



**We would love to include your
voices, ideas, dreams, artwork
and your brilliant Torah in
upcoming newsletters.**

**You can also send us
writing that is
not directly related to the
Holidays!**

cover artwork:

*"Names That Bless Our Turning and Returning"
watercolor and pencil illustration by Amy Buetens*

** See accompanying poem on p11*



Submissions can be sent to
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143

WHO WE ARE

Shalom aleichem, friends—may peace and wholeness find you!

We are writing to you on behalf of Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network. Matir Asurim literally translates as “The One Who Frees Captives.” This phrase from Jewish liturgy refers to God’s power to act for freedom and humanity’s ability to manifest godliness through working for freedom. We are a group of advocates, Jewish clergy, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration.

We have been meeting regularly since Tevet 5781/January 2021, guided by the questions: What are incarcerated Jews experiencing? What support do incarcerated Jews need that is not being met? We know that many Jewish communities have not done enough to support people inside and people impacted by the prison system.

Since we began meeting, we have started a penpal program and have been creating these holiday mailings, and have been working on building and deepening our relationships with you. We are really glad to be building community with you, across and beyond prison walls.

We would really love to get your input about how these mailings can be the most supportive to you, and we would also love to include your brilliance and wisdom in future holiday mailings! There is a feedback form, so you can let us know what you want to be receiving in these mailings, and a penpal interest form, if you would like to sign up to be a penpal. If you have any writing (short essays, reflections, poetry, drawings, etc) related to any of the Jewish holidays or Jewishness in general, please feel welcome and invited to send us your submissions so that they can be included in future mailings.

All of the filled out forms can be sent to us at:
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143

HIGH HOLIDAYS

6th of Tishrei, 5784 ~ September 21, 2023

Shalom friends!

Shana tova! Happy New Year!

As we enter into the High Holidays and embark on a new year, we are thinking of each and every one of you, our beloved incarcerated Jewish community.

It is often taught that the month Elul, which occurs right before the High Holidays is a month to spiritually prepare us for the Days of Awe (the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). There is a quote from Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, that is often associated with our spiritual preparations, “Ani l’dodi, v’dodi li” I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine. This phrase invites us to consider what it means to think about and be responsible for one another’s wellness. It pushes us to remember that all of our struggles are bound up with one another’s and to remember that community and family is a verb - something that we are always in process with. With that quote in mind, it feels particularly important for us to reach towards you and to make sure you know that we are with you, dear community. You deserve love, you are worthy of care and healing and we know that you hold so much wisdom about the complexity and depth of what it means to repair in the face of rupture.

In this mailing, you will find resources, prayers, poetry and artwork to help guide you through Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. The resources are structured in the form of a traditional machzor (Hebrew prayer book used on the High Holidays). You may notice that this machzor is far from complete, and there are many traditional prayers missing. This machzor is just a starting point, a place for us to begin together, and a way for us to pray together. Our hope is that each year,

we can add to it, and slowly, as we build our relationships with each other, together we can expand and enrich our sacred Jewish tradition.

While we grieve that we cannot pray together, our hope is that these prayers are one small way of moving beyond the limitations of prisons. May our words and our prayers be chanted together on these sacred days, and may they join us in the powerful work of teshuva, returning.

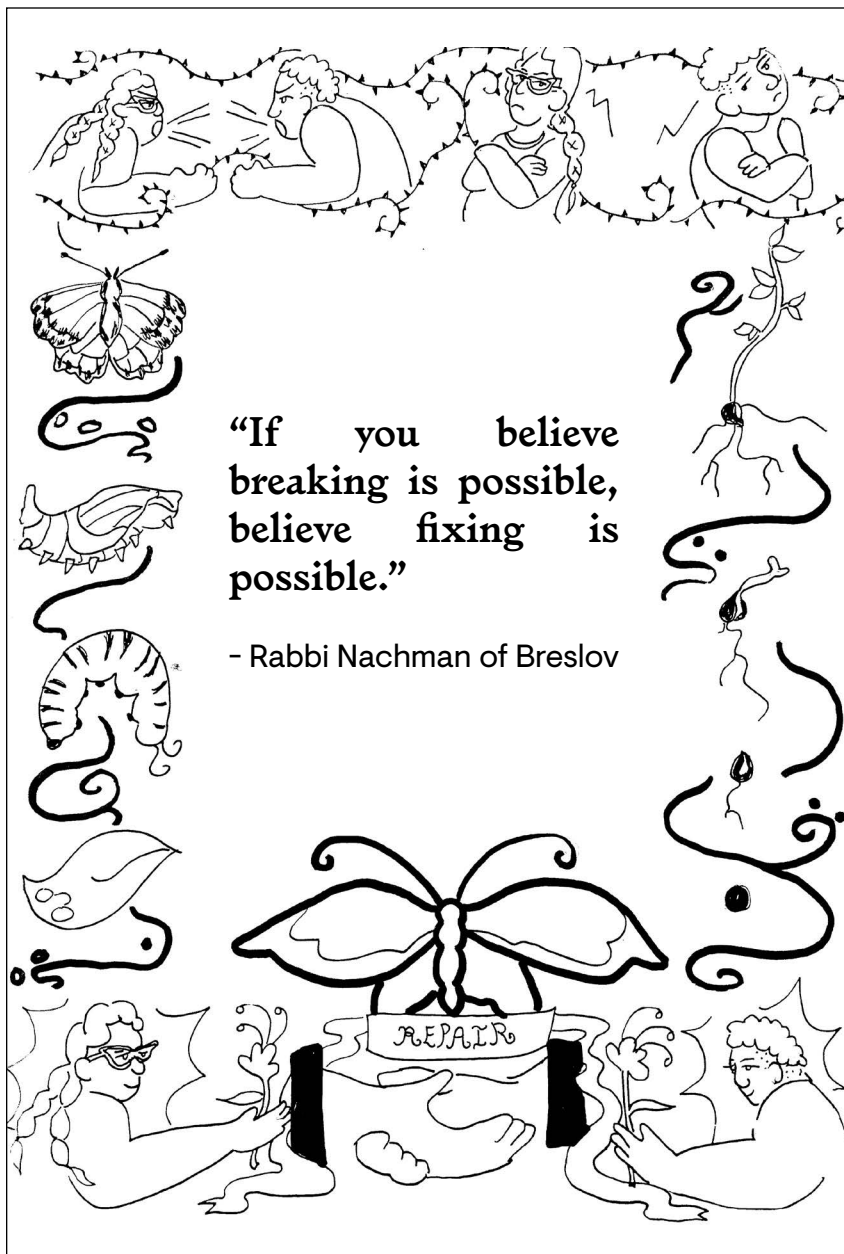
We know that nobody is free until we are all free. As we bring in 5784, we are reaching towards each one of you, our beloved Jewish community across and beyond bars, with love, with care, with a commitment to justice and healing.

Whether or not the prayers are familiar to you, whether or not you feel prepared for the holidays or for the new year itself, we hope that this offering meets all of us with softness for our broken hearts. We hope that whatever meaning you find in these pages or make of their words, that we remember together that we all have the master key, that we can let our hearts ring out to God as loud as any shofar, and that our broken hearts are held by one another!

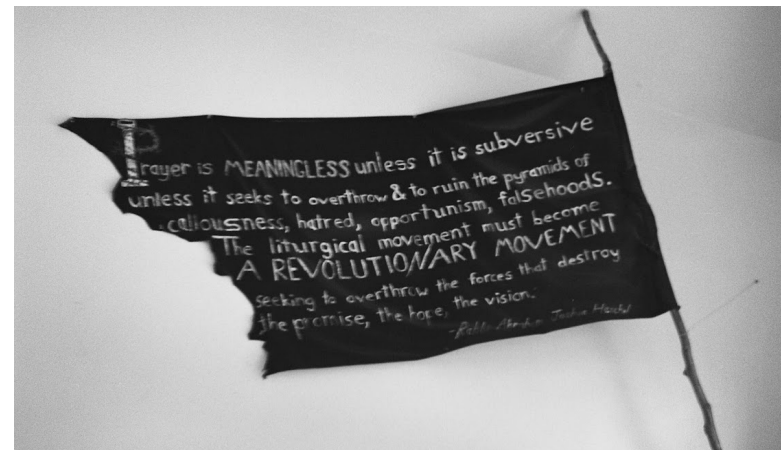
With blessings for *tzedek, rachamim, v'shalom*,
justice, compassion and peace,
Aaron, Sarit, Cece
and all of us at Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network

Table of Contents

Machzor Introduction/Invocation	5
Repair by Lev	6
T'shuvah by Wendy Elisheva Somerson	10
Names That Bless Our Turning and Returning by Amy Buetens	11
Candle Lighting by Sarit Cantor	12
Ahavat Olam	14
Adon Haselichot	16
Shofar: A Collective Call	18
Unetaneh Tokef	20
Unlock ALL of Their Shackles by Rabbi Noam Lerman	22
Aleinu	30
Tashlich by Laynie Soloman	32
Isaiah 58	34
Like Clay in the Potter's Hand by Caleb Brommer	37
Ashamnu	41
Neilah adapted by Meli Sameh	42
Living in Sukkot by Aaron Wander	45
The Meaning of the Sukkah by Alyx Bernstein	48
Myrtle/Hadasim by Aaron Rotenberg	42
והיית אך שמח (You will have Only Joy) by Lexie Botzum	51



Repair, drawing by Lev



**THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT MUST BECOME
A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT,
SEEKING TO OVERTHROW THE FORCES
THAT CONTINUE TO DESTROY THE PROMISE,
THE HOPE, AND THE VISION.”**

– Abraham Joshua Heschel

This mailing was originally compiled by Val Schlosberg and Sarit Cantor. Many of the prayers, translations and poems were sourced from the **Nishmat Shoom 5780 machzor**. Nishmat Shoom was a radical, queer, collaborative, non-zionist, magical, diasporist, inclusive Jewish minyan from Western Massachussets, that recently disbanded. **We are grateful to Nishmat Shoom, and to all those on the fringes, the margins, the freaks, artists, queers and misfits who courageously and steadfastly find powerful meaning and magic in our tradition despite a predominately patriarchal Jewish world; who broaden and enrich our tradition through their struggle, their brilliance, their generosity; who remind us how beautiful it is to fall in love with Hashem over and over.**



T'shuvah by Wendy Elisheva Somerson

Names That Bless Our Turning and Returning

Amy Buetens

Many names, one source,
bless and protect you
as you do the hard work of
self-examination, reflection, and recognition.

Coming back on target,
attempting to change, awaken, and ascend
requires refocusing, reconciliation, and recalibration.

As you repair and renew,
meditate on the many names of the one true source.
These names are an amulet and gift,
reminding that you, too, are
precious, and powerful.

Return to the name
as you course correct.
Recenter yourself in who you truly are.

CANDLE LIGHTING

Sarit Cantor

In Jewish practice, when the sun goes down, the new day begins. Traditionally, we honor the holiness of Rosh Hashanah and the holiness of time by lighting candles and offering a prayer.

Since most Jews inside prisons do not get to light candles, this is an invitation to invoke the sacredness of Rosh Hashanah in a new way.

Open your hands, with your palms facing up
Imagine a smooth rock in each hand
Imagine yourself standing by a body of water that you have known and loved
Let the stones fall from your palms, down into the water
Listen to the sounds of the rocks meeting the water, listen to the sounds of the water moving over the rocks
Turn your palms towards you, and move your hands in a circular motion three times

We honor the ways we are held by the elements, knowing they are far more powerful than any prison wall. We honor the ways that time moves through us and around us and with us. We are those rocks, and we are that water. We are bringing in the holiness of today, as the wheel of time turns. We are the sacred change.



“And G!d says: The first step is to say, “I am here.” To stand barefoot before the fire and let the stones fall from your hands. To recognize your own name in the cacophony and find the strength to answer.”

– Dane Kuttler

A Prayer for Time:

Life is Born and life moves on
And the earth has held and will hold it all.
The sun rises and the sun sets
And returns again to rise and fall.
The wind turns south and the wind turns north
Turning, turning, returning still.
The rivers run from the clouds to the sea
And become the rainn, and the sea is never filled.
So the beginning flows to the end
And the end flows on to begin again.
The One at the end is the One who begins
And the breath of breaths is within all things.

– Rabbi Jill Hammer



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהָיִינוּ וְקִיְמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam, shehecheyanu
v'kiyemanu v'higiyanu laz'man hazeh.

Blessed are You, Source of all Being, who has given us life, established us and allowed us to reach this holy moment.

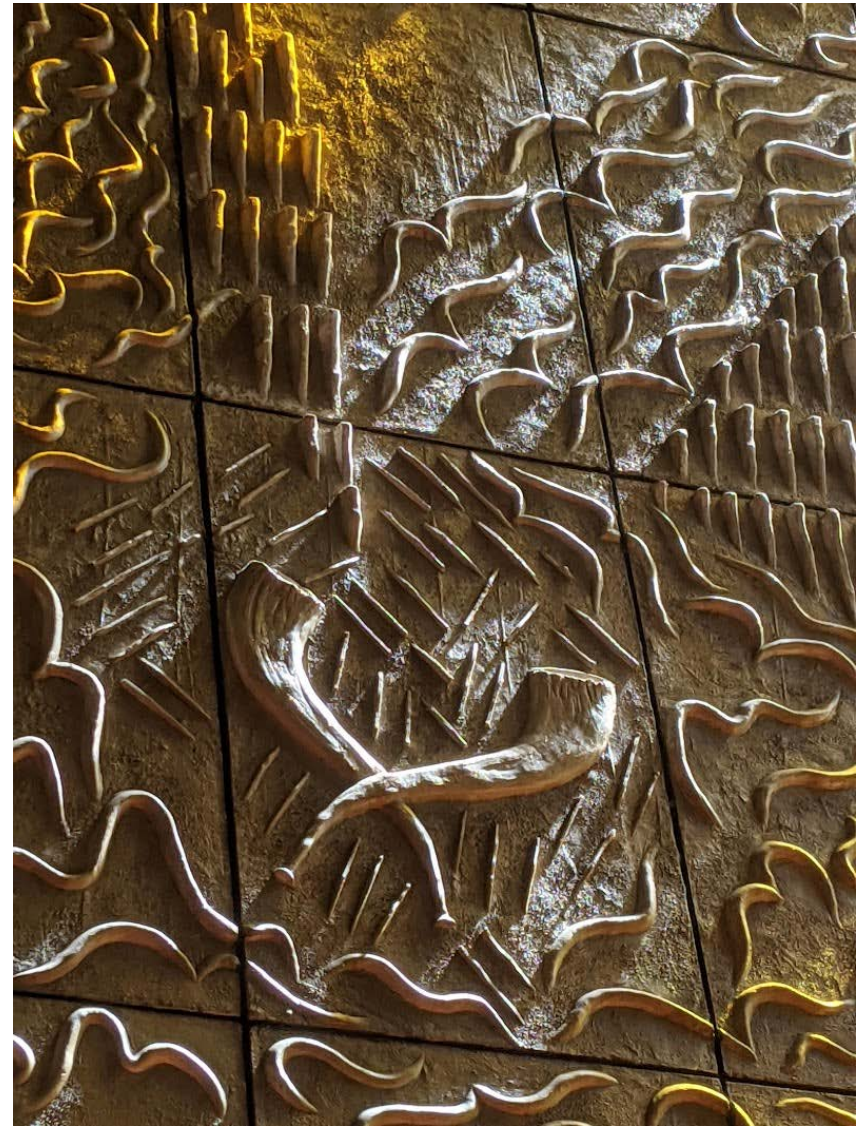
אַהַבַּת עוֹלָם | AHAVAT OLAM

אַהַבַּת עוֹלָם בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ אַהַבַּת תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים אוֹתָנוּ
לְמַדְתָּ. עַל כֵּן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּשִׂבְבֵנוּ וּבְקוֹמָנוּ נָשִׂיחַ בְּחֻקֶיךָ
וְנִשְׁמַח בְּדַבְרֵי תַלְמוּד תּוֹרָתְךָ וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. כִּי הֵם חַיֵּינוּ וְאַרְךָ יְמֵינוּ
וּבְהֵם נִהְגָה יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה. וְאַהַבַּתְךָ אֵל תִּסִּיר מִמָּנוּ
לְעוֹלָמִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְקוּק. אוּהַב עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל: אָמֵן

Ahavat Olam beit Yisrael am'cha ahavta. Torah umitsvot, chukim umishpatim, otanu limad'ta. Al kein Adonai Eloheinu b'shawchveinu uv'kumeinu nasiach b'chukecha v'nismach b'divrei [talmud] toratecha u'v'mitzvotecha l'olam va'ed. Ki heim chayeinu, v'orech yameinu u'vahem neh'geh yomam valaila. V'ahavat'cha al tasir mimenu l'olamim. Baruch atah Adonai, oheiv amo Yisrael. Amein.

With worlds of love
have you loved your people
your people who wrestle with You
You have taught us
wisdom and right action,
principles and truths
when we lie down
and when we rise up
we meditate on our paths
we play forever
with the words of Your Torah and mitzvot
they reside in our lives
and our days
we dwell on them as days and nights go by
let the knowledge of Your love
dwell with us.
blessed are you, Shekhinah
who loves your wrestling people.

– Siddur HaKohanot



Shofars and Blasts from Beth Tzedec Congregation, Toronto - Wendat, Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe Land

ADON HASELICHOT

Adon Haselichot
bochen levavot
Goleh amukot
dover tzedakot
Chatnanu lefanecha
rachem aleynu (x2)
Hadoor beneefla'ot
vateek benechamot
Zocher breet avot
choker kelayot
Chatnanu lefanecha
rachem aleynu (x2)
Tov umeteev labreeyot
yodeya kol neestartot
Kovesh avonot
lovesh tzedakot
Male zakeeyoot
nora teheelot
Sole'ach avonot
oneh b'et tzarot
Chatnanu lefanecha
rachem aleynu (x2)
Po'el yeshu'ot
tzofeh oteedot
Kore hadorot
rochev aravot
Shome'a tefilot
temeem de'ot
Chatnanu lefanecha
rachem aleynu (x2)

אדון הסליחות
בוּחַן לְבָבוֹת
גוֹלָה עֲמוּקוֹת
דוֹבֵר צְדָקוֹת.
חֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ
רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ
הַדּוֹר בְּנֵפְלְאוֹת
וְתִיק בְּנַחֲמוֹת
זוֹכֵר בְּרִית אֲבוֹת
חוֹקֵר כְּלִיּוֹת
חֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ
רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ
טוֹב וּמֵיֵטִיב לְבִרְיוֹת
יֹדֵעַ כָּל נִסְתָּרוֹת
כּוֹבֵשׁ עוֹנוֹת
לוֹבֵשׁ צְדָקוֹת
מִלֵּא זְכוֹיּוֹת
נּוֹרָא תְהִילוֹת
סוֹלֵחַ עוֹנוֹת
עוֹנֵה בַעַת צְרוֹת
חֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ
רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ
פוֹעֵל יְשׁוּעוֹת
צוֹפֵה עֵתִידוֹת
קוֹרֵא הַדּוֹרוֹת
רוֹכֵב עֲרֵבוֹת
שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִילוֹת
תְּמִיִּם דְּעוֹת
חֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ
רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ

Source of forgiveness who knows our hearts
Revealer of depths, Speaker of justice.
“We have sinned before you; have mercy upon us.”
We have lost our way, guide us home to ourselves with gentleness.
Majestic with ancient wonders, comforting presence,
Remembering the covenant with our ancestors, weighing our insides
“We have sinned before you; have mercy upon us.”
We have forgotten who we are, help us remember our goodness.
Goodness flowing to all creations, Knower of all that is hidden
Capturing our careless arrows, Clothed in righteousness.
“We have sinned before you; have mercy upon us.”
We have missed the mark, let us draw from the well of your compassion.
Abundant generosity, filling us with awe beyond awe,
Forgiving everything, answering our call,
“We have sinned before you; have mercy upon us.”
We have missed the mark, let us draw from the well of your compassion.
Artisan of resilience, visionary of the future
Calling upon the generations, guiding us in the wilderness
Hearing our prayers, aligning us in integrity,
“We have sinned before you; have mercy upon us.”
We have missed the mark, let us draw from the well of your compassion.

– Traditional prayer
with translation from Nishmat Shoom Machzor, 5780

SHOFAR: A COLLECTIVE CALL

To everyone everywhere
No one, no one is excluded, from my heart.
To everyone everywhere
No one, no one is excluded, from my heart.
I wish you well, my beloved.
I wish you well, dear sweet soul.
I wish you well, my beloved. May you live with ease.

– Pablo Das



Suddenly you are awakened by a strange noise, a noise that fills the full field of your consciousness and then splits into several jagged strands, shattering that field, shaking you awake. The ram's horn, the shofar, the same instrument that will sound one hundred times on Rosh Hashanah, the same sound that filled the world when the Torah was spoken into being on Mount Sinai, is being blown to call you to wakefulness. You awake to confusion. Where are you? Who are you?

The horn blows to usher in Elul, and it is blown every morning of the ninth of Elul as well, lest we forget and slip back, lest we surrender to the entropic pull of mindlessness. The Torah also stands ready to help keep us awake. As we move through the month of Elul, we also move through the Book of Deuteronomy, and each of the weekly Torah readings – Re'eh, Shoftim, Netzavim, Ki Tetze – whispers to us, “Wake up! Wake up!” Each of these readings offers a subtle rhyme to the process of awakening to which the month of Elul has called us.

– Passage from *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, by Rabbi Alan Lew

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we blow the shofar. The piercing call of the ram's horn is meant to shatter us, startle us, spiritually awaken us to the work of repentance, accountability and the collective need for transformation. The shofar's call breaks open our hearts and it is from this place that we can heal.

In a prison, there is much that shatters and reminds us of the immensity of healing that is needed. But for most, there is no shofar. May the collective sound of our shofars across Turtle Island reverberate, move through the air to find each one of you. May the shofar blasts mingle with my prayers to meet your prayers. May the air that you breathe feel thick with care and may you feel the yearning in the shofar vibrations that call us towards a world where healing, transformation and abounding love for all is possible. May our shattered hearts meet your shattered hearts in the wind and in the breeze that knows no limits, no walls, no borders, no bars. May we feel the many ways that we are connected despite impossible circumstances. May the shofar remind us that we are not alone in this work.



And G'd says: Hear the sounds of the shofar! And if you cannot hear the shofar, if you cannot step foot in the synagogue for whatever reason, then hear what is meant to wake you.

Hear: I Can't Breathe, Hear: Black Lives Matter, Hear the cries of the refugees, Hear the names of the restless dead. Wake. Stay woke. It is all a shofar.

– Dane Kuttler

UNETANEH TOKEF | וּנְתַנֶּה תִּקְוָה

Many of us struggle with the notion of a God Who decides “who [shall die] by fire and who [shall die] by water” in the year to come.

But perhaps this prayer is more about us than about God. We decide what kind of year we will author. The book of life opens itself, and we write deeds of the coming year in our own handwriting: will we be cruel, or will we be kind?

Teshuvah (repentance / turning-toward-God), tefilah (prayer), and tzedakah (righteous giving) have the power to temper even the harshest decree. We always have the power to choose these as our guiding lights.

– Rabbi Rachel Barenblat



Unetaneh Tokef

We lend power to the holiness of this day. For it is tremendous and awe filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted, your throne will be established in loving-kindness, and you will sit on that throne in truth.

It is true that you are the one who judges, and reproves, who knows all, and bears witness, who inscribes, and seals, who reckons and enumerates. You remember all that is forgotten. You open the book of records, and from it, all shall be read. In it lies each person's insignia.

And with a great shofar it is sounded, and a thin silent voice shall be heard. And the angels shall be alarmed, and dread and fear shall seize them as they proclaim: behold! the Day of Judgment on which the hosts of heaven shall be judged, for they too shall not be judged blameless by you, and all creatures shall parade before you as a herd

of sheep. As a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do you shall pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each persons days, and inscribe their final judgment.

בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתְּמוּן

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by lapidation, who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased and who exalted.

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצְדָקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְּזֵרָה

But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

For your praise is just as your name. You are slow to anger and quick to be appeased. For you do not desire the death of the condemned, rather, that they turn from their path and live and you wait for them until the day of their death, and if they repent, you receive them immediately. (It is true -) [For] you are their Creator and You understand their inclination, for they are but flesh and blood.

We come from dust, and return to dust. We labour by our lives for bread, we are like broken shards, like dry grass, and like a withered flower; like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that passes, like dust that scatters, like a fleeting dream. But You are the king who lives eternal.

UNLOCK ALL OF THEIR SHACKLES

Rabbi Noam Lerman

Rosh Hashana Drasha 5779 from Nehar Shalom

Shana Tova,[...] (Happy New Year),

We're going to begin with a Hasidic story about Reb Zusha of Hanipol. Reb Zusha once visited Motl to ask for a donation to help bail out a family that was sentenced to indefinite incarceration. This family could not afford to pay off their debt, and the way of the land was to place individuals and entire families in prison until that debt was completely paid off. Motl was not home yet, so the Rebbe sat down on his porch to wait for him. As he waited, he noticed that there was a cage before him, and within the cage there was a small bird enthusiastically and consistently beating her wings against the bars. The rebbe watched for a while, and then said aloud to himself, "isn't it strange that I am on a mission of mercy-- to prevent human beings from being incarcerated, and yet right before my eyes, I have the power to free this creature?!"

Now, You might have heard that Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world, and marks the anniversary of when G-d created Adam, the first human being who contained all souls. Or that the Torah calls our Jewish new year Yom T'ruah, which means the day of shouting. But did you know that our Jewish new year also marks Yosef's release from prison after 12 years behind bars? Or, that Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of when our ancestors stopped laboring as slaves in Egypt? On that day they began to wait for the moment they could leave Egypt and be fully free, which ultimately took place half a year later on Pesach. Our ancestors experienced redemption and renewal from both prison and from slavery on our Jewish new year. Which makes me want to know, how can we reclaim Rosh Hashana as a day that shouts for liberation, a day for us to work towards freeing people who are incarcerated?

This past summer, I was humbled and blessed to serve as a chaplain for incarcerated youth in a prison facility, and also to fathers who had been released from prison within the last 6 months. The fathers I worked with had been incarcerated for anywhere between a few months to 31 years-- and all of them are trying so hard to create new lives for themselves now that they are outside. Unlike our ancestor Yosef, who was released from prison and immediately given a significant position in society, the fathers I worked with are rebuilding their lives from scratch. They struggle with estrangement from friends and family, and the shock of seeing their old neighborhoods transformed by gentrification. They feel the stigma of society, which makes it difficult for them to find housing, jobs, and new love. Many of them are learning how to use cell phones and computers for the first time, because they had no access to technology while inside. Some of the fathers I spent time with had worked jobs in prison that only paid 10 cents an hour, or two dollars per month, and now they are facing the reality of debt or financial responsibilities that seem impossible. Many of them are sitting with traumatic memories from prison-- which haunt their social lives and fuel mental health issues that they are fighting so so hard to overcome. They repeatedly called prison a war zone, and identify themselves as survivors who are still surviving their memories, and who are now trying to integrate into a society which does not welcome them. Many told me how they want their stories to be shared, because they believe that most people in the United States don't know what goes on inside of prisons.

In my role as chaplain, I witnessed just how much poverty is fueling the prison industrial complex-- whether it be the reason a person was incarcerated, or that someone couldn't afford to be bailed out of jail even before a conviction.

The story I opened this drasha with is from my grandfather's book printed in 1944, where I found an entire chapter dedicated to miracle stories about Hasidic Rebbes trying to bail Jews out of prison because they couldn't afford to pay their way out. The connection between poverty, discrimination, and incarceration is not new, and is a relatable experience for Ashkenazi Jews

just a few generations ago in Eastern Europe.

So, let's return to Reb Zusha. Are you wondering what he did when he saw Motl's bird frantically flapping her wings against the cage? Was he able to raise enough bail funds to save the family from indefinite incarceration?

Before he knew it, Reb Zusha's hands unhinged the locked door that bound the bird to her cage, and the bird swiftly flew away. When Motl returned to his home, he listened to Reb Zusha tell of the family facing incarceration because they were poor, about the bird's protest against her cage, and her yearning for freedom. Reb Zusha quoted psalms and said, "טוב יי לכל, ורחמיו טוב יי לכל, ורחמיו טוב יי לכל, ורחמיו טוב יי לכל" -- The Creator is good to all; tender mercies are over all of G-d's creations". Motl respected his rebbe's wisdom-- he had no clue that his bird was unhappy in her cage, and he was grateful to Reb Zusha for noticing her discomfort and taking action to free her. Without hesitation, Motl gave Reb Zusha the exact amount of funds needed to release the family facing incarceration, and the family gained their freedom that very day.

Like Reb Zusha and Motl, many of the fathers I worked with had a powerful connection to faith, spirituality and G-d. The fathers I worked with named how G-d, and their dedication to Islam, Christianity, Ifa, or American Indian tradition gave them important sustenance that helped bring them through. They said that art, music, and poetry helped them let go of their feelings of rage over injustice, which gave them the fuel to continue surviving. I was floored by each person's resilience. Also, I have to admit-- I did not expect the fathers I worked with to be as hilarious as they were-- and to laugh as much as I did! They cracked so many jokes! They must have known the famous Yiddish saying,

לאַכן איז געזונט, דאָקטוירים הייסן לאַכן.

Laughing is healthy; doctors prescribe laughter!

I think they knew instinctively that laughter is a medicine in its own right, and that it is also part of survival. Laughing releases feelings when tears and crying might be too heavy and too much to release.

As someone who has not personally experienced incarceration, it has been helpful finding stories in my own tradition that show struggle on both sides of the metal bars. Reb Zusha and Motl were working outside of prison trying to support people on the inside, and Yosef's story in the Torah came up many times as a way to learn from someone who experienced multiple versions of captivity and freedom. He was sold into slavery, incarcerated behind bars, rose to power, and then after all that he went through, he forgave his brothers for what they had done to him.

Right before he was sold into slavery, Yosef approached his brothers in the field, and they stripped him of his coat, of everything he had. His own brothers threw him into an empty pit that had no water, and then, they sat down to break bread and have a meal. So here was Yosef, lying in an empty pit, and listening to his brothers enjoy a meal up on level ground while he was stuck down in a pit, alone on a hot day without water or sustenance. My chaplaincy training brought Yosef's experience to my class' attention so that we could notice when the people we were present with might be in their own pits, feeling alone and isolated, while listening to others outside of their pit enjoying life. As chaplains, we were taught that we weren't there to pull people out of pits, or to attempt to fix problems. Instead, we were taught to climb on down into the pit with people, to witness, listen, and affirm. As chaplains, we ask questions and are present with people to support their confidence and inner wisdom so they may climb out of the pit themselves.

One time I was sitting down and studying psalms with a previously incarcerated father, and he said, "the Bible talks about leaving slavery and leaving Egypt, but today there are many other versions of Egypt. People are continually being redeemed and also finding themselves in situations of slavery." I was curious to learn more, so I asked if he could give some examples. He told me that when he was locked up, he decided to read the constitution, and he said, "I noticed that the 13th amendment abolished slavery for all people, except for people convicted of a crime. After slavery, they rounded up Black people, accused them of crimes they didn't commit, and brought them to plantation owners to be re-enslaved--and today, we still have prisons acting in similar ways. You know, I wonder if the U.S ever apologized for slavery." So, we decided to google "Has the United

States apologized for slavery”. We learned that in 2008, congress issued an apology to Black Americans for slavery, jim crow laws, and the US’s history of discrimination. He said, “This is an empty apology! They didnt even change the 13th amendment or pay reparations!

I responded, “So what do you think---Does it do more harm than good for congress to apologize for slavery and not take any action?”

He said, “Sometimes empty apologies are worse-- when you pacify people, it does more harm than good.

“I hear that. It’s like I’m kicking your leg, and then apologize, but keep doing it”, I said.

He said, “Yeah, or it’s like you stop kicking me and continue hitting me in a different way.”

I asked him if he thought healing and repair was possible, and he said, I think there just needs to be more unity-- unity across different communities of people who all join together and pressure politicians to address the specific issue of prison and slavery. To address that slavery is still happening in a different way. And if one politician doesn’t agree, then we need to find another who is willing to focus on accomplishing abolition so it goes mainstream. People get hidden into slavery in prison, and we just need to yell and yell about it until people hear us.

His powerful words ring true especially today on Rosh Hashana, when we recall Yosef’s release from prison and how our ancestors stopped working as slaves in Egypt.

This summer, I was excited to discover a tekhine, a Yiddish women’s prayer, from 1916 meant to be sung on Rosh Hashana all about Yosef and incarceration. Not only does it celebrate the anniversary of Yosef’s release from prison, but it also explicitly prays that ALL people should be released from prison ON THIS VERY DAY of Rosh Hashana.

I’d love to teach the whole song, but Reb Victor and I thought that handing out papers to this large room seemed tricky. I will teach you all the refrain, sing sections of the song by myself, and then please join me in the refrain again! The refrain means (READ ENGLISH) and repeat the yiddish after

me so we get the words right. (teach refrain). Ok, before we sing the whole song, I will read the translation so you know what we are singing.

אויפֿבינדן זייער שלאָס

Unlock Their Shackles *Oyfbinden Zeyer Shlos*

Remember us, beloved G-d, by the merit of Joseph the righteous (X2)

On this very day [Rosh Hashana] you pulled him out from his incarceration and you exalted him to be a leader in Egypt,

So too, Creator of the Universe, through Joseph’s merit, please provide us mazal so that we are not framed by false accusation, G-d forbid!, and wallow in prison.

And You shall summon the captive prisoners towards freedom, and You shall unlock all of their shackles immediately, on this very day [of Rosh Hashana]

Gedeynk unz, liber got, dem zkhush fun yoysef hatsadik (X2)

dos in dem tog hostu im oysgetsoygn fun zayn tfise un host im derhoybn tsu zayn a moyshl af dem land mitzrayim (X2)

azoy riboyno shel oylem, in zayn zkhush zolstu derhoybn unzer mazl mir zoln kholile kayn bilbul nisht hobn, dos mir zoln in tfise zitsn. (X2)

Un zolst rufn tsu di gefangene frayhayt un zolst oyfbindn zeyer shlos hayntikhn tog (X2)

(X2) געדיינק אונז, ליבער גאָט, דעם זכות פֿון יוסף הצדיק

דאָס אין דעם טאָג האָסטו אים אויסגעצויגן פֿון זיין תּפֿיסה און האָסט אים

דערהויבן
צו זיין אַ מושל אויף דעם לאַנד מצרים (X2)

אזוי רבונו של עולם, אין זיין זכות זאָלסטו דערהויבן אונזער מזל מיר זאָלן
חלילה קיין בילבול נישט האָבן,
דאָס מיר זאָלן אין תּפֿיסה זיצן
(X2)

און זאָלסט רופֿן צו די געפֿאַנגענע פֿרײַהײַט, און זאָלסט אויפֿבינדן זייער שלאַס
הײַנטיקן טאָג (X2)

“A Tekhine for the morning of Rosh Hashana, as one enters the synagogue.” Shas Tkhine Rav Peninim. (New York City, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1916), 181. This tkhine is dedicated to people who are currently surviving incarceration and detention centers, as well as people who were released from prison and are resiliently working to heal. Melody and translation by R' Noam Lerman.

So many incredible people are locked behind bars-- and I pray that we feel just how much our communities are lacking because of prisons. That we feel the human beings missing from our homes, communities, places of worship, schools, and jobs. That if and when they come home, we welcome them warmly, and support their healing.

On this day of Yom T'ruah, Day of Shouting, I pray that we yell and yell in solidarity with people surviving inside of prisons, and also with previously incarcerated people who are still surviving and resisting, and that we take action with them.

Our shouting can happen in so many different ways— We can pressure politicians and unify with different communities working to decrease and end mass incarceration. We can learn more about what is happening inside of prisons, and donate to organizations such as the Massachusetts Bail Fund,

like Reb Zusha and Motl. We can sing songs, write poetry, and pray prayers about freeing captive prisoners. We can write letters to people who are incarcerated to let them know that we haven't forgotten them. We can seek out community members who experienced incarceration, be loving towards them, learn from their wisdom, and get in the pit with them to hear their stories.

This Rosh Hashana, as we celebrate the anniversary of Yosef's release from prison and the Israelites cessation of slavery, I invite us to imagine and create a world that acts out of awareness, true justice, mercy, wholeness, courage and redemption for each and every person who is held captive against their will.

From the smallest bird cage to mega prison facilities and detention centers, may our shofar this Rosh Hashana blast through the metal bars and summon the captive prisoners towards freedom. May we unlock all of their shackles immediately, on this very day, on this very birthday of the world and ancient anniversary of liberation.



ALEINU

We sing *Aleinu* near the end of the service. The name of the prayer, *Aleinu*, means, it is upon us. When saying these words, consider what that might mean to you. What does it mean for the work of healing, praising, honoring, returning, releasing, changing, repenting, holding, breaking, crying, learning, repairing—this holy, unending work—to be upon us? In this prayer, we bow all the way down to the ground towards G!d, goddess, shechinah, our creator. We bow in reverence and in knowing that it is upon us to keep trying. To keep remembering that we are not alone. To keep praying together. From the depths of our struggle, our sorrow, our hardship and our brokenness, it is upon us to keep reaching towards one another.

עלינו לשבח לאדון הכל. לתת גדלה ליוצר בראשית. שלא עשנו כגויי
הארצות. ולא שמנו כמשפחות האדמה. שלא שם חלקנו בהם וגורלנו ככל
המונם: ואנחנו בורעים ומשתחיים ומודים לפני מלך המלכים הקדוש
ברוך הוא

Aleinu l'shabeiach la'adon hakol lateit g'dula l'yotseir b'reishit. Shelo asa-nu k'go-yei ha-a-ra-tzot v'lo sa-ma-nu k'mishp'chot ha'adama. Shelo sam helkeinu kahem v'goraleinu k'chol hamonam: Vaanachnu kor'im umishtachavim umodim, lifnei melech, malchei ham'lachim hakadosh baruch hu.

ALEINU

It is upon us to praise the Source of all,
to offer up abundance to creation's driving force,
who made us a part of the divine among all the peoples on the earth,
and made us holy beings among all the beings on the globe,
who gave us a divine purpose along with all peoples,
and intertwined our fate with all the multitudes.
We bend
and bow

in gratitude
before the Ground of All,
who guides all guides and teaches all teachers,
the Holy One of Blessing.

– Romemu Siddur

ALEINU

It is ours to praise
the beauty of the world
Even as we discern the torn world.
For nothing is whole
that is not first rent
And out of the torn
we make whole again.
May we live with promise
In creation's lap
redemption budding
In our hands.

– Marcia Falk



Shofar by Aaron Rotenberg

TASHLICH

Laynie Soloman

Tashlich (תְּשַׁלַּח) means “casting off” or “sending away,” and is a customary brief ceremony during which Jews symbolically cast away moments from the previous year in which we acted with misalignment or transgression. During this ceremony, we “cast away” these actions and moments from the previous year by tossing small stones or bread into flowing water. Watching the bread as it is carried away by the stream of moving water helps us remember that our actions and relationships—to each other, to G!d, and to ourselves—are constantly moving and flowing. This ceremony is full of symbolism, and creates an opportunity to physically embody a sense of teshuva—of restoration and relational repair.

This *minhag* (“custom”) custom dates back to the 13th century, and is now a popular and widespread practice. Because this custom was a later grassroots practice that emerged from the people rather than rabbinic leadership, there is no fixed way to do tashlich, and creativity is encouraged. The most important aspect of this practice is the *kavana* (“intention”) of letting go.

WHAT TO DO

Typically, this ceremony includes tossing bread or crumbs or pebbles into flowing water, and reciting several verses from the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. *Tashlich* is performed during the high holiday season anytime after the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah before the last day of Sukkot.

- Find a source of running, flowing water. For those that cannot access a river or a stream, any source of running water can be used for this practice, including a sink or a shower.
- You can use any material that you’d like as a substitute for bread crumbs or small pebbles including small seeds, or pieces of paper or tissue. If you do not have access to any materials that can be “tossed” into the water source you are using, you can set your intention to watch the flow of the water and concentrate on its movement.

- As you toss things into the water or concentrate on the water’s flow, visualize what you are letting go of, casting off, or tossing away from this year.
- If you want, you can close by reading the following text from the book of Micah in Hebrew or English.

MICAH 7:18-20

G!d, who is like you? You are forgiveness; you forgive all transgressions and release your people from guilt. You release your anger, you delight in love, kindness, and abundance. You take us back in love, you wipe clean the harm we have done, and you cast away all of our transgressions into the depths of the sea. You keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham as you swore to our ancestors throughout time.

מִי־אֵל כְּמוֹךָ נִשְׂא עוֹן וְעֵבֶר עַל־פְּשָׁע לְשֹׂאֲרֵית
נִחַלְתוּ לְאִי־הַחֲזִיק לְעַד אִפּוֹ כִּי־חָפֵץ חֶסֶד הוּא:
יָשׁוּב יִרְחַמֵּנוּ יִכְבֹּשׁ עוֹנֵתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלַיֵךְ בְּמִצְלוֹת יָם כָּל־חַטְאוֹתֵם:
תִּתֵן אֱמֶת לִיעֲקֹב חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתֵּינוּ מִיַּמֵּי קֶדֶם

mi el kamocho nosei avon ve'over al-pesha lischeirit
nachalato lo he'chezik la'ad apo ki-chafetz chesed hu
yashuv ye'rachameinu yichbosh avonoteinu ve'tashlich bimitzlot yam
kol chatotam
titen emet le'yaakov chesed le'avraham asher nishba'at la'avoreinu
mimei kedem



ISAIAH 58

On Yom Kippur, we chant Isaiah chapter 58 as the haftarah. It is reproduced below:

Cry with full throat, without restraint;
Raise your voice like a ram's horn!
Declare to My people their transgression,
To the House of Jacob their sin.

To be sure, they seek Me daily,
Eager to learn My ways.
Like a nation that does what is right,
That has not abandoned the laws of its God,
They ask Me for the right way,
They are eager for the nearness of God:

“Why, when we fasted, did You not see?
When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?”
Because on your fast day
You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!

Because you fast in strife and contention,
And you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such
As to make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the LORD is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Vindicator shall march before you,
The Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then, when you call, the LORD will answer;
When you cry, He will say: Here I am.
If you banish the yoke from your midst,
The menacing hand, and evil speech,

And you offer your compassion to the hungry
And satisfy the famished creature—
Then shall your light shine in darkness,
And your gloom shall be like noonday.

The LORD will guide you always;
He will slake your thirst in parched places
And give strength to your bones.
You shall be like a watered garden,
Like a spring whose waters do not fail.

Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins,
You shall restore foundations laid long ago.
And you shall be called

“Repairer of fallen walls,
Restorer of lanes for habitation.”

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
From pursuing your affairs on My holy day;
If you call the sabbath “delight,”
The LORD’s holy day “honored”;
And if you honor it and go not your ways
Nor look to your affairs, nor strike bargains—
Then you can seek the favor of the LORD.
I will set you astride the heights of the earth,
And let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob—
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

– Translation from Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures,
published by Jewish Publication Society;
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LIKE CLAY IN THE POTTER’S HAND (FOR YOM KIPPUR)

Caleb Brommer

כי הנה כחומר/Ki Hinei Ka’chomer is a stirring and challenging piyyut/poem about the release of control. Traditionally sung after Kol Nidre on the eve of Yom Kippur, this piyyut/poem always strikes me in the chest. We spend so much time and energy trying to control each aspect of our lives that we rarely, if ever, walk the walk of putting ourselves in God’s hands. This piyyut/poem is a reminder that now on Yom Kippur, if ever, is the time to do so. And yet this piyyut/poem is also a reminder of the instruments of control that are not as forgiving, ‘kind,’ ‘life-giving,’ ‘supportive,’ and ‘healing’ as God is. In some ways this poem is aspirational: may it be so that our only judge in this world was God! Instead, we must simultaneously hold reality and idealism in our minds. To the best of our ability we must shape ourselves, our community, our society, like clay. And sometimes we must give ourselves permission to let ourselves be molded and shaped.

Perhaps as you read through this piyyut/poem (and maybe sing it to yourself in a solemn melody), you’ll think about things in your life that you have control over, and things that you don’t. When are you the shaper of your own destiny and when is your destiny shaped by outside forces? Which stanza speaks to you most? For me it’s verse #4, about being the rudder in the hand of the sailor. I don’t know why but the metaphor of the open ocean makes me feel like I’m walking the line of powerful and powerless. Maybe we’re all both. May you find something resonant, comforting, and challenging in the words of this remarkable piyyut. G’mar tov! May you have an easy fast!

Behold, we are like clay in the potter's hand: Expanded at will, contracted at will. So are we in Your hand, Creator of Kindness. Recall the covenant and do not heed the accusing inclination.	<i>Ki hinei ka'chomer :b'yad ha'yotzer Birtzoto marchiv .u'virtzoto m'katzer Kein anachnu b'yad'cha chesed .notzer La'brit habeit v'al .teifen la'yeitzer</i>	כי הנה כחומר ביד היוצר: ברצותו מרחיב וברצותו מקצר כן אנחנו בידך חסד נוצר לברית הבט ואל תפן ליצר:
Behold, we are like stone in the mason's hand: Held at will, hammered at will. So are we in Your hand, Life-giver and Death-giver. Recall the covenant and do not heed the accusing inclination.	<i>Ki hinei ka'aven b'yad ha'm'sater: Birtzoto ocheiz u'virtzoto m'chater. Kein anachnu b'yad'cha m'chayeh u'm'moteit. La'brit habeit v'al teifen la'yeitzer.</i>	כי הנה כאבן ביד המס־תת: ברצותו אווזו וברצותו מכתת. כן אנחנו בידך מחיה וממותת. לברית הבט ואל תפן ליצר:
Behold, we are like iron in the blacksmith's hand: Forged at will, withdrawn at will.	<i>Ki hinei ka'garzen b'yad ha'charash: Birtzoto dibeik la'or u'virtzoto</i>	כי הנה כנגרון ביד החרש:

So are we in Your hand, Support of the poor and needy. Recall the covenant and do not heed the accusing inclination.	<i>peirash. Kein anachnu b'yad'cha tomeich oni va'rash. La'brit habeit v'al teifen la'yeitzer.</i>	ברצותו דבק לאור וברצותו תו פרש. כן אנחנו בידך תומך עני ורש. לברית הבט ואל תפן ליצר:
Behold, we are like a rudder in the sailor's hand: Held at will, released at will. So are we in Your hand, Good and Forgiving God. Recall the covenant and do not heed the accusing inclination.	<i>Ki hinei ka'hegeh b'yad ha'malach: Birtzoto ocheiz u'virtzoto shilach. Kein anachnu b'yad'cha El tov v'salach. La'brit habeit v'al teifen la'yeitzer.</i>	כי הנה כהגה ביד המלח: ברצותו אווזו וברצותו שלח. כן אנחנו בידך אל טוב ושלח. לברית הבט ואל תפן ליצר:

<p>Behold, we are like glass in the glassblower's hand: Shaped at will, melted at will. So are we in Your hand, Forgiver of intentional and accidental sin. Recall the covenant and do not heed the accusing inclination.</p>	<p><i>Ki hinei ki'z'chuchit b'yad ha'm'zageig: Birtzoto chogeig u'vartzoto m'mogeig. Kein anachnu b'yad'cha ma'avir zaton v'shogeig. La'brit habeit v'al teifen la'yeitzer.</i></p>	<p>כִּי הִנֵּה כְּזִכּוּכֵית בְּיַד הַמְזַגֵּג: בְּרִצּוֹתוֹ חוּגֵג וּבְרִצּוֹתוֹ מְמוּגֵג. כֵּן אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ מַעֲבִיר זְדוֹן וְשׁוֹגֵג. לְבָרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן לְיֵצֵר:</p>
<p>Behold, we are like cloth in the weaver's hand: Straightened at will, bent at will. So are we in Your hand, Jealous and Vengeful God. Recall the covenant and do not heed the accusing inclination.</p>	<p><i>Ki hinei ka'y'riah b'yad ha'rokeim: Birtzoto m'yasheir u'vartzoto m'akeim. Kein anachnu b'yad'cha El kano v'nokeim. La'brit habeit v'al teifen la'yeitzer.</i></p>	<p>כִּי הִנֵּה כְּרִיעֵה בְּיַד הַרוֹקֵם: בְּרִצּוֹתוֹ מִיֵּשֶׁר וּבְרִצּוֹתוֹ מְעֵקֵם. כֵּן אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ אֵל קָנָא וְנוֹקֵם. לְבָרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן לְיֵצֵר:</p>

Translation original

ASHAMNU

*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi.
He'e'vinu, v'hirshanu, zad'nu, chamas'nu, tafalnu sheker.
Ya'atz'nu ra, kizav'ny, latz'ny, marad'nu, ni'atz'nu,
Saras'nu, avinu, pasha'nu, tzarar'nu, kishinu oref.
Rashanu, shichat'nu, ti'av'nu, ta'i'ny, tita'nu.*

We have transgressed. We have betrayed our values.
We have taken what is not rightfully ours.
We have spoken false or hurtful words.
We have failed to respect others.
We have failed to listen to our best instincts.
We have harmed others and contributed to societal harm.
We have transgressed through selfishness, unkindness, and
unmindfulness.

*Ahavnu, batachnu, natanu, divarnu yofi.
Taharnu, tzadaknu, chayinu b'anava, cheyn v'chesed.
Hidrachnu, hallahnu, dibarnu emet, kidashnu.
Kibadnu, he'eminu, kibalnu patachnu, yatzarnu tiferet.
Galgalnu, hitachnu, heramnu, noladnu, adavnu.
Malachnu, anu habracha, chazarnu, zacharnu ahava.*

We love, we build trust, we gift, we credit and praise.
We align and purify, we make right, we assume nothing,
we live kindness.
We counsel compassion, we speak truth, we value and affirm.
We accept, we create beauty, we cycle, we empower.
We surrender, we are virtuous, we are upright, we bestow blessing.
We are the blessing, we return to rightness, we embrace divinity,
we remember love.

– Hebrew of *Ahavnu* by Yael Schonzeit and Mazal Etedgi
English by Taya Mâ Shere

NEILAH

adapted by Meli Sameh

At the end of Yom Kippur, we pray the *Ne'ilah* service. In synagogues around the world, the doors of the ark (in which we keep the torah scroll) remain open for this service in its entirety. These doors are open to symbolize the gates of heaven, which are open not only for the people able to attend services in community, but also for those of us who are not.

We pray through a service, repeating prayers that have become familiar over the past years or the past days or the past hours. The key comes in the middle of the amidah, with *Atah Notein Yad*, a penitential prayer speaking to Hashem himself in the second person, excerpted here:

“You reach out Your hand to transgressors,
and Your right hand is extended to receive those who truly repent.

[...]

You have taught us, Adonoy, our God, to confess before You all our iniquities
so that we may refrain from the injustice of our hands;
so that You will accept us in perfect repentance before You.

[...]

What are we? What is our life? What are our acts of kindness?

What is our righteousness? What is our deliverance? What is our strength?
What is our might? What can we say before You, Adonoy, our God and God
of our fathers?”

During Yom Kippur, the books of life and death in the coming year have been written but not sealed. This is a chance for last minute changes or additional fixes and forgiveness. Our connections to G-d are closer and dearer and unique in unintelligible ways during these final hours as we consider ourselves, our actions, our potential for forgiveness, our values, our fellowship with other Jews, even our devotion to G-d.

The service ends with a powerful finish. Out loud, we declare:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

Shema yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai echad.

Hear Yisrael, Adonoy is our God, Adonoy is One.

בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

Blessed [is His] Name, Whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.

Baruch shem kevod malchuto le'olam vaed.

יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים

Adonoy, He is God.

Adonai hu ha'elohim.

And with this, the day ends. The sun sets. The fast ends. The books are closed.
The gates shut until the next year.

We are together, apart, as before, but we are changed; the rituals of imitating angels completed, we ready ourselves to approach living in the realm of humanity once again.



A SHORT NOTE ABOUT SUKKOT:

Normally, we have a separate mailing altogether for our Sukkot mailing, but we have been having more difficulty collecting materials for the mailings than in previous years. With that said, it felt important to offer a little bit of explanation and framing about Sukkot. This holiday is also known as z'man simchateinu, the season of joy. Sukkot completes the cycle of the the season of awe that helps anchor the Jewish calendar and ushers in the new year. After celebrating the possibility that comes with beginnings on Rosh Hashanah, spending time reflecting and restoring relationships on Yom Kippur, we enter into the vulnerable joy of Sukkot. Rabbi Alan Lew, z"l, teaches in his book *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*:

"When we speak of joy here, we are not speaking of fun. Joy is a deep release of the soul, and it includes death and pain. Joy is any feeling fully felt, any experience we give our whole being to. We are conditioned to choose pleasure and to reject pain, but the truth is, any moment of our life fully inhabited, any feeling fully felt, any immersion in the full depth of life, can be the source of deep joy."

Sukkot offers us profound lessons in impermanence and in letting go of controlling our environments. It offers temporary protection amidst the unknown and reminds us that we are surrounded by loving ancestors who are walking alongside us in the vulnerable, joyful, liminal unknowns.

May this season of joy reach each of you in big and small ways, and may you feel the fullness, openness, and depth that Sukkot invites us into.

LIVING IN SUKKOT, A SUKKOT READER

by Aaron Wander

Sukkot commemorates the experience of the Jewish people in the wilderness. According to the Torah, while traveling through the desert, we lived in sukkot (the plural of sukkah), a sort of temporary dwelling, like a hut. Therefore, each year, we also build sukkot.

What is the purpose of building, sitting in, eating in, and – for some people, even sleeping in a sukkah each year? What experiences, emotions, or contemplation is it meant to evoke?

Are we supposed to feel embraced and safe inside of the sukkah, just as we might feel secure within G-d's presence? Or are we meant to feel vulnerable and unstable, just as we so often feel in the world around us?

In these sources, we'll look at the verses from the Torah that describe the holiday of Sukkot. After, we'll explore a debate in the Talmud about what exactly those verses mean. Finally, we'll look at a spiritual interpretation of that debate.

I. Leviticus 23:42-43

You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in sukkot, in order that future generations may know that I had the Israelites live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God.

- Why, according to these verses, do we observe the holiday of Sukkot each year?

II. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 11b

The Talmud records a debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva about what it means in Leviticus that G-d "had

the Israelites live in sukkot.” Rabbi Eliezer thinks that the word “sukkot” shouldn’t be translated literally, while Rabbi Akiva disagrees.

“Sukkot” actually means the Divine Clouds that surround G-d – this is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer.

Rabbi Akiva says: The Israelites made actual dwelling places for themselves.

- According to Rabbi Eliezer, how should we read the phrase “I had the Israelites live in sukkot”?
- If we read the verse according to Rabbi Eliezer, how do we imagine that the Israelites felt? In what ways would they have felt protected? In what ways would they have felt vulnerable?
- If we read the verse according to Rabbi Akiva, how do we imagine that the Israelites felt?
- What sort of vulnerability is meaningful or nourishing? What sort of vulnerability is painful or harmful?

III. Sefat Emet (R’ Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Gur, 19th-20th c. Poland), Essays on Sukkot, #21

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, known by the title of his main book, Sefat Emet (“Language of Truth”), was a Hasidic mystic. Here, he offers an interpretation of the debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva.

Both interpretations are correct! It was because the Israelites went to the desert, transitioning from a permanent dwelling into a temporary one, that God surrounded them with the Divine Clouds.

And behold! In the verse from Leviticus, it states “all citizens in Israel shall live in sukkot, in order that future generations may know” – this means that this mitzvah is so powerful that it allows those who perform it to know and connect to the freedom of the Exodus.

- How does the Sefat Emet combine the two interpretations? Based on how he understands the verse, how do you think the Israelites would have felt? In what ways would they have felt protected? In what ways would they have felt vulnerable?
- Have there been moments of difficulty or transition during which someone else has supported you?
- The Sefat Emet says that by building Sukkot, we can spiritually connect to the experience of freedom in the Exodus. What do you think it is about the experience of building or dwelling in Sukkot that might offer a sense of freedom?



Sukkah by Aaron Rotenberg

THE MEANING OF THE SUKKAH

By Alyx Bernstein

The sukkah is a discrete space, locked in the brief time of the holiday. It has at least two-and-a-half walls and a ceiling of schach branches. It must be at least 10 tefachim high (over 2.6') but no more than 20 amot high (32'). Generally, sukkot are built between Yom Kippur and the start of Sukkot and come down not long after the holiday ends. They are, by nature, bound by time and space, limited to only a week and a half of the year and the small space the sukkah itself covers.

This is by design. In the Talmud, Rava teaches that the *ikar*, the core meaning of the sukkah, is that it is a temporary space, distinct from one's permanent residence. He quotes a verse from Leviticus: "In sukkot shall you dwell seven days." According to Rava, the goal of sitting in the sukkah is to be in a discrete, temporary space for the week of Sukkot. The sukkah exists only in the present.

But the other rabbis give other *ikkarim*, other core meanings, for the sukkah. Rabbah (not to be confused with Rava) points to the rest of that same verse in Leviticus - "So your future generations will know that I housed the children of Israel in sukkot when I took them out of Egypt." For Rabbah, the core of the practice of sitting in the sukkah is the act of knowing, of remembering our ancestors long ago in the desert. The sukkot of today are reflections of the sukkot of the past.

Here we see the sukkah starting to grow beyond the bounds of time. Our modern-day sukkot do not just exist in the present, but instead reflect the long past. As we recite in the Passover seder, we are obligated to see ourselves as if we ourselves went out from Egypt. Just as on Passover we reenact the Exodus, so too our sukkot reenact the Exodus, making us part of our ancient past.

But there is a third rabbinic opinion, a third *ikar* of the sukkah. Rabbi Zeira derives it from a verse in Isaiah: "And there shall be a sukkah for shade in daytime from the heat." But reading this verse in context, this makes the least sense of the three proofs. Rabbah and Rava both pointed to a verse in Leviticus that is about the laws of the holiday of Sukkot. The sukkah in Isaiah is one created by God in a prophesied future after the coming of the Messiah - not a house of branches and wood but the Divine Presence itself over Mount Zion in Jerusalem. While it may use the same word *sukkah*, the meaning here is very different.

However, the Talmud notes that, although the word seems to mean something different, the choice of the word *sukkah* suggests that there is a link between the Divine *sukkah* from the days of the Messiah and the sukkah of Sukkot. This Divine *sukkah* actually appears in the Friday night liturgy, where we ask God to extend the sukkah of peace (*sukkat shalom*) over us. What I think Rabbi Zeira is offering us is a radically different version of the sukkah. Yes, the sukkah is about the space and the time, the moment of sukkot and the sukkah itself. But the sukkah also exists out of space and time. It exists in the shadow of the Divine Presence, in the promised future redemption, in the distant past of our ancestors. It exists wherever we are, wherever we feel the Divine Presence watching over us—or even when we do not feel it with us. The sukkah stretches beyond its walls, beyond its *schach*, to wherever we may be.

This sukkot, whether or not we sit in a literal sukkah, may we all be blessed with our own *sukkat shalom*, our own time of peace and protection.





Myrtle/Hadasim by Aaron Rotenberg

והיית אך שמחה (YOU WILL HAVE ONLY JOY)

By Lexie Botzum

and so this is our rejoicing:
the holiday of the desert.
of clouds that live in the moment before a storm,
of tents and waiting,
of poles and strings and the vaguest outline of a home.

and there will be nothing but joy, never a happier day than ones with
nothing to be grateful for.
no liberation or harvest, only this: sketching the bare bones of
our better world.

we sing not to perfection or fulfillment, but it's potentia.
we are wandering and wild,
hugged by clouds and fire,
no border in sight.

we are waiting and hungry

if we can't rejoice in this
desolate wasteland,
we celebrate:
our readiness & openness.
the structures we've built, incomplete and striving desperately
towards perfection.

in a dry and unredeemed world,
we lie beneath the stars.
we tilt our chins,
stick out our tongues to catch



Matir Asurim is looking for art or images to accompany our holiday mailings. Offerings might include: illustrated prayers, *Birkhat Ha'bayit* (house blessing), blessings of protection, interactive art, coloring pages, comic strips, shvitim (meditative images of the name of Hashem), illustrated depictions of Torah, and other treasures.

Please include a brief (2-3 sentences) description of your work.

Honorariums will be provided for selected artwork.



Submissions can be sent to
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143