

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Yom Kippur
October 12, 2024 *** 10 Tishrei, 5785

[Sacred Words in Liturgy and Life by Shira Billet](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/sacred-words-in-liturgy-and-life/)

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In a 1958 lecture on prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “It takes two things for prayer to come to pass – a person and a word. Prayer involves a right relationship between those two things. But we have lost that relationship... We do not think about words, although few things are as important for the life of the spirit as the right relationship to words.”

Beyond the realm of prayer in particular, this elusive “right relationship” between persons and words is central to our ability to have relationships at all. “Words have become cliches, objects of absolute abuse. They have ceased to be commitments. We forget that many of our moral relationships are based upon a sense of the sacredness of certain words...”

What Heschel worried about in 1958 is even more true and even more concerning in 2024. Human communication, the commitment to taking words seriously and to viewing the words we write and speak as serious commitments, has become even more imperiled in an age where our words are mediated through the technologies of social media, artificial intelligence, and the crippling social phenomena of political polarization and widespread mistrust.

Heschel’s sense that there is a deeper ethical significance to the notion of taking prayer seriously echoes a statement found in Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers). Pirke Avot is an ancient compendium of moral aphorisms and a foundational work of Jewish ethical thought. Throughout Pirke Avot, special attention is given to the power of words. In [Avot 2:18](#), Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the ancient Jewish rabbi and mystic, turns to the words we speak in prayer, and cautions us to be “**extremely careful in... prayer.**” Seriousness prayer, according to Rabbi Shimon, is linked to

compassion and mercy. He concludes his statement about taking prayer seriously with a moral imperative to be a virtuous person. For Rabbi Shimon, being a virtuous person entails being self-reflective and true to ourselves. Virtue begins with “not being a bad person in our own eyes.” Rabbi Shimon thus connects taking prayer seriously with an ethics of compassion that begins with an ethics of honesty and self-awareness.

Heschel’s 1958 lecture on prayer builds on this ancient rabbinic tradition connecting serious prayer with a deeper moral seriousness. He argues that taking seriously the words in our liturgy is a step in a broader process of reclaiming the gravity of words. This means that we must know what the words in our liturgy mean, and, when we say them, that we “[must learn to establish the right relationship between the heart and the word we are about to utter.](#)” From prayer and liturgy, Heschel believed this morally important relationship to words would permeate our lives more broadly. This High Holiday season is an ideal time to work on reclaiming our relationship with words, beginning with the liturgy in our Mahzor. To that end, I want to call attention to a liturgical poem that appears in the Amidah on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, a series of three paragraphs that each begin with the word “[u’vekhen](#)” (ובכן) Typically translated as “[and therefore](#)” or “[so then,](#)” I leave the word untranslated, because according to an old Jewish tradition it is a much more significant word: not a conjunction, but a name of God, or, in a similar but alternative tradition, it is the alphanumerical equivalent of a phrase that refers to the divine-human relationship itself.

These paragraphs were introduced into Jewish liturgy in the geonic period, as attested by siddurim from that era. The first of these three paragraphs begins “[u’vekhen ten pahdekha](#)” (ובכן תן פחדך). It was this very paragraph, where we envision a human world completely united in its awe and fear of God, that inspired the Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto, who spent Yom Kippur in the year 1911 in a

Jewish synagogue in Morocco, to describe, in The Idea of the Holy, the Yom Kippur liturgy as “a liturgy unusually rich” in hymns that express his concept of “the numinous,” or the profound and non-rational experience of feeling the presence of God as a tremendous mystery.

In this paragraph, it is the fear and awe of God that leads “all of God’s creatures” to collectively submit to God, and to become “bonded together as one” to do God’s will “with a full heart.” For Heschel, this very paragraph in the High Holiday liturgy reflects the broader essence of all prayer, in general, not just the High Holidays. Heschel sees this as a prayer in which we are trying “to make God immanent,” to bring God’s presence into this world. He writes:

The true motivation for prayer is... the sense of not being at home in the universe. Is there a sensitive heart that could stand indifferent and feel at home in the sight of so much evil and suffering, in the face of countless failures to live up to the will of God? ... That experience gains intensity in the amazing awareness that God Himself is not at home in the universe. He is not at home in a universe where His will is defied and where His kingship is denied. God is in exile; the world is corrupt. The universe itself is not at home. To pray means to bring God back into the world, to establish His kingship for a second at least.

Heschel sees the “u’vekhen ten pahdekha” paragraph in the High Holiday liturgy as an emblematic expression of the ultimate aim of all prayer, at “the most important moment of the Jewish liturgy.” The payoff comes in the next paragraph, “u’vekhen ten kavod.” After we have come together to bring God’s presence back into this world, we feel a sense of dignity (kavod) and good hope (tikvah tovah) for the future; there is “happiness in the land and joy in the city.”

Let this new year, 5785, be a year in which we all learn, once again, to take seriously the sacred value of words. We can learn this value by taking seriously and paying attention to the words we say in prayer, which reflect, in turn, the very

essence of prayer. Let us turn to our Siddur and Mahzor and pay attention to the words and their meanings and pray them with seriousness.

When we turn from the High Holiday season back into daily life, let 5785 be a year in which we speak to one another with words that are carefully considered – words that we can truly own and stand behind. This involves engaging in deep and extended conversation – not the kind of conversation that happens in fits and spurts on social media – and with words that are our own, whose authorship has not been outsourced to technology. This involves *listening carefully to the words of others, giving them the benefit of the doubt, asking questions for clarification, assuming good will, and when we disagree, expressing that disagreement with frankness and honesty, but also with thoughtfulness and respect, in a way that preserves relationships*. When we do this, we can hope that others will do the same for us, and, over time, if we continue to take words seriously both in prayer and in daily relationships, we can become a unified community, even across difference. And perhaps we will experience again that good hope, dignity, and joy that we see in the “u’vekhen” prayers – for the Jewish people together with the broader community of humanity. *(Shira Billet is an Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and Ethics at JTS)*

[A Call for Responsibility: On the U-Netanah Tokef by Marcus Mordecai Schwartz](https://www.jtsa.edu/a-call-for-responsibility/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/a-call-for-responsibility/>

U-netanah Tokef is a prayer deeply rooted in the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah. It proved so popular that this Rosh Hashanah-themed prayer became standard on Yom Kippur, as well, despite its clear foregrounding of judgement (Rosh Hashanah) rather than forgiveness (Yom Kippur). Its power lies in its direct confrontation with the themes of judgment, mortality, and the role of human agency in shaping fate. The piyyut begins by establishing the significance of the day: God sits in judgment, weighing the deeds of all humanity; all beings pass before God, their fates recorded. The imagery is stark and unflinching—life and death, peace and turmoil,

prosperity and hardship—all are laid out as potential outcomes for the year ahead. While the origins of U-netanah Tokef are often linked to a popular legend about the martyrdom of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany, in the 11th century, modern scholarship has revealed that the text of U-netanah Tokefis more than four centuries older than Rabbi Amnon and originated with the liturgical poet Eleazar ben Kalir in the Land of Israel.

Known for its famous lines, “Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water?” it’s a sobering reminder of the unpredictability of life and the many forces beyond our control. Yet, it also affirms that our actions—specifically, repentance, prayer, and charity—can mitigate the harshness of any decree. **While the future is uncertain, our choices and behavior can influence the course of our lives. Fate is ours to make.**

In contemporary Jewish practice, U-netanah Tokef resonates with many, regardless of background or level of observance. It forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about our mortality and the uncertainty of life. The prayer’s emphasis on repentance, prayer, and charity aligns with a broader commitment to justice, compassion, and ethical responsibility. It challenges us to consider how our actions, both individual and collective, shape the world and the future. As we recite these words, we are invited to engage deeply with our own lives, to reflect on our deeds, and to consider how we might contribute to a better world in the coming year. U-netanah Tokef is not just a reflection on divine judgment; it is a call to human responsibility. *(Rabbi Marcus Mordecai Schwartz is the Henry R. and Miriam Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections of the JTS Library)*

[The Importance of Showing Up by Hillary Gardenswartz](https://www.jtsa.edu/the-importance-of-showing-up/)
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What might be a compelling reason to think and act beyond oneself?
“*You are not obligated to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it*” ([Avot 2:21](#)).

“If I am only for myself, what am I?” (Avot 1:15).

These teachings from Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of Our Fathers) emphasize one’s individual responsibility to the collective. Our singular actions affect others; we each have an obligation to positively impact our greater communities. But with so much happening in these unsettling and unstable times, it is reasonable to want to simply check out and stay in our personal bubble. The issues are seemingly endless: antisemitism, political instability, misinformation, climate change, social media saturation, the loneliness epidemic, and on and on. **When simply getting out of bed some days is a victory, why add the obligation to show up for others?**

Our deep well of Jewish tradition and wisdom, alongside our rich and complex American history, provides inspiring guideposts on how to navigate this sense of obligation. Jewish ritual life is built upon the presence of a community. We literally cannot complete certain obligations without a minyan, especially those obligations connected to the celebration and commemoration of seasonal, annual, and life-cycle events. Our tradition demands that we be counted and that we take count of others, which includes everything from daily prayer to knowing who is sick or grieving or celebrating a milestone. Being counted in community means one shows support for those who need our presence without needing to do anything more than share the same space. Our mere physical presence positively impacts another’s ability to experience a life event with communal support.

Showing up and being counted in the civic space is just as important as it is in Jewish spaces. Being civically engaged fulfills that same sense of obligation to others; you are part of a larger community, and therefore your voice not only matters but is necessary to create progress and change. **Showing up in the civic realm—whether attending a community board meeting, voting, paying taxes, or participating in a park cleanup—matters. It matters, and it also takes practice.** We cannot expect our children or our students to understand what it

means to be civically committed if we do not show them. We must model the skills of being responsible members of the community: engage in respectful dialogue with others (especially with those who hold opposing views), know our local representatives and issues, and build relationships with different members of our community. In his speech “Democracy and Education,” educator Booker T. Washington said, “Character, not circumstances, makes the man. It is more important that we be prepared for voting than that we vote, more important that we be prepared to hold office than that we hold office, more important that we be prepared for the highest recognition than that we be recognized.”

As we enter 5785, may we take our obligation to bolster our various communities seriously. May we find strength in each other and power in our actions to make positive change. May we create civic and Jewish spaces that foster authentic relationship-building across differences and allow democracy to flourish. *(Hillary Gardenswartz is Director of Student Experiences at Civic Spirit and Member of the JTS board of Trustees)*

[Yom Kippur: Ki Hu Nora v'Ayom – For It Is A Day of Awe & Threat
by Rabbi Jamie Gibson](#)

https://truah.org/resources/jamie-gibson-yom-kippur-moraltorah_2024/

The summer of my last year in college at Michigan, the landlord offered a break on my rent if I would help strip the paint off the kitchen walls and repaint them. At that time I was living on around \$350 a month, so I was glad for any dent in my expenses.

He bought me the paint stripper and left me to my work. I wore only my shorts and worked bare-chested so as not to ruin my clothes. When I applied the first brush full of paint stripper, some splashed back on me. And it stung. Dang, it hurt. I quickly put on a tee shirt but my arms were uncovered. And every brush stroke some droplets shot back, burning my arms.

When the landlord returned I complained but he just laughed and said, “That’s paint

stripper — it'll take your skin right off. It will strip you down to your soul if you let it!"

Since then, that's how I've thought of Yom Kippur. The prayers we say on the Day of Atonement are meant to be soul-strippers:

Avinu Malkeinu... we have sinned before You...

Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu... we are guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen...

Al Chet shechetanu lifanecha... for the sin we have sinned before You...

And the hardest one of all:

Unetaneh-tokef k'dushat hayom...

We grant the holy power of this day

Ki hu no-ra v'a-yom...

The recent Reform Machzor, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, translates this last line as: "**A day whose holiness awakens deepest awe.**" While this rendering is lovely and poetic, it is not entirely accurate. A closer translation might be: "**A day of awe and threat.**"

This day actually threatens us. It threatens our self-satisfaction and justifications. It threatens our apathy and excuses. If we are to stand honestly on this day and take responsibility for our wrongdoings and shortcomings, poetic circumlocutions will not do the trick. Though none of us wants to get splashed with soul-stripper — much less stand, unvarnished, before God with all of our flaws — we mustn't soften the language and reduce the impact.

This year of all years, this week of all weeks — the week of October 7 — how can we dare to shield ourselves from guilt and shame when, one year ago, our fellow brothers and sisters endured bullet wounds, bombs, torture, and worse on the Gaza border. According to the latest reports, maybe 50 or 60 of the hostages are still alive, malnourished, ill-treated, hanging on by a thread. How dare we say no to the pain of guilt when so many of our people suffer brutal, physical pain every hour of the day?

Unetaneh tokef grants us no illusion of covering up our failures, both of deed and of will. It says that we are counted and our deeds are measured, whether we like it or not. We stand, souls-stripped, our excuses no match for the words of the prayer that allows no covering up.

Our discomfort is what this day demands, not the easy promise of reconciliation and repentance.

In that spirit, we might pray this year, the year of October 7, *Al chet shechetanu...*

For the sin we have sinned by keeping silent in the face of brutal antisemitism endured on campuses all over the country.

For the sin we have sinned by not demanding the world intervene to return the hostages and end hostilities.

For the sin we have sinned by turning a blind eye to the suffering of both Jews and Palestinians while living our daily lives.

For the sin we have sinned by not flooding the streets to oppose the lies and defamation of Haitians, not to mention other immigrants.

Only when we stand stripped of excuses and apathy will we be able to complete the prayer: “For all of these sins, O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement!”

I pray with all my heart — may our words of repentance this year fly from our lips to our hands, making things better, just, and right.

(Rabbi Jamie Gibson is the rabbi emeritus of Temple Sinai in Pittsburgh, PA. He holds the Rabbi Jason Z. Edelstein chair in Catholic-Jewish Dialogue at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, PA. He serves as the 2nd Vice Chair on the Pittsburgh City Human Relations Commission, which handles complaints of discrimination in housing and employment based on gender, race, age, disability and LGBTQ status)

Yahrtzeits

Rich Cohen remembers his father William Cohen on Fri. Oct. 18th.

Bob Woog remembers his father Cornelius M. Woog on Fri., Oct. 18th.