

THE OU WOMEN'S INITIATIVE IS PROUD TO PRESENT:

— TISHREI ESSAY COLLECTION —

IDEAS & inspiration

5787

*Words We Return To,
Words That Return Us*



In memory of my dear mother Ethel Cohen Mallor, *a"h*, to commemorate her 27th *yahrzeit*.

Sponsored by the Mallor/Walder Families

In loving memory of our beloved parents, Dr. Manfred Raphael and Sara Anne Lehmann, and Jacob and Rose Siegel, and in memory of all who have perished in defense of Am Yisrael.

With our fervent *tefillot* for HaKadosh Baruch Hu's bestowing merciful shalom and *refuah sheleimah* of all Am Yisrael.

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A message from
REBBETZIN DR. ADINA SHMIDMAN
Director, OU Women's Initiative

בס"ד

Every year, Tishrei invites us into a conversation.

It begins with the piercing cry of the shofar, continues through the whispered confessions and soaring prayers of Yom Kippur, and culminates in the joy of the *sukkah* and the dancing of Simchat Torah. At first glance, each *chag* possesses its own distinct *mitzvot*, melodies, and mood. Yet together they tell a single story—the story of *tefillah*.

We often translate *tefillah* simply as “prayer.” Yet the very word *lehitpalel* hints at something much deeper. *Tefillah* is not merely about speaking to Hashem; it is about allowing ourselves to be transformed by the encounter. Authentic *tefillah* changes not only what we say, but who we become. That transformation is the unfolding of Tishrei itself.

On Rosh Hashanah, our gaze is lifted upward. Through *Malchiyot*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*, we proclaim Hashem's sovereignty and rediscover our place within His covenant. We begin by asking not, “What do I want?” but rather, “Before Whom do I stand?”

On Yom Kippur, that awareness turns inward. Standing before Hashem compels us to stand honestly before ourselves. We seek forgiveness, repair broken relationships, and rediscover the people we are capable of becoming. Our *tefillot* become a catalyst for introspection, healing, and renewal.

Then comes Sukkot. We leave the permanence of our homes for the embrace of the *sukkah*. Surrounded by the *arba minim* and immersed in the *simchah* of the *chag*, we discover that *tefillah* is not meant to remain within the walls of the shul. It accompanies us into our homes, our relationships, and the ordinary moments of life, transforming them into opportunities for holiness.

This year's *Ideas & Inspiration Tishrei Essay Collection* invites us to enter into that conversation. Through the voices of exceptional women educators and scholars, each essay illuminates a different dimension of the *tefillot* of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Together, they reveal that *tefillah* is not only something we say—it is a way of seeing, relating, repairing, rejoicing, and ultimately, becoming.

The OU Women's Initiative is deeply grateful to our supporters, whose generosity makes this publication possible. Thank you to the OU Women's Initiative Commission Co-Chairs, Miriam Greenspan and Nomi Rotblat, and to the entire commission for their leadership and partnership. Thank you to our talented contributors for sharing their scholarship and insight. Finally, I extend my appreciation to the dedicated OU Women's Initiative team—Adeena Mayerfeld, Ayelet Shachar, Emma Katz, Rachel Mazurek, Nechama Epstein, Rachel Miller, Nechama Friedman, and Malka Schiffman, the Mr. Saul Bernstein OU Women's Initiative intern—for their creativity, dedication, and tireless efforts in bringing this collection to fruition.

The journey of Tishrei does not end when the *chagim* conclude. If *tefillah* has truly transformed us, it accompanies us long after the shofar's final blast, after the *sukkah* has been taken down, and after the dancing of Simchat Torah has ended. The measure of our *tefillah* is found not only in the words we recite throughout Tishrei, but in the lives we live because of them.

May the pages that follow enrich your *tefillot*, deepen your relationship with Hashem, and inspire you to carry the growth of Tishrei into every day of the year ahead.

Kesivah vechasimah tovah,



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We have been deeply inspired by the incredible work that the OU Women's Initiative has undertaken over the past several years to expand opportunities for women to study Torah and to learn from extraordinary and talented women scholars. At the same time, the organization has created a vibrant, international community of women who share a passion for learning.

We feel truly privileged to be part of this exciting initiative by sponsoring the ALIT program in memory of Helen's beloved parents.

—Helen and Manny Adler

Words We Return To, Words That Return Us

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Transliterations in this publication are based on Sephardic or Ashkenazic pronunciation according to authors' preferences.

This essay collection contains divrei Torah, and should therefore be disposed of respectfully by either double-wrapping prior to disposal, or placing in a recycling bin.



תהילים ק"ל

An Architecture of Return From the Depths

By Rebbetzin Aviva Feiner

For forty years, two chapters of Tehillim have anchored me through every season of life: Psalms 121 and 130. I first encountered them as a daily ritual when I chanted them aloud in a second-floor classroom in Washington Heights under the guidance of my teacher, Mr. Hellman, of blessed memory. At the time, I did not realize that I had been handed a lifeline, words to grasp during life's inevitable descents. King David didn't write only for scholars. He wrote for anyone who has ever felt small, burdened, or far away. Read closely, Psalm 130 traces a path from the bottom of the abyss to the threshold of redemption, revealing the steps that make return possible.

The chapter opens with an apparent paradox: On the one hand, it is "*Shir hama'alos*—a song of ascents," while on the other hand, it is said "*mima'amakim*—from the depths." The speaker has not yet begun to climb. He calls out from the lowest point. According to tradition, the fifteen Songs of Ascent correspond to the fifteen steps on which the Levi'im stood in the Beis Hamikdash. Psalm 130 is the tenth in this sequence, a point at which the climber has already made considerable progress but has not yet reached the top. Rav Shimon Schwab, in *Selections of Tehillim*, explains that this chapter speaks directly to those submerged in sadness and helplessness. Its power lies precisely in that suspended place between despair and deliverance.

The word *ma'amakim*, the plural of the Hebrew word for valley, *emek*, is very telling. The psalmist does not cry out from one single abyss. He has traversed an entire landscape of disappointments and failures and stumbled many times. Yet he still calls to G-d. His first act of return is not an escape, but a prayer.

That posture of humility reverberates throughout the *yamim nora'im*. On Yom Kippur, we ask, "*Mah anu? Meh chayeinu? Meh chasdeinu?*—What are we? What are our lives? What is our righteousness?" These words are not expressions of despair. Recognizing our smallness before G-d is what allows us to turn toward Him honestly, without defenses or illusions.

The Talmud (*Berachos* 7b) teaches that Avraham was the first person to address G-d as "*Adon*." In doing so, Avraham affirmed that G-d is not a distant force, but a personal Presence Who is attentive to the struggles of each soul. Rav Shimshon Pincus, in *Tiferes Shimshon*, develops this idea through a striking analogy. G-d is the ultimate physician of the body because He created it. Likewise, He is the ultimate physician of the soul. He gave us both free will and the *yetzer hara* that challenges it. He understands both our failures and the faults and imperfections from which they arose.

Rav Schwab identifies this vulnerability in the psalmist's choice of words. He asks G-d to listen using the verb form "*shimah*," which ends with the Hebrew letter *hey*, rather than the more familiar "*shema*." *Shema* is a command or proclamation, while *shimah* conveys a plea. The difference of one single letter captures the emotional register of the entire chapter: "Please, G-d, listen to my voice."

The turning point of the chapter can be sensed in the words "*Ki imcha haselichah*—for forgiveness is with You." Forgiveness belongs to G-d, and a broken soul can become whole again only because He grants it forgiveness. Rav Schwab emphasizes that there is no natural mechanism through which wrongdoing simply disappears. We cannot erase sin from our souls or undo the pain we have caused. *Teshuvah* is therefore neither a psychological technique nor an amendment to a moral ledger. It is a Divine gift that transcends ordinary logic. As Rav Schwab writes, "There is no instinctive imperative to avoid sin other than one's choice to do the will of G-d." Sin and atonement both rest entirely on relationship, not mechanism.

In the closing verses, King David compares his longing for G-d to that of watchmen awaiting the morning. A watchman does not doubt that dawn will come. He waits for it with certainty. Similarly, the psalmist trusts that even the deepest darkness will eventually give way to light.

This sentiment is also reflected in the following verse, as the chapter widens its lens from the lone supplicant to the entire people: "*Yachel Yisrael el Hashem*—O Israel, long for Hashem." Rav Schwab distinguishes here between *tikvah*, ordinary hope, and *yichul*, anticipation that is charged with longing. The latter is the quality Rambam requires as one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith. It is not enough to merely believe that Mashiach will come. We need to actively await him with earnest longing. "Even though he may delay, still I await him daily." Here too, the psalmist encourages us to hold tight, filled with eager anticipation of the redemption that will ultimately come.

"*Vehu yifdeh es Yisrael mikol avonosav*—He will redeem Israel from all its sins." Rav Schwab explains that exile is ultimately rooted not in the other nations' hatred, but in our own failures. Just as the individual can return and be forgiven, the Jewish people can be redeemed. The psalm that begins in the depths ends with the promise of our return to G-d, redemption, and the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash.

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למנצח לבני קורח A Story Larger Than Our Own By Mrs. Rena Siev

The moments before *tekiat shofar* are always charged with anticipation. It's one of the most stirring parts of the prayer service, a time when we reach inward and prepare to engage in a ritual that defines the very nature of the day. We hope that our *tefillot* will be carried upward on the wings of the *shofar*'s cries, transcending the limits of human language and giving voice to the unspoken prayers in the deepest recesses of our souls.

Ahead of this moment, we stand together and recite “*Lamnatzeach livnei Korach mizmor*” seven times with intense concentration. We hope that our prayers will cling to the words of the *mizmor* as they metaphorically pierce through the expanse that separates us from G-d. We repeat the Divine name “Elokim” a total of forty-nine times, in the hope of transforming the *middah* of harsh judgement (represented by “Elokim”) into the *middah* of boundless compassion and ensuring that G-d ascends the *Kisei Hakavod* cloaked in mercy.¹ It's a deeply personal moment and a deeply evocative moment, as we try to insert our hearts into the words.

But a close look at the text reveals a striking dissonance. Though the moments ahead of *tekiat shofar* might intuitively feel like a personal moment of prayer, the words we recite do not echo this feeling. The text of this *mizmor* is not characterized by a call of “*mima'amakim*,” of reaching out to G-d from the depths of our hearts, nor does it even mention the word *tefillah*. It speaks neither of personal struggles nor of individual hopes and prayers. To the contrary, this *mizmor* is profoundly universal. It's focused outward and looks toward a time in the future when all of humanity will celebrate G-d's exalted sovereignty: “All you nations, join hands...for the Lord is supreme, awesome, a great King over all the earth” (Tehillim 47:2-3). It speaks of G-d's reign over the nations and the role that the “nobles of the peoples” (47:10) play in this process. Though the words *melech*, *teruah*, and *shofar* feature prominently in the text and establish a concrete link between this chapter, G-d's Kingship, and the mitzvah of the day, we can't shake the feeling that our intensely personal moment of prayer has dissolved and been recast as a sweeping vision for the nations of the world.

To further complicate matters, this psalm is attributed to the “sons of Korach.” Directly associated with one of the most infamous rebellions in Jewish history, the sons of Korach seem like unlikely heroes to invoke at this momentous time. Intuitively, we would have expected to recite the words of David, the inspiring figure who made himself an instrument of G-d's will and transformed his personal challenges into prayer. Why does our preparation for the *shofar* begin with the sons of Korach and their universal vision for the world?

In many ways, the question itself points toward the answer. Human beings naturally inhabit their own *daled amot*, their private world of anxieties and aspirations, struggles and dreams. On Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, when “all creatures pass before Him like a flock of sheep” (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 1:2), man instinctively turns inward and thinks about what hangs in the balance for him and the people closest to him.

Undoubtedly, there is something deeply valuable about this inward turn. Rosh Hashanah calls on us to live thoughtfully and intentionally, and the sobering awareness that so much hangs in the balance compels us to take stock and improve.

Yet Rosh Hashanah makes another more sweeping demand of us. Ultimately, Rosh Hashanah is the *yom harat olam*, the anniversary of the creation of the entire world, much more than the anniversary of our own time here. It's not really about us. It's not about our personal goals, as noble and sincere as they may be. It's not even about the prayers that feel most urgent.

This shift is daunting, especially in a culture that celebrates individuality and personal fulfillment. Rosh Hashanah asks us to loosen our hold on the self and recognize that we are members of a flock, part of a nation, and citizens of a vast world that has been moving forward, one day at a time, toward a moment in the future when G-d's Kingship will be celebrated by the entire world. The world is following a clear trajectory, progressing toward a time when “G-d will rule over the earth” (Tehillim 47:8) and “reign over the nations”(47:9), in a movement that is so much more far-reaching than my own individual passions and dreams.

This *mizmor* asks us to confront the uncomfortable truth that the story is ultimately not about us. The questions that it presses us to answer, or at least put on the table, confront things that are so much greater than our own personal ambitions. It refers to us as “the nation of the G-d of Avraham” (47:10), evoking Avraham's relentless efforts to teach the ancient world about G-d's Kingship and encouraging us to reframe ourselves in that light. How can I bring more G-dliness into this world? What does it mean to accept responsibility for *Am Yisrael*? Are my priorities aligned with the needs of the wider community? What does this global, futuristic vision mean for me and my own life? Against the backdrop of these questions, even our most personal *tefillot* can take on new meaning and become part of a story far larger than our own.²

In many ways, this is precisely what the sons of Korach realized in their final moments. Just before the earth swallowed Korach and his followers, they looked beyond their immediate ambitions and the vision they had inherited from their father. They loosened the grip of family loyalty and ideology and chose to reclaim their place within the larger story of the Jewish people. In doing so, they not only saved themselves from imminent disaster. They also earned an enduring place of prominence and ensured that their descendants would one day stand in the Beit Hamikdash and inspire generations with their words and music, words that continue to resonate in the moments before *tekiat shofar* each year, when we exceed the limitations of our own personal stories and focus on a sweeping vision of a perfected world instead.

¹ Elef Hamagen on *Mateh Efraim*, 585:3.

² Similarly, our prayers are generally formulated in the plural, as opposed to the singular, reminding us that we stand before G-d as part of a greater community.

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זכרונות

Our Place in the Master Plan

By Mrs. Ruhama Welcher

אתה זוכר מעשה עולם ופוקד כל יצורי קדם. לפניך נגלו כל תעלומות והמון נסתרות שמבראשית.

You remember the deeds done in the universe and You recall all the creatures fashioned since the earliest times. Before You all hidden things are revealed and the multitude of mysteries since the beginning of Creation.

The *berachah* of *Zichronos* in the Mussaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah revolves around one of the day's central themes: Divine scrutiny, reward, and punishment. The idea that Hashem recalls our every action and hidden thought, forgets nothing, and determines the destiny of both individuals and nations for the year ahead is an expression of Divine judgement. By definition, the two names of Rosh Hashanah are one and the same. Yom Hazikaron is also Yom Hadin. This text is about responsibility and consequences; Hashem remembers all our actions, evaluates them, and responds in kind.¹

Ultimately, however, *Zichronos* is about significance. We are remembered, and we are accountable because we are significant, because we matter, and because our choices matter. The thought that every action and every hidden thought are noticed may feel unsettling, yet a life in which these go unnoticed is a life devoid of meaning. A task with no outcome is pointless; a game with no winners or losers is no fun. Without evaluation or consequences, sacrifice loses its value, kindness loses its moral weight, and courage loses its importance. The fact that our actions are remembered, weighed, and judged reflects the significance of our lives and the choices we make.

If there were no remembering, no judgement, no consequences, life itself would be intolerably meaningless. We come from dust and return to dust; our lives are transient and fleeting, a microscopic dot in the vast expanse of history. Yet the knowledge that our actions are noticed and carry consequences transforms those fleeting lives with immeasurable significance. *Zichronos* reminds us that all our actions, thoughts, secrets, struggles, and aspirations are remembered because they matter to Hashem.

Zichronos is a critical part of the Rosh Hashanah *davening* because reminding ourselves that Hashem remembers everything can be transformative. If we are deeply conscious of *Zichronos*, it shapes every choice and action, every thought and every *middah*.² Living with the knowledge that Hashem has expectations of us, that He evaluates us, and that every decision carries real significance transforms the way we live. An awareness of *Zichronos*, of both our accountability and our significance, can become a powerful catalyst for growth.

However, there is an even deeper dimension here. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, quoting the Ramchal, points out a remarkable feature of this *berachah*. Human beings can only remember the past. By definition, memory is retrospective. Divine remembrance, however, transcends time, and for Hashem, remembering encompasses the past, the present, and the future. The *berachah* begins with

everything Hashem remembers from the past: “*Atah zocher ma’aseh olam*—You remember the deeds done in the universe.” It then proceeds to speak about the present: “*Atah zocher es kol hamifal*—You remember every action.” And finally, the *berachah* turns toward the future: “*Hakol galui veyadu’a lefanecha*—everything is revealed and known before You.”

The implications of this progression are profound. We tend to think of Rosh Hashanah as an assessment of the past year: a time to reflect on what we did well, where we failed, and what we need to change in the year ahead. However, Rabbi Friedlander describes this in far more remarkable terms. Hashem doesn’t just evaluate our actions based on their effect here and now. He judges them in the context of the whole of creation and its ultimate purpose.

There is a Divine master plan for creation, and every person plays a unique role within it. When Hashem judges us, He evaluates our lives in light of that greater mission, considering our past, present, and future. Our choices are not only significant because they shape our own lives or those around us today; they also matter in the context of refining the world for all generations. Our lives have cosmic significance. They matter to all of humanity and all of history, and every act has the potential to shape the destiny of the world.

Rosh Hashanah is about far more than recognizing that Hashem evaluates my actions over the past year and reflecting on how I can improve in the year ahead. It’s about seeing myself in the context of the whole creation, as a small cog in a big machine that is nonetheless indispensable. It is about recognizing that I have a unique role to play in Hashem’s plan, a role that no one else can fulfill. It is about understanding that my life carries not only personal significance but historical and eternal significance. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem judges me in light of the purpose for which He placed me in His world, evaluating how well I am fulfilling the role that only I was created to play.

When we say the *berachah* of *Zichronos*, we are not merely acknowledging that Hashem remembers us. We are reminding ourselves who we are: people whose choices matter, whose lives carry eternal purpose, and whose every thought and action contribute to the fulfillment of creation itself. And when we live with this awareness, it is manifested in every decision we make, in every moment of self-control, every act of kindness, every sacrifice, and every choice to become the people Hashem created us to be.

“*Ashrei ish shelo yishkachecha, u’ven adam yisametz bach*—Fortunate is the person who does not forget Hashem and the human being who finds strength in You.” Fortunate is the person who does not forget Hashem, and is always aware of their significance and allows this awareness to shape all their thoughts, decisions, and choices.

¹ Rabbi Yoseph Albo, *Sefer Ha’ikarim* 1:4.

² Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Sifsei Chaim: Mo’adim, Zichronos*, 503.

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וידוי

The Courage to Speak the Truth

By Dr. Danielle Bloom

Among the four classic stages of *teshuvah*—*charatah* (regret), *azivat hachet* (abandoning the sin), *vidui* (confession), and *kabbalah al he'atid* (commitment for the future)—*vidui* stands apart. *Charatah*, *azivat hachet*, and *kabbalah al he'atid* are all expressions of the same fundamental movement: distancing oneself from sin. *Charatah* addresses the past: one looks back and regrets what was done. *Azivat hachet* focuses on the present: one stops the sinful behavior now. *Kabbalah al he'atid* focuses on the future: one resolves not to repeat the behavior. Past, present, and future are all addressed through these three stages.

Vidui, however, is fundamentally different. It does not involve a new decision, a new feeling, or a new commitment. The sinner has already regretted his sin, stopped, and made a resolution for the future. What then is the goal of verbal confession? Why is speaking the words so essential that, according to many authorities, in the absence of *vidui* the process of *teshuvah* remains incomplete?

The answer may lie in the nature of human relationships.

Human beings crave balance in their relationships. When one person harms another, a moral imbalance is created. The same is true when someone performs an act of kindness. Until the recipient says, “Thank you,” or the offender says, “I’m sorry,” the relationship remains incomplete. This insight may explain a fascinating aspect of the Hebrew language. The word *lehodot* means both “to thank” and “to admit.” At first glance, these concepts seem unrelated, yet they perform the same function. Both “thank you” and “I’m sorry” acknowledge a moral debt and restore balance to a relationship. In this sense, words do not merely describe reality; they change it.

Rabbi David Fohrman notes that asking “Are you *mochel* me?” shifts the focus to the victim’s obligation to forgive rather than the offender’s responsibility to apologize. *Vidui* requires the sinner to own the wrongdoing by saying, “I was wrong. I am sorry.”¹

This relational dimension explains why confession occupies such a unique place in *teshuvah*. Regret, leaving behind the sin, and future commitment may transform the sinner internally, but confession addresses the relationship itself. It verbalizes responsibility and restores moral balance between the individual and G-d.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers another perspective on *vidui*. In *Al Hateshuvah*, he argues that thoughts and emotions remain incomplete until they are expressed in words. As long as ideas remain trapped within a person’s mind, they lack clarity even to the person himself. Only through language do thoughts become fully formed and fully understood. As he writes, “...the person himself does not grasp what is going on in his mind...Unexpressed thoughts of *teshuvah* are meaningless.”²

More importantly, confession confronts one of humanity’s most powerful defenses: self-deception. Human beings instinctively avoid unpleasant truths. We rationalize our mistakes and preserve our self-image. A person may privately recognize his failures while outwardly pretending that nothing is wrong.

Vidui breaks through these defenses. It compels a person to face reality directly. Once the words are spoken—“I sinned,” “I failed,” “I was wrong”—the truth can no longer be hidden behind rationalizations and excuses. The painful honesty of confession strips away illusion and forces us to see ourselves as we truly are. Rav Aharon Lopiansky explains that by confronting one’s failures through *vidui*, we declare that the sin does not define our identity. The act of confession separates the sinner from the sin, affirming that one’s essence remains attached to Hashem.³

For this reason, Rabbi Soloveitchik describes confession not merely as the conclusion of *teshuvah* but as an act of atonement in its own right. He compares *vidui* to a sacrifice offered upon the altar. In ancient times, an animal offering symbolized the surrender of something precious before G-d. In confession, we offer something equally precious: our pride, our carefully cultivated image, and the illusions that allow us to avoid the truth. Through the painful act of speaking the truth, we symbolically place our ego upon the altar.

The significance of *vidui* becomes even clearer when we consider the two moments in Jewish life when confession is usually recited: on Yom Kippur and in the final moments before death. At first glance, these occasions seem unrelated. One occurs annually; the other occurs only once. Yet both share a common theme. They are both moments of accounting and closure. Rambam highlights this connection when he writes that a person should always strive to do *teshuvah* and confess “so that he may die as a *ba’al teshuvah*.”⁴ In Rambam’s view, *vidui* is not merely a ritual performed at the end of life. Rather, every act of confession is preparation for the ultimate accounting that every person will face one day. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for the final *vidui*, while the deathbed *vidui* is the Yom Kippur of a lifetime.

Yom Kippur concludes the year’s spiritual journey, inviting a person to evaluate both successes and failures before beginning anew.

The deathbed confession serves the same purpose on a larger scale. At life’s end, we will review our entire lifetime, accept responsibility for our failures, and seek to stand honestly before G-d.

In both cases, *vidui* serves as the language of truth. It is the moment when a person stops running from reality and confronts it directly. It is the moment when relationships are rebalanced, illusions are stripped away, and responsibility is fully embraced.

Ultimately, *vidui* is more than a verbal component of *teshuvah*. Regret, abandonment of sin, and future commitment all reflect the decision to leave wrongdoing behind. *Vidui* does what the other stages of *teshuvah* cannot. It gives voice to repentance, restores broken relationships, strips away self-deception, and enables a person to stand honestly before G-d. Through confession, one does not merely change. We tell the truth about who we have been and who we hope to become.

³ Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky, “Korach 5786: Moshe’s *Limud Zechus* for Klal Yisrael,” recorded 2026, audio recording, <https://outorah.org/p/256959>.

⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:1-2.

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¹ Rabbi David Fohrman, “*Teshuvah: What Is Real Repentance?*” recorded September 9, 2013, audio recording, https://classic.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/797675/Rabbi_David_Fohrman/_Teshuvah_What_is_real_Repentance.

² Pinchas H. Peli, ed., *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Orot Publishing House, 1980), 62-63.



כחומר ביד היוצר

Like Clay in the Hand of the Sculptor— A Study in Contrasts

By Rabbanit Rookie Billet

This is a season of contrasting themes.

During the *Yamim Nora'im*, we address G-d with profound humility, surrendering to His will. In the *piyut* recited on Kol Nidrei night, Kachomer Beyad haYotzer, the *paytan* compares humanity to:

“Clay in the hand of the sculptor who molds it and transforms it at will”—G-d shapes us and refines us.

“Stone in the hand of the mason who preserves it or smashes it at will”—G-d creates or destroys.

“The axe in the hand of the blacksmith who fires it or removes it at will”—G-d strengthens or weakens.

“A wheel in the hands of the ship captain who grasps it or releases it at will”—G-d directs man’s course and destiny.

“Silver in the hand of the silversmith who refines it or leaves it impure at will”—G-d purifies us or leaves us to our own devices.

“Glass in the hands of the glassblower who forms it or liquefies it at will”—G-d sustains and encourages us, or allows us to be ineffective.

“Material in the hand of the embroiderer who sews his stitches straight or crooked at will”—G-d allows man to take the straight path or deviate.

The *paytan* also has many different descriptions of G-d: “the Preserver of lovingkindness”; “the One Who gives life and takes it away”; “the One Who supports the poor and indigent”; “the Role Model of goodness and forgiveness”; “He Who forgives our wrongdoings, whether intentional or erroneous”; “He Who wants our sole devotion”; and “He Who avenges wrongdoing.”

After invoking multiple metaphors for humanity and numerous attributes of G-d, the *paytan* distills the Jewish people’s pleas as we stand before G-d on the night of Yom Kippur, awaiting the sealing of our fate for the coming year: G-d, we plead, remember the covenant You made with us and our forefathers. Have mercy on Your errant nation. Disregard the accusations of the Accuser, judge us favorably, and grant us a year of peace, fulfillment, success, and victory, both as a people and as individuals. Clothed in white, we stand before You in humility, foregoing worldly pleasures, and entrusting ourselves entirely to Your compassion and forgiveness.

It is important to note that though the *paytan* compares humanity to clay, to unfinished metal, to cloth, to unfinished glass, to raw material, and to a steering wheel that cannot direct the ship without a captain, nevertheless, we are human beings who have been given the gift of speech, *ruach memalela*, and are endowed with *seichel*, intelligence, and understanding. Man can exercise his free will, which is also a gift from G-d. Man is capable of changing his ways, capable of self-improvement, capable of acting authentically, in full recognition of his uniqueness and agency. Jean Paul Sartre says that an authentic human being cannot in good conscience act in “bad faith” and say: “I had to do it, I couldn’t help it, I was forced.” Authenticity means that as believers in *bechirah chofshit*, free will, we are entirely free to do as we choose. It is within our choosing to walk the path of justice, or regretfully, turn away from it.

Alongside our humility, we must retain a measure of confidence and recognize that humanity is the summit of G-d’s creation and therefore possesses profound worth and potential. Man and woman possess the power of speech, the gift of memory, the ability to record history, compare and contrast, argue and agree. Man can stand erect before G-d, forcefully pleading his personal case, and at the same time express his humility, his undeservedness of G-d’s mercy and love, and his hope that G-d will give him life and success despite his shortcomings. Interestingly, the straight shofar and the bent shofar remind us of this contrast between confidence on the one hand and humility on the other.

Though the *piyut* is not attributed to a specific author, its original imagery is found in Yirmiyahu 18 where Hashem commands Yirmiyahu to go down to the potter’s house and watch him at work. The prophet sees how the potter shapes a vessel, and, when he is dissatisfied with the results, reshapes it into a different vessel, according to his will. Hashem explains to Yirmiyahu that He, G-d, can cause a nation that complies with His commandments to succeed and flourish, and a nation that defies Him and turns to other gods to meet destruction. The prophecy is a harsh one, foretelling disaster and destruction of the people and the land that fail to heed G-d’s word and follow His commandments. The *paytan* however, changes this stern warning of doom to an appeal for mercy and compassion from the Deity who is in charge of everything. The G-d of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, can judge harshly, and yet, in no time at all, He can reverse the evil decree and fulfill the promise of bounty, victory over enemies, tranquility in the land, and long, healthy, peaceful lives for His beloved Israel.

For as long as I can remember, this *piyut* has held deep meaning for me as I sit in shul on *Kol Nidrei* night. This *piyut* makes me feel my dependence on G-d’s generosity: whatever gifts or talents I may possess are the gifts of G-d, as are my health, my faculties, my hearing and vision, my perseverance and determination, my mobility. This awareness fills me with gratitude for all the good in life and helps me accept that we must be grateful for life’s challenges as well, since they strengthen us and develop our capacity to withstand the difficulties that are inevitable in our fragile human existence.

This poem makes me feel close to G-d—He is my Creator, my Guardian, my Mentor, my Teacher, my Parent, my King, my Shepherd, my Guide, and my Protector, Who desires my trust. Depending on how we define the *yetzer*, whether as the Accuser, as I did above, or perhaps as my own *yetzer hara* (negative inclination) that can divert my attention from goodness and selflessness, this prayer also helps me recognize that it is our personal moral responsibility to help make the world a better place, and it is within our capacity to do so.

May I close with the prayer that this Yom Kippur, the G-d of *chesed* and *rachamim* will answer our *tefillot* for the good: for an end to war, the cessation of worldwide antisemitism, comfort to the bereaved, marriage for those searching for life partners, children for the childless, financial security for those who struggle, relief from psychological pain, healing for the wounded, traumatized, and ill, and the fulfillment of all the unspoken longings of our hearts.

Rabbanit Rookie Billet made aliyah after retiring from a long career as a Judaic studies teacher, day school and yeshiva high school principal, yoetzet halacha, writer, speaker, mentor, and rebbetzin of the Young Israel of Woodmere.



סדר העבודה

Reflections from the Battlefield, Lessons of the Mikdash

By Mrs. Elisheva White

Last Yom Kippur, my husband was in Lebanon on reserve duty, and I was home with four children and pregnant with our fifth. There was a video circulating at that time that gave tremendous *chizuk* to myself and the other wives of my husband's unit, religious and non-religious alike. The video moved between parallel scenes of the same young man praying in shul on Yom Kippur and serving in the army. In one scene, he wrapped himself in a white *tallit*; in the other, he put on his olive-green uniform. In one scene, he walked to shul; in the other, he climbed into his army vehicle. In one scene, he knelt for *hishtachavayah*, prostration; in the other, he crouched to take aim with his gun. The juxtaposition affirmed what we already knew in our hearts: This too is *avodat hakodesh*.

The image of the Kohen Gadol's wife watching her husband leave to perform the *avodah* in the Beit Hamikdash, not knowing whether he would return alive, came to mind as we sent our husbands to the front lines, trembling yet filled with pride. This experience, shared by countless families from every part of Am Yisrael, has brought the themes of Yom Kippur to life with extraordinary intensity, allowing us to understand its spirit in a new and deeply personal way.

Rabbi Akiva famously states: "How fortunate are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven" (*Mishnah Yoma* 8:9). The Maharal explains that Yom Kippur purifies Am Yisrael because we have *deveikut baShem*; we cling fully to Hashem. When we are completely attached to G-d, our sins are removed because we are part of G-d, Who is disconnected from all sin.¹ The Netivot Shalom explains, according to the Kedushat Levi, that this is the secret of the *hishtachavayah*, which plays a prominent role in the *avodah*.²

This powerful moment is described poignantly in the *Seder Ha'avodah* that we recite on Yom Kippur: "And the *kohanim* and the people who were standing in the Temple Courtyard, when they heard the glorious and awesome Name [of G-d] explicitly pronounced from the mouth of the Kohen Gadol...they bowed, prostrated themselves, offered thanks, and fell upon their faces and said, 'Blessed [is His] Name, His glorious Kingdom is forever and ever.'"

The Kedushat Levi explains that at this moment, the nation reached the highest level of humility and self-nullification before Hashem, which is the secret to the atonement of Yom Kippur. When we bow daily, we only nullify our minds and hearts. On Yom Kippur though, when we fully prostrate ourselves, we symbolize complete submission before Hashem, achieving *taharah*, purity.

There are three things that purify a Jew. The first is a mikvah, which purifies one who immerses completely, with nothing separating his body from the water. The second is *Knesset Yisrael*, the Jewish people as a whole. When one is fully connected to Am Yisrael, it functions like a mikvah and purifies him. The third, and highest source of purification is Hashem Himself. When we attach ourselves to *Knesset Yisrael* and surrender to His will, we attain *deveikut baShem*.

This idea relates to the teaching of the Rambam: "Once a soldier enters the throes of battle, he should rely on the *Mikveh Yisrael* Who is their Savior in times of need."³

¹ *Derashot Maharal*, "Derush leShabbat Teshuvah," 27.

² *Netivot Shalom*, vol. 2, "Yom Kippur," essay 1, 163.

³ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim U'milchamot* 7:15

⁴ *Mishnah Sotah* 9:15

⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 56:2

From the very first round of reserve duty, my husband has reflected that his own "*Mikveh Yisrael*" is our community, and at large, the Jewish people. He knew he didn't have to fear, even for his wife and children, because they were fully bound with Am Yisrael who would take care of them.

The lack of control gave me a heightened sense of submission to Hashem. When we go through dangerous situations we learn that "Upon whom is there for us to rely? Only upon our Father in Heaven."⁴ There is nothing we can do to control the outcome of the war, and we are forced to turn to Him alone.

Upon receiving news that my husband was summoned yet again to Gaza, I cried. Something broke inside of me as I faced danger again. My husband looked me in the eyes and said with such clarity: "I believe with all my heart and all my soul that if Hashem wants something to happen to me, it will happen no matter what situation I am in. There are still hostages in Gaza, and this is where I need to be."

Somehow, this comforted me, and it is the secret to the comfort of Yom Kippur and *hishtachavayah*, complete submission to Hashem's will. It allowed me to rise to the occasion as a servant of Hashem.

The way we felt when our husbands arrived home safely was a glimpse of the jubilation the nation felt when the Kohen Gadol emerged safely. Indeed, the *piyut* Emet Mah Nehedar uses a series of vivid images to capture the splendor of the Kohen Gadol as he emerged from the *Kodesh Hakodashim*: "Like the image of a rainbow in the clouds...like the kindness upon a bridegroom's face...like a rose among thorns..." These scenes share a theme of hope. When you see a rose among thorns, you understand that beauty and vitality can emerge from difficult situations.

We can recreate this jubilation in our everyday lives by embodying the idea that Hashem is truly in charge. Is G-d any less in charge when we wake up able to breathe, walk, and talk than He is on the battlefield?

Bereishit Rabbah notes that there are strong connections between *hishtachavayah* and redemption: "Rabbi Yitzchak said: Everything is due to the merit of *hishtachavayah*...The exiles will be gathered in due only to the merit of *hishtachavayah*...The Beit Hamikdash will be built due only to the merit of *hishtachavayah*, as it is stated: 'Exalt the Lord our God and prostrate yourself at His holy mountain.' (Tehillim 99:9)"⁵ On Yom Kippur, our discovered dependence on Hashem ironically brings joy, the knowledge that we are part of a plan much bigger than ourselves. Perhaps this heightened sensitivity, gained through life experiences, is what we need in preparation for our ultimate redemption.

Even without the Beit Hamikdash, Hashem presents us daily with personal and national challenges, inviting us to see Him in all of it. *Geulah* comes in the merit of *hishtachavayah*. If *hishtachavayah* represents complete submission, then submission brings redemption closer. We submit not only to G-d, but also to the needs of Am Yisrael, taking responsibility for each other. It is not a submission of sadness, but of joy. It is the knowledge and commitment that no matter what Hashem brings our way, we will accept it as *ovdei Hashem* and as members of Am Yisrael, rising to the challenges and opportunities that He has placed before us.

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אושפיזין

The Guests We Bring Home

By Rebbetzin Yocheved Goldberg

Every year, at some point during Sukkos, our family returns to the same question: If you could invite one person to join us in the *sukkah* this year, who would it be?

The answers are always remarkably diverse and surprising.

Some choose towering rabbinic figures or rebbetzins whose Torah, leadership, and *chesed* continue to inspire generations. Others invite personalities from Tanach, longing to hear their stories firsthand. Occasionally, someone names one of Israel's prime ministers or an American president, curious to understand the weight of the decisions they made on behalf of their countries.

More often, however, the choices are deeply personal: a grandparent who survived the Holocaust whose experiences we wish we knew more fully, a beloved relative whose absence is still felt, or a namesake whose life and legacy shape a child's developing identity.

The conversation that follows has become one of the most meaningful moments of our *yom tov*. We ask why each person was chosen and what we would ask if they were seated beside us. In doing so, these figures become more than names from history or family memory; they become teachers.

Our discussion naturally leads us to that evening's *ushpizin*. Before reciting the *tefillah* welcoming them into our *sukkah*, we spend a few moments reflecting on the unique quality each one represents. Why does Avraham embody *chesed*? How did Yosef preserve his integrity while living in Egypt? What can we learn from Moshe's humility, Aharon's relentless pursuit of peace, and David's extraordinary capacity to return to Hashem after failure? Most importantly, which of those qualities do we hope to cultivate within ourselves?

Perhaps this family tradition resonates because it captures the very essence of the *ushpizin*. Inviting someone into our *sukkah* is an exercise in self-reflection. Whose presence do I want to feel? Whose values do I hope will shape my own? The people we choose reveal not only whom we admire, but the kind of people we aspire to become.

The word *ushpizin* is derived from the Aramaic word for "guests." The Zohar teaches that each day of Sukkos, one of the seven shepherds of the Jewish people—Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef, and David—enters every *sukkah*. Though we cannot perceive them physically, we symbolically welcome them, recognizing that Sukkos is not merely about dwelling in a temporary structure, but about filling that structure with enduring spirituality.

Sukkos reminds us that security is never found in the shelters or homes we build, but in the values that sustain us. Seen in this light, the *ushpizin* are far more than honored visitors from the past. Together, they represent seven complementary dimensions of Jewish character, each one essential to a life of *avodas Hashem*. The fact that each guest is associated with a different day reminds us that spiritual growth unfolds gradually, one virtue at a time.

Avraham, whose tent was open on all sides, embodies boundless *chesed* and hospitality. It is only fitting that he is the first guest to enter our *sukkah*, a space dedicated to welcoming and hosting others. Yitzchak represents *gevurah*, the inner strength and

quiet courage to develop holiness through restraint. Yaakov personifies *emes*, truth balanced by compassion. His life teaches that integrity often requires navigating complexity rather than seeking simplistic answers.

Moshe exemplifies *anivus*. Though he was the greatest *navi* and leader, the Torah praises his humility, teaching that true leadership begins with selflessness. Aharon is the great pursuer of *shalom*, reminding us that creating harmony is among the highest forms of *avodas Hashem*. His presence feels especially fitting around every *yom tov* table, where keeping the peace can be a challenge. Yosef demonstrates unwavering faithfulness to his identity despite extraordinary adversity. Surrounded by the culture and temptations of Egypt, he remained steadfast in his values, making him an enduring model for every Jew striving to maintain Torah ideals within the broader world. David, the final *ushpizin*, embodies resilience. His life was marked by spiritual heights and painful failures, yet he continuously turned towards Hashem.

Together, these seven guests create a blueprint for a life of holiness. No single characteristic is sufficient on its own. Kindness without discipline becomes indulgence. Truth without compassion becomes harshness. The progression of the *ushpizin* reminds us that spiritual growth is cumulative. By the conclusion of *yom tov*, we are surrounded by a complete constellation of Jewish values and ideals. The *ushpizin* that join us become less like distant figures from long ago and more like mentors quietly challenging us to become better versions of ourselves.

The *sukkah* itself is intentionally temporary. At the conclusion of *yom tov*, we dismantle it, its fragility reminding us that we are no different. None of us are complete. Like the *sukkah*, we are vulnerable to the elements, yet capable of becoming holy precisely through that vulnerability. Every year we build the *sukkah* anew, and every year we are given the opportunity to rebuild ourselves.

To me, this is the deepest message of the *ushpizin*. They are not invited because they were flawless, but because they spent their lives striving. The Torah does not preserve them as untouchable heroes; it presents them as human beings who stumbled, struggled, repented, and grew. Their greatness was never the absence of imperfection, but the refusal to allow imperfection to define them.

In many ways, the question my family asks in our *sukkah* is really the same question the *ushpizin* ask of us: Who do we want sitting around our table? Whose voice do we echo in our home? Which qualities do we hope our children absorb from this sacred space?

When we leave the *sukkah*, we do not simply return to ordinary life. We carry our guests with us—the *ushpizin* and the people our family and guests invited in. Their voices, struggles, and ideals accompany us long after the walls have come down. If we welcomed them well, they leave us with more than memories of a beautiful *yom tov*. They leave us with a vision of the people we ourselves can become.

Perhaps that is the true purpose of inviting the *ushpizin* into our *sukkah* each year—not so that they spend seven days with us, but so that we spend the next year becoming a little more like them.

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ופרוש עלינו סוכת שלומך The Joy of a Fallen Structure By Mrs. Talia Pinchot

Throughout Sukkos, we add a special request to Birchas Hamazon: “*Harachaman Hu yakim lanu es sukkas David hanofeles*—May the Merciful One establish for us the fallen *sukkah* of David.” This phrase, drawn from the prophet Amos (9:11), refers to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty. Rav Yosef Kara (on Amos 9:11) explains that *sukkas David* also alludes to the Beis Hamikdash. At first glance, this imagery is shocking. Why is the eternal Davidic dynasty, or even the Beis Hamikdash, compared to a *sukkah*, the most temporary and fragile of structures?

A second, seemingly unrelated question arises from the story of Leah. *Midrash Mishlei* (chapter 31) teaches that Leah merited to produce kings and prophets because she went out to greet Yaakov and received him *besever panim yafos*, with a warm and joyful countenance. What is the connection between the way Leah welcomed her husband and becoming the mother of royalty?

The Maharal explains that the phrase “*sukkas David hanofeles*” is not a disparagement of the Davidic monarchy, but rather the key to its endurance. When a house collapses, its identity is lost. If it is rebuilt, it is considered a new structure. A *sukkah*, however, is inherently temporary. Its fall is not its end. It can be reestablished and still retain its original identity (*Netzach Yisrael*, ch. 35).

The *sukkah*’s ability to continually rise again explains why the *tefillah* uses it as a metaphor for the Davidic dynasty. Other kingdoms endure only as long as their institutions stand. Once dismantled, they vanish into history. The Davidic dynasty, however, is rooted in a Divine covenant. It can be exiled, obscured, and outwardly dismantled without ever ceasing to exist. We therefore do not ask Hashem to create a new kingdom, but to reestablish the original one.

With this framework, we can return to Leah. To understand her reward for what appears to be a simple act, we must first appreciate the fragility of her position within Yaakov’s family. *Bereishis Rabbah* (71:2) describes Rachel as the *ikar shel bayis*, the primary wife. Rachel was Yaakov’s chosen partner, the one he openly loved. Leah, by contrast, entered the marriage through Lavan’s deception. The *midrash* cited above even relates that Yaakov initially considered divorcing Leah, only reconsidering once Hashem blessed her with children. Although Leah built much of Yaakov’s family, her place within the family unit remained tenuous.

This vulnerability forms the backdrop to the episode of the *duda'im*. After Leah stopped bearing children, her son Reuven brought her *duda'im* from the field. When Rachel asked for them, Leah’s response revealed years of pain: “Is it not enough that you have taken my husband, that you would also take my son’s *duda'im*?” (Bereishis 30:15). Rachel then granted Leah a night with Yaakov in exchange for the *duda'im*.

This arrangement could hardly have restored Leah’s dignity. She was forced to negotiate for a single night with her own husband. Yet, when Yaakov returned from the field, Leah went out to meet him *besever panim yafos*. Despite the transactional nature of the encounter, Leah refused to allow the tense relationship to be further compromised. She approached it with joy, hope, and a commitment to continue building.

Why did this act merit the reward of kingship? Because Leah embodied the defining quality of the Davidic dynasty long before her descendants who would establish that kingdom ever existed. Her relationship was strained, at times even broken, but it was never erased. She recognized that beneath her disappointment lay a bond worth preserving and a future worth pursuing.

The Torah then records, “*Vayishma Elokim el Leah*—Hashem listened to Leah” (Bereishis 30:17), despite the fact that it doesn’t mention an explicit prayer. Rashi (ibid) explains that Hashem responded to Leah’s inner longing and her efforts to build the *shevatim*. Leah’s actions themselves became her *tefillah*. By going out to Yaakov with *simchah*, she demonstrated her belief that even a broken relationship can be rebuilt.

On Sukkos, we step into a structure that embodies this very idea. The *sukkah* is inherently fragile, easily dismantled, and exposed to the elements. Yet we enter it with joy. Like Leah, we are called to approach vulnerability not with despair, but with *simchah*.

When we say, “*Harachaman Hu yakim lanu es sukkas David hanofeles*,” we give voice to Leah’s silent prayer. We sit in a *sukkah* that is temporary, even fragile, while we await the ultimate *sukkas David*, the Beis Hamikdash rebuilt in all its glory. In doing so, we affirm that what has fallen apart is not lost forever and what has been broken can always be rebuilt. But Leah teaches us something more: joy is essential to the work of rebuilding.

On this *zeman simchaseinu*, we daven that the broken areas of our personal lives, our struggles and disappointments, can be met with *sever panim yafos*, with openness, hope, and a willingness to rebuild. And on a national level, as we sit in our individual *sukkos* and recite this prayer, we recognize that each temporary structure is part of something far greater. Our small *sukkah*, filled with *simchah*, becomes a building block of the ultimate *sukkah* we await. Just as Leah’s actions earned her the blessing of royal descendants, we pray that the *simchah* we bring to our *avodah* will help usher in the restoration of the Davidic dynasty and the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash.

Mrs. Talia Pinchot is a women’s health physician assistant, kallah teacher, and author of *Women in Tanach Through the Eyes of Chazal*.



תפילת גשם

Eternal Messages Beyond the Forecast

By Mrs. Adeena Mayerfeld

For many of us living in modern cities, rain is simply part of the forecast. It may change our plans or slow our commute, but few of us actually feel dependent on rainfall. Yet, every year, on Shemini Atzeres, we recite *Tefillas Geshem* and begin six months of davening for rain.

How can we truly connect to these *tefillas*, especially for the rain of Eretz Yisrael, when we're so far removed from its agricultural reality?

On the sixth day of Creation, although the vegetation had already been created, it had not yet grown because "Hashem had not caused it to rain upon the earth" (Bereishis 2:5). Rashi explains that Hashem withheld the rain until Adam understood the world's dependence on Hashem and turned to Him in *tefillah*.

By creating a world dependent on rain, Hashem gave us an ongoing opportunity to recognize that every *berachah* comes from Him and turn to Him in *tefillah*, opening the door to a deeper relationship.

With this perspective in mind, it is instructive to consider the focus of *Tefillas Geshem*. Although we call it the "Prayer for Rain," the stanzas of the *piyut* do not mention *geshem*. As they invoke the *zechuyos* of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, and the *shevatim*, the repeated request for rain uses the word *mayim* rather than *geshem*.

Chazal teach that water symbolizes Torah. Just as water sustains physical life, Torah sustains spiritual life. Before we conclude with *mashiv haruach umorid hageshem* and explicitly pray for the rain that sustains our bodies, the *piyut* directs our attention to the "water" that sustains our souls and fosters our relationship with Hashem.

So, as we reflect on the *zechuyos*, we ask not only for rain, but also what these individuals can teach us about our own *avodas Hashem*.

The *tefillah* begins by describing Avraham as "drawn after Hashem like water," defining the relationship that shaped his life. It alludes to the *akeidah* and the river Avraham encountered on his way. He was prepared to sacrifice his only son through whom Hashem had promised his future, continuing even when the path seemed impossible. The *Mateh Levi* explains the stanza's conclusion ("*derashto bezaro al kol mayim*"), and notes that when Avraham arrived in Eretz Yisrael, the Promised Land greeted him with famine. His *emunah* far surpassed simple belief in Hashem. Avraham trusted Him through challenges and obstacles, even when His plan lay beyond human understanding.

The *piyut* invokes Yitzchak's *zechus* of "pouring out his heart like water." When he and Rivkah were unable to have children, Yitzchak instinctively turned to Hashem in heartfelt *tefillah* (Bereishis 25:21). It recalls Yitzchak's digging of the wells that Avraham had dug and the Pelishtim later filled with earth. The Shem MiShmuel explains that these wells symbolize the spiritual inspiration Avraham introduced to the world. Over time, that inspiration became buried beneath the routines of daily life. Yitzchak did not seek new inspiration, but uncovered what was already there by continuing to dig.¹

Moshe's stanza begins with two acts of quiet *chesed* involving water. As an infant, he was saved by Pharaoh's daughter, who defied her father's decree to rescue him from the Nile. Years later, Moshe rescued Yisro's daughters and also went a step further and drew water for their sheep.

The *piyut* then turns to Moshe bringing forth water by striking the rock. In the desert, Bnei Yisrael learned through open miracles that every drop of water came directly from Hashem. Yet the *piyut* also echoes the later, similar incident at Mei Merivah, where Moshe was punished for striking the rock. The Netziv explains that Mei Merivah was meant to prepare Bnei Yisrael for life in Eretz Yisrael. Moshe was told to take the staff, the symbol of the desert's open miracles, but not to use it. Instead, he was commanded to speak to the rock. This moment was meant to teach that in Eretz Yisrael, in times of drought, they should no longer seek open miracles but rather speak to Hashem through *tefillah* (Bamidbar 20:12). The miracles would become hidden, but their dependence on Hashem would remain the same.

As we invoke the *zechuyos* of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Moshe, we can ask ourselves:

Do I continue to follow Hashem even when I cannot fully understand His plan, like Avraham? When I face challenges, do I instinctively turn to Hashem in *tefillah*, like Yitzchak? When my *avodas Hashem* feels routine, am I willing to keep digging? And like Moshe, do I notice opportunities for quiet *chesed*? When I face an *eis tzarah*, is my first instinct to turn to Hashem in *tefillah*, recognizing Him as the Source of *berachah*?

The message of *Tefillas Geshem* does not end on Shemini Atzeres. A few weeks later, we begin saying *vesein tal umatar*. Within our request for sustenance, we daven for rain in Eretz Yisrael.

Eretz Yisrael itself embodies the very lessons of *Tefillas Geshem*. As Moshe prepares Bnei Yisrael to enter the Land, he describes it as "*lematar hashamayim tishteh mayim*—from the rain of heaven will it [the land] drink water" (Devarim 11:11), unlike Egypt, where the Nile River consistently provided water. The mefarshim explain that this is not an agricultural disadvantage, but a spiritual gift. Eretz Yisrael was intentionally designed so that its rainfall would be intertwined with the spiritual lives of the people. Its dependence on rain is the very means through which Hashem continually draws Klal Yisrael into a relationship with Him.

The community of Asa'el, an agricultural community in Israel, lives this reality today.

After October 7th, most of the men in the *yishuv* were serving in Gaza. The women faced a dilemma: their fields desperately needed rain, yet rain could make the fighting more dangerous. They asked their rav where to direct their *tefillas*. His answer was simple: "We do not change the *tefillas* of generations. We continue to daven for rain." So they added extra *tefillas*, and the children said Tehillim. That year, they received enough rain for a successful harvest, while an unusual weather pattern left Gaza dry. The following year, with many of their husbands serving in Lebanon, they again poured their hearts into their *tefillas* for rain. This time, Asa'el received abundant rainfall, and the harvest was more than double what they expected, requiring volunteers from across Israel to bring it in from the fields.

For these families, *Tefillas Geshem* is not a remnant of an agricultural past. When they daven for rain, they are davening for their crops and livelihood, and expressing, day after day, their dependence upon Hashem.

We may not live in an agricultural society, but we daven for a land that still embodies the relationship rain was meant to create. We are invited to live with that same awareness, recognizing that our dependence upon Hashem is not a weakness in the land, but an opportunity for a relationship.

Mrs. Adeena Mayerfeld is the Assistant Director of the OU Women's Initiative and coordinates the leadership programming for the department.

¹ Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein, *Aggadah: Sages, Stories & Secrets* (White Plains: Mosaica Press, 2015), 105-106.

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HALACHA SUBSCRIBERS

16,000

WOMEN LEARNING THE SAME
PEREK OF NACH DAILY

50,000

WOMEN REACHED

100+

MIKVAHS
STRENGTHENED

2,500+

VIRTUAL TEHILLIM
RALLY PARTICIPANTS

400+

ALIT SUMMER LEARNING
PARTICIPANTS EACH YEAR

350+

MIKVAH ATTENDANTS AND
DIRECTORS TRAINED

TORAH LEARNERS ACROSS

45+ COUNTRIES

MENTAL HEALTH
FELLOWSHIP:

189

REBBETZINS, KALLAH TEACHERS, EDUCATORS,
AND KIRUV PROFESSIONALS SUPPORTED

YOUR LEARNING

The OU Women's Initiative brings high-caliber Torah learning taught by leading women educators from across the Jewish world. Whether you have ten minutes or want to explore a topic in depth, you will find meaningful learning in Tanach, halacha, Jewish thought, and the Jewish year.

Nach Yomi, parsha, Rosh Chodesh, and seasonal programs offer fresh, relevant learning for every stage and schedule. Explore our audio and video content and find what works for you.

TORAT IMECHA NACH YOMI

Complete Nevi'im and Ketuvim in two years with 15-minute daily audios. Learn independently or with a local chapter, join a 16,000-woman global community, and use the Nach Yomi Journal for notes and reflection.

TORAT IMECHA HALACHA

Read a short, practical halacha in about 30 seconds, delivered directly by email or WhatsApp.

TORAT IMECHA PARSHA

Listen to a 15-minute parsha shiur every Wednesday and enter Shabbos already thinking about the parsha.

ALIT SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM

Join women of all ages worldwide for three weeks of dynamic online learning.



Nach Yomi has empowered me to be a role model to my grandchildren, who see me engaged in learning even at seventy-one. I have fallen in love with what it means to be a Jewish woman and am more motivated than ever to keep growing in knowledge of those who paved the way for us. I see this not only as a privilege, but as a sacred obligation.

—Ingrid Danelewitz



YOUR LEADERSHIP

Whether you are a rebbetzin, nonprofit or lay leader, kallah teacher, educator, mikvah administrator, or attendant, your role matters. Find professional development tailored to your work, a network of women who understand your challenges, and support to strengthen your impact.



LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

For women who lead nonprofits, communal institutions, organizations, and chesed initiatives. Gain the strategic know-how your role calls for and join a network of women navigating similar complexities.

FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH FELLOWSHIP COURSE & SEMINAR

For rebbetzins, kallah teachers, kiruv professionals, and educators. Strengthen the way you guide, teach, and support others — with professional development, mentorship, and a community of women carrying similar roles.

COLI: COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

For women leaders dedicated to impacting the local community by encouraging deeper community engagement, offering valuable leadership skills, and creating a support network of Orthodox women serving in leadership roles within the community.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR MIKVAH LEADERS

For mikvah directors, attendants, and women opening a new mikvah. Gain practical training, resources, and experienced guidance for operating a mikvah and elevating the experience with warmth, clarity, and care.



These past two days have been so special for me. I realized (again) the power of sisterhood. We laughed and cried together, discussed topics that we are passionate about, and came up with ideas of how to change the world little by little. We shared intimate challenges and moments of growth, and most importantly learned that we create the strongest support system for one another!

—Tammy Masar

OUR COMMUNITY

Whether chagim inspiration, Women in Business, or idea labs, take part in our wide range of stimulating and meaningful virtual and in-person events. Or find the resources to create your own community programs.

LECH K'NOS FAST-DAY PROGRAMMING

Bring meaningful fast-day programming to your community with a ready-to-use video, editable flyer, and Tehillim cards. Choose the time, find a host, and inspire the women of your community, with everything prepared for you.

PROGRAMMING IDEA LAB

Collaborate with other women leaders to identify community needs, exchange ideas, and develop meaningful programs and initiatives.

BAT MITZVAH PROJECT

Learn together as mother and daughter with a ready-to-use curriculum, whether on your own or by bringing the program to your community. Separate, beautifully designed books for mothers and daughters help make the bat mitzvah milestone one of deeper connection and shared learning.



Thank you so much for all your women's programming and learning initiatives. The women of the Young Israel of Manhattan really enjoyed the Lech Knos program. It was such a worthwhile event for the hectic time right before Purim. So much of the holiday preparations fall into the material realm, as they should, but the brief break to shore up on the spiritual was so welcome!

—B. K.



