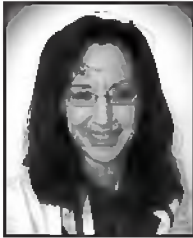


At-One-Ment: High Holy Days, 5773

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Once a year on the tenth day of the seventh month, the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest, cleansed the sanctuary. His work completed, he went before the people and announced, simply and surely:



Mikol khatoteykhem lifnei Adonai titharu, "Before Adonai you shall be cleansed from all your sins" (Leviticus: 16:30). Torah tells us: God responded by granting the community complete forgiveness.

But Torah makes no mention of any process of *teshuvah* to be observed between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The text doesn't actually connect the two holidays. Neither does Torah depict God decreeing who shall live and who shall die in the year to come – not on either day.

Torah texts on the High Holy Days are spare. Most of our observance has emerged from rabbinic texts and folkway additions. Still, many of us assume that our rites follow a prescribed tradition with a trajectory of almost 2,000 years.

But Judaism is neither static nor one-dimensional. For Ashkenazi Jews, *Unetaneh Tokef*, the prayer in which we describe a day of judgment that evokes fear even in the angels, is pivotal. *Unetaneh Tokef* was a late addition to Ashkenazi liturgy and probably became widespread only following the 10th century. Many Jews consider it a centerpiece of their devotion, unless they belong to the many Sephardic communities that do not recite the prayer.

Our liturgy, our practice, and our understanding of the purpose of Jewish festivals change over time and are affected by geography. The phrase *aseret y'mei t'shuvah* (ten days of repentance) probably entered our vocabulary when the *Arbah Turim* was published in the 13th century. Verses on *Zichronot* and *Shofarot* may have been acceptable liturgical elements by the writing of *Mishnah*, but the rabbis argue about whether to add verses about *Malchut*. Ashkenazim of some European lands disputed with their rabbis on Sabbath Shuva. The Jews of Poland, according to Seva Ratzon, did no such thing: "It is an encouragement to the will to [do] evil."

In Hungary, so their descendants write, Chassidic rabbis of the 17th and 18th centuries walked to the House of Prayer for Kol Nidre in such trepidation that even their earlocks trembled with fear. But words like "awe," "fear," or "judgment" are completely absent from a 1663 stele describing how Jews in Kaifeng observed Yom Kippur. Instead, the stele describes Yom Kippur as a day when "desires are forgotten, attainments are put aside, and all apply themselves to preserving the heart and nourishment of the mind, so that through direction there may be a restoration of goodness."

There are many more such examples. Jews have differing practices where our High Holy

Days are concerned – even different perspectives on their purpose. These differences transcend time, location, and gender.

Why regard them as anything more than curiosities?

Because they demonstrate two critical issues we must contend with in our own time. Do today's Jews believe that God is a stern judge who decides each year who shall live and who shall die? Has God pointed the finger of death at the child dying of hunger in the Sudan, and rewarded the child whose home is in Ballantyne with life? How are we to contend with this theological perspective after the Holocaust? What would happen if we observed the kind of Yom Kippur the Kaifeng Jews enjoyed, a day in which "man remains at rest [so that] his heavenly nature will reach perfection"?

Moreover, recognizing the rich diversity we are heirs to reminds us to be conscious – and to appreciate – the extraordinary diversity we represent today. Jews have

made and remade their traditions for centuries. They have responded to their times and to their ancient texts with new readings and with abiding reverence.

A story: One year on Kol Nidre, Rabbi Meir of Apt arrived at the synagogue to find his congregation in tears: "Jews," he said, "this is not what I desired; I wish you to turn to God in joy!" And he began to chant the hymn "Majesty and faithfulness are God's who lives forever" with such enthusiasm and pleasure that they all stopped crying and took one another by the hand and danced for an hour in a great circle. Then they began Kol Nidre.

May we turn to God with open hearts this New Year, in the pursuit of goodness and kindness. May we live out our joy – in who we are, who we have been, and who we are yet to be. ✡

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