some sort of impasse? And that it's time to move beyond the universal-particular debate, and for progressive Jews to re-think or think *beyond* this possibly exhausted paradigm.

The 21st-century *global* challenges, that Jews like everyone else are confronted with, cannot be adequately addressed through the now (possibly) anachronistic prism of universalism and particularism. Progressive Jews need to acknowledge that the many crises that humanity now face demand their participation in the building of global consciousness/awareness, and a commitment from them to engage in global collective action. How Judaism re-understands itself in a world beset with *transboundary* problems is not a choice today but an urgent necessity. Progressive Jews are now *planetary* Jews.[5] This is the new paradigm, and Jewish perspectives, thinking and action must find new ways to be framed within it.

The current war that Israel and Hamas (in Gaza) are engaged in provides us with a series of catastrophic examples of why this must be the case. Locally calamitous this conflict is also an unbounded disaster. Politically and environmentally the impacts ripple out without any regard for politically constructed borders. Fear, disease, pollution and hate are contagious. Uncontainable they feed a growing sense of hopelessness that finds willing expression in new global trends of nihilism and authoritarianism.

Planetary Jews recognise all of this. They understand that it's by becoming part of a new movement of global collaboration (beyond

[4] Cited in H.H. Ben-Sasson in *A History Of The Jewish People*, 1985

[5] When I wrote this I didn't know that there was something on the web called "Planetary Judaism: Torah for The Future" by Rabbi Miles Krassen - his vision is not how I understand *planetary* Judaism, but there maybe some similarities?

modern universalism) that they can help counter the amassing forces of global destruction. Maybe, in the end, this is just another way of saying that *planetary* Jews are those who continue to understand that the synergetic relationship between the global (universal) and the local (particular), that finds *particular* expression within Judaism is, or might become, part of a global (universal) resistance to all that is fragmenting and undermining our common purpose as Jews and humanity. Perhaps then, *planetary* Jews are simply those who have continued undaunted, despite everything, to recognise the life enhancing, and *futural* synergy of the universal-particular dynamic that despite everything continues to express itself within Judaism.

The point was not to sacrifice your children

Rabbi Lev Saul

In 1922, archaeologists dug up a site in modern-day southern Iraq. There, they found incredible spans of gold and sophisticated armour, and Iron Age Sumerian artefacts, encased within stone walls. They dubbed this place “the Royal Cemetery of Ur,” an ancient Babylonian mausoleum.

On that site, they also discovered evidence of hundreds of human sacrifices. Among the human sacrifices, a considerable number were children.

Nearly all of the skeletons were killed to accompany an aristocrat or member of the royal family into the afterlife. Some had drunk poison. Some had been bashed over the head with blunt objects. After their death, many were exposed to mercury vapour, so that they would not decompose, but would remain in a lifelike posture, available for public display.

This site dates to sometime around 2,500 BCE in the ancient city of Ur. According to our legends, another figure came from the ancient city of Ur sometime around 2,500 BCE.

His name was Abraham.

In the biblical narrative, Abraham wandered from Ur to ancient Canaan, where he began to worship the One God, and founded Judaism.

The world in which Abraham purportedly lived was rife with child sacrifice. Across the Ancient Near East, archaeologists have uncovered remains of children on slaughtering altars. They have found steles describing when and why they sacrificed children. They have found stories of child sacrifice from the Egyptian, Greek, Sumerian, and Assyrian civilisations.

So problematic was child sacrifice in the ancient world that our Scripture repeatedly condemns it. The book of Leviticus warns: “Do not permit any of your children to be offered as a sacrifice to Molech, for you must not bring shame on the name of your God.” The prophet Jeremiah describes disparagingly how the Pagans “have built the high places to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal.” In the Book of Kings, King Josiah tears down the altars where people are sacrificing their children.

Abraham put a stop to the practice of child sacrifice. It seems to happen suddenly, and without warning, and with even less explanation. No reason is given why he abruptly ended all the cultural deference that had gone before and opposed an entrenched religious practice.

The question we now must ask is: why?

One reason that comes to mind is that it is so obviously immoral. Surely it should be self-evident that you don’t kill kids! But that wasn’t obvious to all the people around Abraham. And that wasn’t obvious to traditional commentators, either. In their world, the morally right thing was always to obey God.

A traditional reading says that Abraham stopped child sacrifice in obedience to God. In the story we read today, Abraham is called upon by God to go up on Mount Moriah and slay his son. Only at the summit, when he holds up his arm to murder Isaac, does God stop him, telling Abraham that he has proved his devotion to God by not withholding his son, and that he does not have to kill Isaac.

Yet there are several problems with this story. If we adhere to the traditional reading, God still wanted child sacrifice, and felt that doing so would prove Abraham’s devotion. In fact, nearly all traditionalist readers interpret it this way,saying that obedience before God should be a sacred virtue. A conservative reader of the

Bible says that the moral of the story is that we should be subservient to God, and do what we are told.

God said not to perform child sacrifices, so we no longer do. That would mean, then, that if God had said child sacrifice was permitted, we would still be doing it.

In 2007, the Israeli philosopher Omri Boehm offered a radical reinterpretation of the story of the binding of Isaac. The story, Dr Boehm argues, is not about Abraham's fealty to God, but his disobedience. Dr Boehm shows how, reading against the grain of traditional interpretation, this is not a story where God changes tack and decides not to ask for child sacrifices anymore, but where Abraham rebels against authority and refuses to commit murder.

For Boehm, what was truly radical about the Binding of Isaac was that it set out a new set of values, completely at odds with those of the Ancient Near East. Where other cultures practised child sacrifice because it was part of their established culture, Abraham resisted and put life above law. Where others encouraged obedience to authority, so much that poor people could be killed in the palaces of Ur to serve their masters in the afterlife, Abraham made a virtue of rebellion. For our ancestor Abraham, refusing to follow orders, even God's, was the true measure of faith. By not killing, even if God seemingly tells you to, you show where your values really lie.

This is not a story about obedience, but rebellion. And that message - of resistance against authority in defence of human life - has much to teach us today.

Boehm reconstructs what the archetypal story of child sacrifice was in the Ancient Near East. Across many cultures and time periods, there was a familiar refrain to how the story went. The community is faced with a crisis: some kind of famine, natural disaster, or war. The community realises that its gods are angry. To placate the gods, the community leader brings his most treasured child and sacrifices

him on an altar following the traditional rites. Then, the gods are pleased and the disaster is averted.

We can see that the biblical narrative clearly subverts the storytelling tradition that was around it. In other cultures, the community leader really did sacrifice his special child, and that really did please their Pagan god. In our story, the community leader does not sacrifice his special child, and the national God proclaims no longer to desire human sacrifice. This is already then, a bold message to the rest of the world: you might sacrifice children, but we will not.

Boehm takes this a step further and looks at source criticism for the text. Most scholars of Scripture accept that Torah is the work of human hands over several centuries. One of the ways we try to work out who wrote which bits is by looking at what names for God they use. Whenever we see the name “Elohim” used for God, we tend to think this source is earlier. Whenever we see the name “YHVH” used for God, we tend to assume the source is a later edit by Temple priests.

The story of the binding of Isaac is odd because it uses the name “Elohim” almost the entire way through, until the very end, when the angel of God appears and tells Abraham not to kill Isaac. That means that most of the text is from the early tradition and only the very end part, where the angel of God tells Abraham not to kill Isaac, comes from the later priests.

So, Boehm asks, what was the earlier version of the text? If you take out the verses where God is YHVH and have only the version where God is Elohim, what story remains?

Well, in the version that we know, where both stories are combined, an angel of God calls out and tells Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac. That’s the bit where God is YHVH. If you take that out, and have only God as Elohim, Abraham makes the decision himself. No angel

comes to tell him what to do. Next, if we cut out the parts where God is YHVH, there is no praise from the angel, telling Abraham he made the right choice. Instead, you get a story where Abraham deliberately disobeys his God because he loves the life of his son more.

The earliest version of the text, before the Torah was edited and a later gloss was added, is one in which Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, goes all the way up Mount Moriah, and then refuses. Without prompt or praise from God, Abraham decides to sacrifice a ram instead of his son. In the earliest version of the biblical narrative, when source critics have stripped away priestly edits, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son and Abraham rebels.

The earliest version, then, is an even more radical counter-narrative to the other stories of the Ancient Near East. Not only do we not sacrifice children. We also recognise that sometimes you have to say no to your god. In this version, rebellion is more important than obedience, especially when it comes to human life.

This isn't just a modern Bible scholar being provocative and trying to sell books. In fact, Boehm shows, this was also the view of respected Torah scholars like Maimonides and ibn Caspi. These great mediaeval thinkers didn't think of the Torah as having multiple authors, but they could see that multiple stories were going on in one narrative. One, they thought, was the simple tale of obedience, intended for the masses. But hiding between the lines was another one, for the truly enlightened, that tells the story of Abraham's refusal.

Boehm terms this "a religious model of disobedience." By the end of the book, you go away with the unshakeable impression that Boehm is right. True faith, he says, is not always doing what you think God is telling you. Sometimes it is reaching deep within your own soul to find moral truth. Sometimes you really show your values by how you defy orders.

In his conclusion, Boehm takes aim at Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, an American religious leader, who lives in the West Bank settlement of Efrat. Rabbi Riskin had said, in his analysis of the binding of Isaac, that Abraham was a model of faith by his willingness to kill his son. Riskin insisted that he was willing to sacrifice his own children in service of the state of Israel.

This, says Boehm, is precisely the opposite of the message of the binding of Isaac. The point was not to let your children die. The point was to bring a final end to child sacrifice. The point was not to submit to unjust authority, but to rebel in defence of life.

Rabbi Riskin does not realise it, but by offering child sacrifice, he is really advocating for the Pagan god. He is describing the explicitly forbidden ritual of allowing your children to die.

Abraham thoroughly opposed these false gods who demanded ritual murder. They were idols; and child sacrifice a monstrous practice that we were supposed to banish to the past. The very essence and origin of Jewish monotheism is its thorough rejection of killing children.

Boehm could not have known how pertinent his words would become. This year has been one of the worst that those of us connected to Israel can remember. Beginning on October 7th, with Hamas's horrendous massacres and kidnappings, the last Jewish year has seen us rapt in a horrific and seemingly never-ending war.

This year, thousands of Israelis were killed. This is the first time in a generation that more Israeli youth have died in war than in car crashes. Reading through the list of names, it is remarkable how many of the soldiers were teenagers.

That is not to even mention the 40,000 Palestinians whom the IDF have killed. According to Netanyahu's own statements, well over half were civilians. Around a third were children. As famine and food insecurity rises, the risk of deaths will only accelerate. It has

been agonising to witness, and I cannot imagine how painful it has been to live through.

Yet, during my month in Jerusalem, I saw that the voice of Abraham has not been extinguished. There are few groups I hold in higher esteem than the Israeli peace movement. Against untold threats and coercion, in a society that can be intensely hostile to their message, they uphold Abraham's injunction against killing.

One of the leaders of the cause against war was Rachel Goldberg-Polin. On October 7th, her 19-year-old son, Hersh, was kidnapped by Hamas. His arm was blown off and he was taken hostage in Gaza. From the very outset, Mrs Golderg-Polin argued fervently for a ceasefire and a hostage deal that would bring her son home. She warned that the only way her son would come home alive would be as part of political negotiations.

At the end of August, as Israeli forces neared to capture Hersh as part of a military operation, Hamas shot her son, Hersh, in the head.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin's refusal to give up hope, refusal to sacrifice her son, and steadfast insistence on peaceful alternatives is a true model of Abraham's faith.

And it involves serious rebellion too. When I met with hostage families in Jerusalem, I was shocked to hear how, for protesting against the war to bring their families home, they had been beaten up by Ben Gvir's police. I saw this with my own eyes when I marched alongside them. People shouted and jeered at them, and the police came at them with truncheons.

In July, when I went with Rabbis for Human Rights to defend a village in the West Bank against settler violence, we were joined in our car full of nerdy Talmud scholars by a surprising first-timer. A strapping 18-year-old got in to volunteer in supporting the Palestinian village. What was most remarkable was that he himself lived in a West Bank settlement.

He explained that he had refused to serve in the military. He did not know that others had done it before, or that there were organisations to support Israeli military refusers. Instead, he said, he thought to himself: “if I don’t go, they won’t kill me; if I do go, I might kill someone.” What could be a truer expression of Abraham’s message: no to death! No to death, no matter the cost.

He really had to rebel. For refusing to serve in the war, the conscientious objector I met spent seven months in jail. Still now, there are dozens of Israeli teenagers in prison because they would not support the war.

Throughout my time in Jerusalem, I attended every protest against the war and for hostage release that I could. One of the most profound groups I witnessed was the Women in White, a feminist anti-war group going back decades. One of these women, with grey hair and the look of a veteran campaigner, held a placard that read in Hebrew: “we do not have spare children for pointless wars.”

Is this not exactly what Abraham would say? We will not sacrifice our children on the altar of war!

Theirs is truly the voice of Abraham, the true voice of Judaism. It is the voice that opposes child sacrifice. Theirs is the voice that upholds the God who chooses life.

Talmud tells us that, when we blast the shofar one hundred times on Rosh Hashanah, we are repeating the one hundred wails of Sisera’s mother when she heard her son had died. Sisera was, in fact, an enemy of the Israelites, who waged war on Deborah’s armies, and was killed by the Jewish heroine, Yael. Still, at this holy time of year, we place the grief of Sisera’s mother at the forefront of our prayers.

We take the cry of every mother who has lost a child and we make it our cry.

Thousands of years after the Sumerian Empire had ceased existing, archaeologists dug up its remains, and saw a society that practised child sacrifice. From the very fact of how they carried out murder and permitted death, the excavators could tell a great deal about what kind of society this was. One that killed people to serve their wealthy and their gods.

One day, thousands of years from now, historians may look upon us too, and ask questions about what our society was like, and what we valued. May we take upon ourselves the mantle of Abraham.

May they look back and say that we chose to value life. May they look back and see that our people despised death and war. May they look back on us and see a society that practised faithful disobedience.

Note: this piece was written for last year's High Holy Days (2024). Therefore, the statistics will not be current - but will not have improved.

In pursuit of the other, 10 haikus

Cantor Rachel Weston

וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם
וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי: וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת לִשְׁחֹט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test, saying to him:
"Abraham." He answered: "Here I am." And Abraham picked up the knife
to slay his son.

Genesis 22:1 and 10

With stout, trembling fists
Father built an altar of
Disobedience

וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְּכֶם אָנֹכִי כֹּרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאָלָה הַזֹּאת: כִּי אֶת־
אֲשֶׁר יֶשְׁנוֹ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ עֹמֵד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינֶנּוּ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ
הַיּוֹם:

I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone,
but both with those who are standing here with us this day before our God
and with those who are not with us here this day.

Deuteronomy 29:13-14

Ancestral anguish
buried beneath searing sands:
"Act first. Then listen."

יַעֲזֹב רָשָׁע דַּרְכּוֹ וְאִישׁ אָוֶן מַחְשְׁבֹתָיו וְיָשֹׁב אֶל־יְהוָה וִירַחֲמֵהוּ וְאֶל־אֱלֹהֵינוּ כִּי־
יַרְבֶּה לִסְלוֹחַ: כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא דַרְכֵיכֶם דְּרָכָי נְאֻם יְהוָה:

Let the wicked give up their ways, the sinful, their plans, for My plans are
not your plans, nor are My ways your ways, declares God.

Isaiah 55:7-8

Silent Agony;
What manner of God is this?
His burdened soul scorched!

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גָּרֵשׁ הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירַשׁ בֶּן־הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת עִם־
בְּנִי עִם־יִצְחָק׃

Sarah said to Abraham: “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”
Then God opened Hagar’s eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.
Genesis 21:10 and 19

Ha-ger, my strange shroud
Made miracles in the dunes
Forgive me, Achti

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבָּתוֹן זִכְרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ׃

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts.
Leviticus 23:24

Shattering vessels;
Such is the howl I desire
to reveal Myself

וְהִיא מָרַת נָפֶשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וּבָכֹה תִבְכֶּה׃

In her wretchedness, Hannah prayed to God, weeping all the while.
1 Samuel 1:10

My Barren Mothers,
Dancing for the monsoon rains
soar out before me

וַהֲסִרֹתִי אֶת־כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֹרָי וּפָנַי לֹא יֵרָאוּ׃

And, as My Presence passes by, I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.

Exodus 33:23

Never once did my
infertile marriage to God
cause me such tsuris

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה׃

Love your fellow as yourself: I am Adonai.

Leviticus 19:18

Whilst reading in shock
Deuteronomy thirteen
I question this creed

כִּי לֹא לְעוֹלָם אָרִיב וְלֹא לָנֶצַח אֶקְצוֹף כִּי־רוּחַ מִלְּפָנַי יַעֲטוֹף וּנְשָׁמוֹת אֲנִי עָשִׂיתִי׃

For I will not always contend, I will not be angry forever: nay, I who make spirits flag, also create the breath of life.

Isaiah 57:16

Storm and Fury fade
Sweet winds restore shared rest, like
Swords into Ploughshares

כִּי מִנֶּגֶד תִּרְאֶה אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תָבוֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־אֲנִי נֹתֵן לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it.

Deuteronomy 32:52

Eyes raised to the hills
Forty years of spies, dust, and rock.
If it be Your will...

Return, O Israel, to the Eternal One your God

Rabbi Alexandra Wright

Shabbat Shuvah takes its name from the opening words of the Haftarah that is read on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Eloheycha* - 'Return, O Israel, to the Eternal One your God' <Hosea 14:2>.

The context in which the prophet speaks is one of national renewal. Hosea's prophecies occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel in the early to middle part of the eighth century BCE (around 784-748 BCE).

We know little about what was happening in Hosea's time. We know that it was a period of political instability and foreign domination. Taxes were high and paid, not internally, but to the Assyrian sovereign Tiglath-pileser III, subjecting the northern kingdom to foreign subjugation. Israel may have tried to create a coalition with Egypt against Assyria, but this only created further punitive measures from Assyria.

More prominent are criticisms of the religious and cultic life in the north. Without the centrality of the Temple in the southern kingdom of Judah, the northern kingdom was beset by syncretic practices that involved the worshipping of the local Canaanite Ba'alim, and a rejection of Israel's God. Hosea mentions diverse idolatrous practices, such as involvement with cult prostitutes, kissing molten images of calves, and other doubtful rituals.

The opening words of the Haftarah call upon the nation to repent from their sins, to confess with words and ask God's forgiveness. What is interesting here is that already the prophet is suggesting some kind of liturgical process: "Take words with you and return to

the Eternal One. Say to God, 'Forgive all guilt and accept what is good.'"

The passage continues in the vein of similar prophetic passages: don't think that those empty actions of offering up sacrifices on an altar will cleanse you from your sins but express yourself with true remorse and regret. The dark and bleak past of sinfulness and rejection, says Hosea, will be replaced by God's pity, by healing and love and the people will flourish and blossom as they turn away from idolatry and return to paths of righteousness.

The Hebrew verbal root *shuv* is used five times in the nine verses that are read from Hosea:

- *Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Eloheycha* - 'Return, O Israel, to the Eternal One your God' <vs.2>.
- *V'shuvu el-Adonai* - 'And return to the Eternal One' <vs.3>.
- *Erpa m'shuvatam* - 'I will heal their backsliding' [affliction] <vs. 5>.
- *Ki shav api mimmenu* - 'For My anger has turned away from them' <vs. 5>.
- *Yashuvu yoshvey v'tzilo* - 'Those who sit in his shade shall be revived' <vs. 8>.

One way of reading these verses is within the context of the prophet's plea to the nation to repent - to recognise that they have engaged in apostate practices and must return to a path of goodness and loyalty to God. Without this, the people's physical, moral and spiritual existence is in danger - these three aspects are all bound together - and without repentance - *t'shuvah* - there can be no national restoration or renewal.

But on another, more personal level, these verses are addressed to each one of us at this season of repentance. The Haftarah reflects the inner processes that are required of us at this time: the work of

confession, remorse, repentance, seeking forgiveness, so that we can walk once again in paths of righteousness.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to 'return to God'? Our Machzor for the *Yamim Nora'im* may help us with our confessions of wrongdoing; it may give expression to that sense of distance from God through parables and prayers, but how do we make sense of distance or nearness to the idea of God's presence, to something that has no palpability, that we cannot grasp or see?

In the more contemporary prayers in our Machzor, it is our blemishes and faults that estrange us from God - 'greed and envy, self-pity and self-indulgence, cruelty and callousness, prejudice and arrogance, hatred and destructiveness' <p. 196>. Whether we are guilty of these imperfections, or not, Yom Kippur requires us to accept communal responsibility for these social and moral failures. And so, none of us is free from the burden of sin.

But making that statement, saying the words is not the same as experiencing and feeling what the Machzor describes as our rupture from God. How does one ensure that the motions of Yom Kippur are not merely mechanical or superficial, but evoke in us a deep sense of unease, shame and remorse for when things have gone wrong. We may justify our behaviour to ourselves - we did this because of the needs of the moment, because we didn't have a choice, because we were momentarily weak, because we didn't understand the consequences. But I think we know deep down when something has gone terribly wrong - when we have hurt someone, neglected something, told a lie perhaps, or trampled over someone's feelings. And if we are not aware of the hurt we inflict on others, then we are guilty of self-delusion.

Hosea's message is about reconciliation with God, but it assumes that we have a relationship to begin with. Estrangement only happens when there has previously been a connection, a human-divine dynamic and relationship.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik speaks about the learned Jew, the individual who sanctifies the mind through intellectual struggle. But he also speaks about the heart and the way it experiences God emotionally. 'One must feel the emotional pull of the *Ribono shel Olam* or, as William James put it, 'the presence of the Unseen.'

'Can a Jew genuinely feel [God's] presence?' asks the Rav. And the answer he gives is 'yes'; humanity not only must believe in God but must feel God's hand supporting their head during times of emotional turmoil. When, in the same year, Rabbi Soloveitchik suffered the loss of his mother, brother and wife, he spoke of God's presence and proximity being particularly strong during times of studying Torah.

This is the season of longing to be near to God. These days of reflection and the great day of Yom Kippur ahead of us encourage us to experience that sense of seeking and pining for God. *Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Eloheycha* - 'Return, O Israel, to the Eternal One your God'. The therapeutic ways of prayer and reflection, finding moments that have the capacity to imbue us with a sense of awe and wonder in something greater, more profound and more holy than this material world, help us ultimately to return to the paths of righteousness. Then, in the words of Hosea, we shall blossom like the lily, strike root like a Lebanon tree and be revived - *yashvu yoshvey v'tzilo*.

And you shall live in safety

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber

In the popular imagination, the prophet is there to portend doom – and so they often were.

But prophets also brought hope and comfort, two values sorely lacking in contemporary Anglo-Jewry.

As we hear more and more from our leaders and from the Jewish press about how precarious our situation is, how rising antisemitism means that the Jews have no future in this country, I present here a series of texts which encourage us to think more positively, to be grateful for what we have, to revel in our undoubted safety, to give thanks for the true privilege it is to live in a society like modern Britain.

Deuteronomy 12:10

וְיִשַׁבְתֶּם־בֶּטַח׃ You shall dwell in security.

Rabbi Gabriel's comment: Strictly speaking, I've taken these two words out of context. They are actually part of a longer sentence that spans two verses: "When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land … and live there safely … you are to bring … sacrifices."
But there's no reason why we can't also understand them as a commandment: we are required to dwell in security, 'security' referring not just to physical safety but also to the emotional quality of feeling safe. We should live without fear.
That doesn't mean we should lack basic common sense. Some things are scary, and we obviously need to take precautions about antisemitism. But there's a spectrum from taking sensible precautions to being continually burdened by a sense of dread attached to our Jewish identity – and this semi-commandment tells us that we should do what we can to enjoy the genuine safety we have.

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 7a

אמר רבי אבהו: לעולם אל יטיל אדם אימה יתירה בתוך ביתו.

Rabbi Abbahu says: a person should never impose excessive fear on the members of their household.

Rabbi Gabriel's comment: The Talmud goes on to give an example of why a father (who was, of course, the historic head-of-household) should not impose excessive fear. If he made his wife and children too afraid to speak out, then if, when cooking a meal for him, they accidentally made it non-kosher, they'd be too intimidated to warn him and he'd eat it.
This particular scenario may not be the most worrisome to our modern eyes, but the principle is still valid.
People who live in artificially-imposed fear are simply not enjoying life to the full, and not taking full advantage of the gifts they have been given by God.
Of course, even without artificially-imposed fear, plenty of people cannot enjoy life to the full: they may be afflicted by the genuine fears which arise from war or bombardment or displacement or famine; they may have a severe disability, or all-encompassing caring responsibilities; they may have any number of reasons to be apprehensive about their future.
All the more so, then - for those of us who have none of these problems, it is wrong, utterly wrong, for us to confect fears to burst bubbles which needn't be burst.

Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 10a

מי גרם לרגלינו שיעמדו במלחמה – שערי ירושלם, שהיו עוסקים בתורה.

How were we able to withstand our enemies in war? Because, within the gates of Jerusalem, Torah study continued.

Rabbi Gabriel's comment: Business as usual. When covid struck, the world moved online but carried on as best it could. Even in Theresienstadt, Jewish prisoners continued their education, under the tutelage of the world's first woman rabbi, Regina Jonas z"l.
The best defence against those who threaten the Jewish people - and the best way of spiting them, of sticking two fingers up at them - is to avoid retreating into fortress synagogues, but instead to keep calm and carry on.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg: antisemitism, an ancient solution

Not less Judaism, but more. If we can bring that about we shall cease to be troubled by that haunting ghost that pursues the modern Jew. Not that the antisemite will suddenly throw his arms about our necks in love and affection, but rather that we shall cease to be interested in what the antisemite says and does. We shall cease to be like the one in the fairytale, who is compelled to walk the road in which they have no interest and who in consequence resents every stone and thorn on the way, and we shall become, as our ancestors were, like one who walks the road because they love it and who never stops to notice the stones and the thorns because their soul is filled with a sense of beauty of what surrounds them, and with a happy realisation of the glorious gold that awaits them where the road ends.

Rabbi Gabriel's comment: I do not deny for a second that antisemitism is a real risk: my house is on a police quick-response watchlist due to the threats I regularly receive as a rabbi.
I'm also not denying that people are honestly feeling fear. But the Jewish community can and must do better as a whole in contextualising the fear. The fact is, 21st-century Britain is one of the safest places in all of history to be Jewish. We're not facing gas chambers or expulsion or inquisition or forced baptism or bans from attending university.
Nor, looking around the present-day world, are we facing armed attacks on our synagogues like in the USA and Denmark. Nor are we banned from buying Hebrew books like in Saudi Arabia. Nor are we at risk of being slaughtered en masse at music festivals like in Israel.
I honestly cannot think of a single time and place I'd feel safer living as a Jew than right here and right now.
So yes, what antisemitism there is in modern Britain is worrying and must be remorselessly tackled, but at the same time I see my role as a Jewish leader to hammer home just how indescribably lucky we are to be here.
I want to take a leaf out of Isaiah's book and offer נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי: comfort, comfort to my people! <40:1>
I need the children in my congregation to grow up understanding that their Jewish identity is something to be proud of, to celebrate, to live actively, not something that's going to mark them out as the next Anne Frank. Otherwise why would they keep coming?

Rabbi Naomi Levy: a prayer when one experiences an antisemitic incident

I am frightened, God, angry, in disbelief. I never imagined this would happen to me, that anyone would target me for being a Jew. I am deeply shaken by the rise of antisemitism in this country and throughout this world.

I don't want to ignore this incident, nor do I want to overreact, so that I am suspicious of every new encounter.

Show me, God, how to not live in fear, remind me that I am not alone. Give me the courage to speak up and speak out, to seek help from those who stand with me and from organisations that will defend my people and all people. Fill me with the determination to join hands with Jews and non-Jews across the globe to put an end to antisemitism and all prejudice wherever it lies.

I pray for the day when people will learn to see one another through Your eyes, God. In Your eyes all people are equally loved, equally precious.

I will not hide who I am, I refuse to cower in fear. I will not lose my faith in human goodness. Fill me with the strength, God, to turn my despair into hope and my rage into calm, thoughtful action. Grant me the wisdom to transform this act of hate into a deeper commitment to my people and my faith.

God, my Shelter, Guardian of Israel, teach me to see that the sacred flame of my ancestors burns brightly within me. I am grateful to be part of a holy and blessed people who have withstood and survived centuries of hate - and still we spread Your light and still we thrive!

Rabbi Gabriel's comment: Whenever we hear prophets of doom, whenever we hear that we should pack our suitcases, let us pay attention for a moment - decide whether we genuinely need to pack our suitcase - but then, once we (God willing) conclude that we needn't, let us instead rejoice in our good fortune.

Collective t'shuvah

Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen

אָשַׁמְנוּ
בָּגַדְנוּ
We have abused and betrayed.
סְלַח לָנוּ. מְחַל לָנוּ. כַּפֶּר לָנוּ
Forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement.
Yom Kippur liturgy

Each year our words and prayers are shaped by the times we are in. We return (שוב) to what is familiar in unfamiliar times. It is in the meeting of the new and returning that the spark of the possible lives in the High Holy Days. There is a promise and a hope set into the returning - we return because we, deep down, understand 'we are capable of becoming' (Ruttenberg 2022: 143). We turn up, maybe by rote, but maybe because we sense we are obligated to this internal work of repair, returning and becoming.

Stepping into the meeting of the new and returning, we also step into the encounter between the individual and the communal. Our prayers are not only introspective but political. We recognise we are responsible: 'few are guilty, but all are responsible' (Heschel 1962: 19). We recount the sins and mistakes of both ourselves and of those next to us in the pews. In giving voice to the 'we' it is not possible to pretend that the 'I' is solitary, disconnected from the collective. I am shaped by you, you by me: 'An 'I' becomes itself and through a 'we', and a 'we' can only be realised in and through a group of more-or-less coherent 'I's.' (Shulman 2005: 80).

We are called at this time, radically, to focus upon the harm we have caused, not the harm done to us. We are asked: what harm have you (both individually and collectively) done? What repair must you make? In twelve-step speak we are responsible for 'keeping our side of the street clean', regardless of the actions of others. These are

radical notions - that the individual is responsible as part of the collective, and that we do this work regardless of what is done to us.

Our prayers, therefore, are not platitudes. We are doing avodah (sacred work), of becoming, of returning, for the promise of renewal. For t'shuvah 'the goal…isn't merely making amends. It's transformation' (Ruttenberg 2022: 34).

So here we are, stepping towards becoming, in this time of the familiar and shockingly new. Ready to utter our own confessions as well as others. Standing in 'shame and confusion' (Yom Kippur liturgy) to focus solely on harm caused by us. Where to begin, at this time, with the words genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes resounding, shattering our sense of self and am (people), with graphic images breaking apart what we thought we knew and where we belonged. What does it mean to pray and make t'shuvah at this time?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, using the work of Maimonides, explores the five steps of t'shuvah. It seems, to me, we may be stuck, for a while, on the first step. Rabbi Ruttenberg teaches that the first step is 'naming and owning harm' (2022: 26). For a person cannot repent if they do not understand what they are repenting for (Ruttenberg 2022: 26). We need to find the words, understand the harm and its consequences. Do we yet have the words? Can we agree and find a shared language? Can we, collectively, own the harm done and being done? When denial, fear, disbelief, anger, trauma stand in the way, how can we begin collective t'shuvah?

Together

As Rabbi Ruttenberg writes: 'the larger the scale of harm - and the greater number of people obligated to address and repair that harm - the more critical the first step of repentance is' (2022: 116). Or as Marge Piercy writes in the final three stanzas of her poem, The Low Road:

Three people are a delegation
a cell, a wedge.
With four you can play games
and start a collective.
With six you can rent a whole house
have pie for dinner with no seconds
and make your own music.
Thirteen makes a circle,
a hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity
and your own newsletter;
ten thousand community
and your own papers;
a hundred thousand,
a network of communities;
a million our own world. (2018: 44).

In a time of feeling unmoored from Jewish community and questioning of the future, who are you with? Who are the people you can stand alongside of and create a sense of belonging?

In grief

Thus said Adonai of Hosts:
Listen!
Summon the dirge-singers, let them come;
Send for the skilled women, let them come.
Let them quickly start a wailing for us,

> That our eyes may run with tears,
>
> Our pupils flow with water.
>
> <Jeremiah 9:16-17>

Grieving recognises the world is not how it should be and can transform defensiveness towards action. We grieve for all that has been lost.

For what and for whom are you grieving?

In action

> Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision (Heschel 1996: 263).

We act, because we must. We pray so we can act.

As t'shuvah is the work of transformation, what is an action you can commit to?

In solidarity and in the hope of becoming.

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Justice and peace

Rabbi Colin Eimer

'Justice' and 'peace': words bandied about so much, so easily, but just what does either one actually mean? In Hebrew 'justice' is often translated as *tsedek* or *mishpat*; 'peace' as *shalom*. In Ivrit, *mishpat* refers to what is administered in the courts, with connotations of judgement. It's not easy finding good English equivalents for *tsedek* and *mishpat*.

I keep a few coins in my car, so that when I'm at a red light and somebody comes up waving a paper cup at me, I'll give them a coin. They might well be part of a gang of exploited immigrants, earning a pittance; they might well be feeding a drug or drink habit. But I'm minded by what Danny Segal, the poet, once wrote: what if the person next to you on the bus or in the train were the mashiach, just looking for a decent word or act from you? Justice is easy; doing what is right is harder. Almost by definition, the blacks and whites in life are usually fairly clear; it's the greys that are difficult, more demanding, harder to navigate, demanding some sort of judgement on our part.

Leviticus 19:36 speaks of having weights and measures that are *tsedek*. Older translations say 'just'; more modern ones like 'honest' and 'correct' may be the best way to get to the underlying sense of what is implied in that word *tsedek*?

Ts'dakah derives from *tsedek*. It's often used at this season: *ut'shuvah ut'fillah uts'dakah ma'avirin et roa ha-g'zeirah* "repentance, prayer and good deeds can transform the harshness in our destiny." 'Good deeds'? - better than the older translation of 'charity.' That comes from the Latin caritas to do with caring. But caring can be partial: what if, for whatever justified or unjustified reason, I don't care about that person? And may have the more-

unpleasant connotations of the Victorian notion of the 'deserving poor' (and therefore the 'undeserving poor') something of which still persists in society.

Midrash reminds us that "more than the householder does for the poor person, the poor person does for the householder." <Leviticus Rabbah 34:8> That poor person ('the beggar') is actually giving the householder (you and me) the opportunity to behave like a Jewish human being. "Because you've had a bad week in business," the schnorrer berates the rich man in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "I should suffer?!"

To give ts'dakah is not doing anything special: simply what is fitting and correct. It upends the dependency relationship so often implicit, sometimes even explicit, in the idea of charity. And the book of Proverbs reminds us that *ts'dakah tatsil mi'mavet* "charity saves from death" <10:2> Charity might save from death but surely only in a very long-term sense of giving millions for medical research. So whoever wrote that can't, surely, have realistically believed that giving *ts'dakah* will avert death? Once again, it's challenging our understanding. If *ts'dakah* does, indeed, save from death, then it's our death, a spiritual death, a death of our soul, of our essence as a human being.

In synagogues all over the world, the haphtarah we read on Yom Kippur morning is from the prophet Isaiah <57:14-58:14> What a surprising choice for this day! We might expect the reading to be extolling the virtues of fasting, confession of sins and so on. Far from it. "Why afflict yourselves if you pay no heed?... is this the fast that I have chosen... to grovel in sackcloth and ashes, is this what you would call a fast?" Don't think that your fasting and confessing is anything special, Isaiah is saying, it's not what Yom Kippur is about at all.

It continues: "Is not this the fast I have chosen: to untie the straps of the yoke... is it not sharing your food with the hungry, bringing the

homeless into your home, clothing the naked?" <Isaiah 58:6> Can there be a clearer expression than this of what we mean by 'Prophetic Judaism'? I am awed by the audacity of whoever it was, the best part of two millennia ago, in choosing this reading for the haphtarah.

There is a vertical and horizontal relationship in Judaism: that between us and God and that between us and other human beings. Each relationship has their associated acts, *mitzvot*. On this Sabbath of Sabbaths, this holiest day of the Jewish calendar, we might expect the focus to be on that vertical relationship alone. That haphtarah reminds us that, even on this day, perhaps particularly on this day, if we don't think about what we do outside the synagogue, about how we live in the world, then what we do inside it is not *tsedek*, neither honest nor correct if we wish to consider ourselves as decent human beings.

We end the Amidah with the words, *Oseh shalom bimromav*... "the one who makes peace in the highest.... It's a verse from Psalm 19. *Shalom* is correctly translated as 'peace' but just what do we mean by 'peace'? It's connected with *shalem*, to do with wholeness, completeness. So the cessation of hostilities is no more than an early step on the path to real *shalom*. What we have seen in the past couple of years between Israel and the Palestinians makes that, sadly, abundantly clear.

A sense of what *shalom* 'peace' might mean survives in the English phrase, 'to be at peace with oneself.' In other words, the various parts of who we are, the elements of our personality are in some sort of harmony and balance, not in tension with each other. That is to have arrived at some sort of inner peace.

When saying *oseh shalom bimromav* at the end of the Amidah, some follow the tradition of taking a few steps backward as they are saying it. If we are serious about wanting to make peace with another, we have to be prepared to step back from our position. If

we don't, it is as if we are saying: "here, where I am, is correct and I don't need to move from that position"; which, by implication, must mean that where you are is not correct and you need to move. Stepping back means I recognise that my narrative, my way of understanding the past and the present, might not be the only one. In stepping back I create a space where other narratives can be heard. Standing resolutely where I am, in the sureness of my position, does little to advance the cause of peace.

Justice and peace - must they always seem incompatible?

Speaking up and speaking out

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

“For the sake of Zion, I will not be still; for the sake of Jerusalem, I will not be silent” <Isaiah 62:2>

Across the Jewish world, hundreds of thousands of words - perhaps millions - are recited by those who attend synagogue services during aseret y’mei t’shuvah, the ‘ten days of return’ that begin on Rosh Ha-Shanah and conclude on Yom Kippur. ‘Recited’ - rather than ‘spoken’ - because the words that flow out of the mouths of those who gather together are scripted, written in prayer books for congregations to say and sing.

Most of these ‘scripts’ take the form of blessings, prayers, psalms, songs, and communal confessions. Some of them, derived directly from the Torah and the books of the Prophets, express the teachings that are intended to guide us. The sacred days that open and conclude the season, Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, are absorbing, so absorbing that as they demand our time and our attention, it is easy to lose ourselves in the sea of words, and lose sight of the objective: change. The root meaning of the word shanah, ‘year’, encompasses both ‘change’ and ‘repeat’. The cycle repeats itself here after year, but we are challenged each year to change, and the scripts we follow are supposed to inspire and provoke us to change our lives.

In the musaf, the additional service on both Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, a line in the k’dushah blessing, the blessing of ‘holiness’, reminds attendees of the three-fold task of the ten days: T’shuvah, T’fillah, and Tz’dakah; ‘Return’, ‘Prayer’, and acts of ‘Justice’. Of the three, Tz’dakah is the task set before us beyond Yom Kippur, in the year ahead. The change demanded of us begins with

personal change, but it encompasses each one of us taking responsibility for change in the wider society.

Of all the words scripted on Yom Kippur, those of Isaiah chapter 58 that form the haftarah, the reading from the Books of the Prophets in the morning service, convey this message in a stark and uncompromising fashion <58:5-7>:

Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Eternal One? / Is not this the fast I choose: to release the shackles of wickedness and untie the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free and to break off every yoke? / Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?

The prophet decries observance of the rituals of Yom Kippur that are not accompanied by acts of justice. The timing of the message could not be more significant. It is late morning, those who are fasting have fasted for at least sixteen hours already, and have been reciting with as much conviction as can be mustered, thousands of words so far.

But the prophet's message is that our efforts are useless unless we translate words into deeds. More than this, the prophet rejects the sacred rites that we are observing so assiduously. The only 'fast' that is acceptable to the Eternal is one that involves transforming the lives of the destitute and homeless and liberating the oppressed.

The prophetic passage which is the highpoint of the Yom Kippur morning service reminds us that the words we recite and the rites we observe must be translated into action. But that is not all. Four chapters further on in the Book of Isaiah, a reminder of the purpose of prophetic utterance gets to the heart of prophetic motivation <Isaiah 62:2>:

For the sake of Zion, I will not be still; for the sake of Jerusalem, I will not be silent.

We are called to act. And we are also called to speak; to speak up and to speak out against injustice. There is virtually nowhere in the world today that is free of injustice. As Jews and fellow travellers, our attention is focused on one small patch of the Earth. Following the depraved atrocities and abductions of October 7, 2023, a devastating war has turned Gaza to rubble, killed tens of thousands of civilians, injured many thousands more, brought the trapped population to the edge of starvation, and provided cover for the imposition of siege conditions on the West Bank and an upsurge in settler violence.

We are called to raise our voices; to add our voices to the chorus of prophetic voices in Israel, that, echoing Isaiah, are saying, 'For the sake of Zion, I will not be still; for the sake of Jerusalem, I will not be silent'. These voices are demanding an end to violence and occupation, the provision of sufficient aid to Gaza, a plan for reconstruction, and a pathway towards a just peace.

Not everyone may feel they have the knowledge, ability and confidence to speak out. But needs must, and the ethical teachings - in the Torah, in the prophetic books, and in rabbinic literature - give us the vocabulary we need to speak out in the language of Judaism.

Of course, we do not have to be alone in giving public voice to our condemnation of injustice and our calls for peace and human rights. On the contrary, we can join our voices to the voices of Jews who are already speaking out here in Britain, like Progressive Jews for Justice in Israel/Palestine.

Meanwhile, we are on journeys of t'shuvah. As we navigate this sacred time, a prophetic missive for us to heed, which reinforces the message of the Yom Kippur morning haftarah <Amos 5:21-24>:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your sacred assemblies. / … / Remove from Me the noise of your songs; and let Me not hear the melody of your harps. / Rather, let just process [mishpat] roll down like water, and justice [tz'dakah], like an overflowing stream.

Turning repentance into action

Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton

As a young child, I would spend Yom Kippur morning in the cavernous old building of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue St John's Wood. I remember we would sit in the central block of seats facing the almemar/platform. To the sides and behind us there were hundreds and hundreds of people sitting in the synagogue's five capacious galleries, one to our left, one to our right, two above these, and one behind us at the back. And I remember it was the same man each year who would read sonorously the haftarah/ prophetic reading from Isaiah:

> Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction?.. Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast I look for: to release the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house?

As a child, this was what Yom Kippur was all about: it had nothing to do with a ritual Judaism that demanded I abstain from food and drink, and everything to do with an ethical Judaism that demanded that I be scrupulously honest in all I did and do my best to help others. This was the Judaism of my youth, the religion I believed in. It is the religion I still believe in.

Nearly thirty years later, when I was a Leo Baeck College student, I spent a summer studying at Yeshivat HaMivtar in Jerusalem. As Yom Kippur drew near, I was discussing with one of my fellow students the importance of the ethical dimensions of the day and the clear message to help other people. He looked puzzled. 'Where's that in the prayers?' he said. I fetched a machzor / festival prayer

book and showed him the reading from Isaiah which had so moved me as a child. 'Gosh', he said, 'I never noticed that before. I always heard it in Hebrew and I never looked to see what it meant.' At that moment, it became absolutely clear to me that an Orthodox upbringing was not something I could ever want for my own children and my own students: Reform and Liberal Judaism managed to get an important message across which Orthodoxy had failed to. And it wasn't just about understanding or not understanding Hebrew. It was about putting that message into action. In the 1990s we had a social issues office at the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, and I was one of their most passionate supporters. We discussed homelessness at Sukkot. I took part in a local campaign in Manchester on behalf of Viraj Mendes, a Sri Lankan threatened with deportation: We filled the synagogue with blankets for Bosnia during the war there. This was Judaism in action.

Right now, we don't need a social action team to give us ideas about what to do. We are doing it anyway. During Covid most of us, one way or another, helped out neighbours and friends: when the war in Ukraine started we took refugees into our homes: and then, after the horrific events of October 7th 2023, so many came together in prayer vigils: and many have been repeatedly to Israel to show solidarity. More recently, some of us have been involved in vigils, campaigns and fund raising to raise funds for Gaza: and more recently still, there is a growing awareness that we need to do that for the people of Sudan as well, where 30 million people face hunger. As I write this, I've been spending the last few days writing a report for a mental health campaign, knowing that our NHS is one of many causes in Britain which need support, and help and action.

Today, we are a worried and anxious people living in a worried and anxious society. We are likely to continue to be driven by many, often too many, causes which need our concern. During these days of repentance, it's worth remembering that putting our faith into

action can also help us. Helping others can often be the best therapy. There are many whose lives have been shattered who have found a new lease of life in caring for others. Isaiah's message is totally, thoroughly, uncomfortable. When you multiply prayers, he said, God won't hear them. When you fast, God will take no notice. What harms religion is apathy. You call this a fast? It's helping other people that counts. You can't love God if you ignore the cry of the hungry and the homeless and the sick and the asylum seekers. When Yom Kippur comes around, it is all too easy to congratulate ourselves afterwards. We did it. We went to shul, we prayed the prayers. We fasted all day. Weren't we good? But did we heed the message? If our lives are untouched and unchanged, the whole day is useless. It is indeed indifference that is the biggest enemy of Judaism today, as both our machzors state:

> For the fear of change and renewal, and our unbelief.
>
> For saying prayers aloud, but refusing to listen.
>
> For being our own worst enemy.
>
> For keeping the poor in the chains of poverty;
>
> and turning a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed...
>
> and for the sin of silence and indifference.
>
> For all these, O God of mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Help us restore our relationships and our confidence and trust in each other. Help us restore our society, and help us build a world at peace with itself, full of compassion and caring. We make a living by what we earn: we make a life by how much we care.

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