

Wrestling with God's Image in the High Holy Day Liturgy

Yoel H. Kahn

Adonai s'fatai tiftach, ufi yagid t'hilatecha.

— Psalm 51:17

Preparing to pray is in itself a prayer.
Or so I say. I will begin tomorrow.
Having fled here, though none pursue. Fled where.
Within, far, to the desert place, the sorrow
place. For what I have done. For surely the matter is known.
But see, turn aside, look, the thorn tree, the heart
is not consumed; burning, it does not burn
to ash. It has a voice: Friend, pilgrim, start
now on your way. You can't save your prayer for the world
to come, vagrant one, it is your call, the knowing
to turn and answer, *Wilderness of God*,
hard mountain, I am here. A pilgrim going
to the farthest place is praying, or too can pray
if the place be near, since going is the way.

—Dan Bellm, "The voice in the fire" (*Parshat Sh'mot*),
from *Practice: A Book of Midrash*

In *Pirkei Avot*, we learn, "Ten things were created on the eve of the first Shabbat at twilight. These are they: the mouth of Miriam's well; Balaam's ass; the manna; Moses' staff; the hole in the earth which swallows Korach...."² Other versions of the story propose variations in this list, but all share the same idea: at the very last moments of twilight before the first Shabbat, a few exceptional things were created. These are phenomena described in the Torah that violate the laws of nature, and to which the Rabbis declared a one-time exception to the principle, *olam ke-minhago noheg* ("The world goes according to its natural course").

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This midrash is a story about the indigestible. What do we do with the stuff offered by our tradition that we simply cannot swallow? For our ancestors, the solution in this case was to create a special exception for a small group of occurrences, and then to declare, *Dayeinu*, enough already—leaving them, as it were, integrated but quarantined. Much as we love the Jewish religious tradition, it contains plenty of aspects—in teaching, text, and practice—that we can't swallow. Earlier generations of Reform Jews were confident that they could distinguish between what was intrinsic and essential to Judaism, and what could be jettisoned because it was not. We, on the other hand, may be less confident of our own discernment in these matters, but at the same time we may be more open to the possibilities of significance and meaning that the tradition can offer. And yet, there are many aspects of historical Jewish teaching and practice, from *nidah* to *tahanun*, that have no place in Reform Judaism.³

I love the High Holy Days. I love the music and the gathering of the people, and despite my seasonal grumbling, I find deep fulfillment in my role as organizer, officiant, and preacher. Sometimes I am overwhelmed by my connection to the extended community, linked across time and space to the generations of our people. Adrienne Rich writes of the faith of those who

have kept beyond violence the knowledge
arranged in patterns like kente-cloth

unexpected as in batik
recurrent as bitter herbs and unleavened bread

of being a connective link
in a long, continuous way⁴

At other times, to be honest, I am so much on “automatic pilot” that the words and music wash over me without penetrating. But when I do what we ask our people to do—to be fully present, to pay close attention to the liturgy, and to reflect on its message—I find myself torn between my devotion to the words (words polished smooth by generations of our people, words that resonate deeply with historical Jewish teaching and my own religious language) and my discomfort with language and imagery that are

so incongruent with my life experience and my faith. While most of the time I am caught up in the poetry, history, melodies, and multivocality of the liturgy, I am sometimes like the congregant who suddenly stopped reading aloud from the Yom Kippur *machzor* one year, turned to his companions, loudly exclaimed, "This is such bull!" and walked out. I wanted to run after him, shouting, "Just wait for the haftarah! The prophet Isaiah felt the same way!" Then I wondered, why am I always in need of the corrective and the counter text?

At the center of the historical liturgy of the High Holy Days is the celebration of God's enthronement and majesty.⁵ From the substitutions in the *chatimot*, in which "the King" replaces "God," to the shofar service, the liturgy of the High Holy Days calls our attention to the centrality of this core rabbinic idea. For myself and for many others, the theological assertion of God's absolute power and of our human smallness and powerlessness is deeply untrue and unsatisfying. While the rabbinic tradition offers other images of both God and humanity, the High Holy Day liturgy lifts up the language and imagery of divine sovereignty.

My discomfort begins with the gendered language of sovereignty, but it certainly does not end there. What do we gain by substituting or alternating *Imeinu Malkateinu* for *Avinu Malkeinu*? For most liberal Jews, I believe, the result is not the least bit satisfactory; it appears to be a gratuitous substitution that does not significantly alter the force of the prayer or the imagery.⁶ God as the powerful King is the overarching image of rabbinic theology, and it's the central motif throughout the daily, Shabbat, and High Holy Day liturgy. The recitation of the *Sh'ma* is an act of "accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven," the *G'ulah* blessing recites how our ancestors at the shore of the sea "witnessed His power . . . [and] freely acclaimed Him King,"⁷ and the normative explanation for the custom of taking three steps forward before beginning the *Amidah* is that one is "entering the presence of the Sovereign."

All the same, it is possible to pray faithfully in a synagogue and to fully engage in the worship experience without noticing or engaging these ideas or this imagery. For the most part, while they are the background against which our practice has been shaped, the historical complex of naming and declaring God's sovereignty need not be an explicit part of the liturgy we experience. We do not introduce the *Sh'ma* as "accepting the yoke of the Kingdom

of Heaven," we sing *Mi Chamochah* and skip over the body of the *G'ulah* prayer that precedes it, and any Reform rabbi can readily offer a Buberian dialogical interpretation of taking three steps forward to signify entering into an intimate conversation.

At the High Holy Days, however, it is much harder to overlook such imagery. The central themes of the season are the enthronement of, and judgment by, the Holy One, Blessed Be. The special liturgy of the day begins with the proclamation, "THE KING sits on an exalted and elevated throne." The shofar service begins with the *Malchuyot* readings and verses—and here, too, I must acknowledge my simultaneous discomfort with and deep devotion to historical practice and liturgy. Even without medieval *piyutim*, the fundamental shape of the High Holy Days' liturgical message is a vertical axis, with the Living and Eternal God-King (*Melech El chai v'kayim*) above, and humanity ("whose origin is dust and whose end is dust") below. We hasten to quote the last line of *Un'taneh Tokef*—"for the hand of every person is signed there"—but this is small compensation for the tradition's overwhelming emphasis on petition for God's mercy and kindness, and our need for unmerited grace, *ki ein banu maasim*.

My discomfort is not due simply to an outdated metaphor; we have no trouble freely invoking and understanding the rich agrarian imagery that permeates the Bible and our sacred literature, even though the vast majority of us left the long-since-mechanized farm a couple of generations ago. What does not work for so many today is the continual emphasis on God's absolute power and our own frailty—an imagery of imbalance that is fundamentally dissonant with how we experience ourselves in the world and with our core Reform Jewish teachings about human responsibility and engagement. Peter Knobel and others have called this rebalancing of the divine-human relationship the "theology of human adequacy."⁸ I seek a theological language and liturgical imagery that recognize and honor both human adequacy and human frailty.

Within our diverse movement, the theology of human adequacy—which might be called more adequately a "theology of partnership"—is perhaps the most characteristic contemporary Reform Jewish theological and liturgical language. It is the emphasis on human agency as the vehicle for realizing God's powers and the divine-human partnership that distinguishes this teaching from secular humanism on the one hand and a traditional religious

language of dependence on the other. Beginning with the midrash about Nahshon at the parting of the sea, liberal Jews, and especially their rabbis, seek out and lift up all those places in which “Your might, O God, is everlasting” can be re-read as “Help us to use our strength for good and not for evil.”⁹

For the Rabbis, nothing described in the Torah could be dismissed, no matter how uncomfortable it may have made them. In *People of the Book*, Moshe Halbertal calls the effort to frame or understand a received text in the best possible light, or in a way consistent with the reader’s values and world view, “the charitable reading” of the text. In this way, the midrash about the phenomena created at twilight on the first Shabbat is a complex effort to create a “charitable reading” of a group of problematic stories in the Torah.¹⁰ Our inclination, of course, is to read the Torah and the entirety of the Jewish tradition as charitably as possible. Yet what sets us apart from other Jews today, and from prior generations of Jews, is our readiness to acknowledge that not every text or teaching is amenable to a charitable reading. Consistent with our own theology of human adequacy in our own day, we do not “accept the decree,” but instead turn away from such texts and teachings.

I hasten to point out that many of us, clergy and congregants alike, are untroubled by the imagery of the historical liturgy. We can and do find deep meaning, comfort, and truth. History, language, and message all resonate. Others can even bring charitable readings of the very texts that distress me the most, as Margaret Wenig does with *Un’taneh Tokef* elsewhere in this issue. For such individuals, the attempt to erase the distance, to level the disparity between God above and the human (individual and collective) below, disrupts the very imagery that so resonates for them and that is at the core of their experience of the High Holy Days. In an essay about the language of contemporary liberal Jewish prayer, Lois Dubin writes,

I do not want to pray to myself or to ourselves as humans. I do not want to pray only to a human community or to the forces immanent in nature. When I pray, I want to maintain a sense of transcendence, of Otherness beyond. I want to imagine something Other, something beyond us; something that conveys a sense of the forces beyond ourselves and our control, a sense of the mystery and tragedy we often face, and the truth of our finite limits.

I want to address that dimension of Otherness, for without it, I cannot express honestly my deepest longings and fears.¹¹

This passage is a corrective to my own position; it is a firm reminder that although many share my alienation from the imagery and language of the received liturgy, there are many others who do not. Accordingly, if our task is to create a liturgical experience that addresses contemporary liberal Jewish sensibilities, it must be nuanced and inclusive rather than dogmatic and exclusive.¹² If my personal discomfort with the core metaphor of the High Holy Day season colors my reading and hearing of every aspect of the liturgy, surely the comfort and resonance that the metaphor brings others only increases their receptivity and relationship to the very same texts.

With this sensibility in mind, let us turn to five techniques that Reform Jews use to create a meaningful liturgical experience when faced with potentially dissonant texts.

1. Including the Historical Text in Hebrew, and Omitting the Translation

Gates of Prayer's Shabbat Evening Service VI, the "religious naturalism" service, includes the *Bar'chu* but does not have a translation. In the compiler's mind, there was clearly no appropriate, alternative, nontheistic language to offer, but respect for the historical liturgy in Hebrew was required. Although we often offer alternative English settings for traditional texts, the wholesale recitation of Hebrew passages without a vernacular translation is unacceptable to our Reform community today. The message sent by presenting and reciting passages in Hebrew without providing access to a translation is that the historical liturgy is a symbolic or magic ritual whose manifest content is of no interest or importance. Purely as a practical matter, the increasing proportion of well-educated Jews and native Hebrew speakers makes the Hebrew text more accessible than it was for earlier Reform communities.

2. Radical Reformulation of the Language

In her *Book of Blessings*, Marcia Falk not only argues for a reformulation of the language of blessing, but encourages us to move completely beyond dualistic language in favor of an evolving, inclusive

vocabulary of immanence.¹³ Powerful as Falk's poetry and language are, for most Reform Jews her nontheistic imagery strays too far from the historical liturgy to fulfill their goals of familiarity, historical integrity, and theological authenticity. While many Reform Jews are uncomfortable with the balance between human agency and divine decision and action as portrayed in the received liturgy, most do not want the distinction between them to be erased. They seek to name and honor both human power and frailty, *Adonai Tz'vaot* and *Shechinah*. The intermediate step of recasting the blessing formula without substantive change to the body of the text itself does not resolve objections to the pervasiveness of the metaphors.¹⁴

3. Framing *Kavanot*

By the time Lurianic Kabbalah began to spread its influence in the century after Luria's death in 1572, the extant liturgy was well established and codified. Liturgical innovations that reflected the kabbalistic sensibility did not, by and large, penetrate the language of the prayers. Instead, innovation was channeled into the creation of entirely new prayer structures, such as midnight *tikkunim* and framing *kavanot* that preceded the recitation of the authorized prayers. These introductory settings did not alter the language or performance of the received prayer; rather, they were intended to inform and direct the *kavanah* of the worshiper so that the next action would be performed in conformity with the halachah yet understood in an original theological fashion.¹⁵

The introduction to the candle lighting in *Gates of Repentance*, Rosh HaShanah Evening Service II, is an example of a Reform Jewish *kavanah*, invoking the language of human agency and abstract divinity: "May the light of the divine shine forth to lead us, to show us the good we must do, the harmony we must create. Let the fire we kindle be for us a warming flame, whose brightness shows us the path of life."¹⁶ As with the kabbalistic formulae printed in other *siddurim*, the goal of this passage is to explain the true significance and intent of the prayer and ritual that follow.¹⁷

No section of the High Holy Day liturgy is more powerful and more challenging than *Un'taneh Tokef*. In this medieval *piyut*, invoking an ancient, mythic image, God sits on the throne of judgment and decides the fate of each living creature, declaring, depending on their merits, "who shall live and who shall die." A litany follows,

listing the many ways in which death can arrive. At the end, we learn that our own actions have the power to alter the force of but not lift the decree. In *Gates of Repentance*, *Un'taneh Tokef* is presented in full and faithfully translated.¹⁸ It is preceded, however, by a page-length reading that changes the focus from God as the Judge to a humanistic reflection about how we manage our own challenges. Decisions are not recorded or sealed in the Book of Life, but rather:

On Rosh Hashanah we reflect,
On Yom Kippur we consider:
Who shall live for the sake of others,
Who, dying, shall leave a heritage of life.¹⁹

4. Creative Translation/Interpretation

Offering a framing *kavanah*, followed by a faithful presentation of the historical liturgy, is often combined with interpretative English readings that are offered in place of the faithful English translation.²⁰ Perhaps the most venerable, specifically Reform solution is to offer a nonliteral translation—yet surely a charitable translation from the perspective of the translator. Reflecting an evolving sensibility, the editor of *Gates of Prayer* went through the manuscript and made all references to people inclusive but left all the references to the Holy One in the masculine; in *Mishkan T'filah*, humanity and divinity are gender-neutral. Most Reform rabbis probably hold that this is a nonliteral but faithful rendering of the original. These range from relatively small changes that are made throughout a service or liturgy to entire passages that bear only the slightest resemblance to the original source. The relationship of these carefully crafted English liturgical readings to the historical text to which they are anchored is parallel to the relationship of midrash to biblical verse. Some midrashic readings have become so familiar over time that they are part of the normative Jewish understanding of the text. We consider others to be overly determined by the agenda and historical circumstances of the authors and compilers, and we do not find them illuminating of the underlying text or compelling.

5. Complementary readings

The fifth response to challenges presented by the historical liturgy is to bring complementary English texts that do not necessarily

Speak directly to the language or imagery of the Hebrew prayer. A few poems are used in this way on the left hand pages of *Mishkan T'fila*—for example, the juxtaposition of Judy Brown's "What Makes a Fire Burn" opposite "Chatzi Kaddish" on page 224. Strong, even fierce English texts, whether in poetry or prose, can be effective precisely because they are not directly trying to redeem or rework the Hebrew prayer. Such texts unapologetically invite the worshiper to explore a completely new set of metaphors and images that are not derived from or dependent upon the historical liturgy. Consider Ellen Bass's poem, "Change":

This is where I yank the old roots from my chest
like the tomatoes
we let grow until December, stalks
thick as saplings.

This is the moment when the ancient fears
race like thoroughbreds, asking for more
and more rein. And I, the driver,
for some reason they know nothing of
strain to hold them back.

Terror grips me like a virus
and I sweat, fevered,
trying to burn it out.

This feat is so invisible. All you can see
is a woman going about her ordinary day,
drinking tea, taking herself to the movies,
reading in bed. If victorious
I will look exactly the same.

Yet I am hoisting a car from mud ruts
half a century deep. I am hacking
a clearing through the fallen slash
of my heart. Without laser precision,
with only the primitive knife of need, I cut
and splice the circuitry of my brain.
I change.²¹

This poem could be used as a *kavanah*, framing the High Holy Day *Amidah*. I would propose, however, using this poem as a

complement or response to *Un'taneh Tokef*. Bass's plainspoken, humanistic poem does not invoke religious imagery or vocabulary; for me, it is a more fulfilling and spiritually engaging passage than the widely used, toned-down, humanistic rewriting of the received text that appears in *Gates of Repentance*. The evocation of awe and trepidation is as rich as in the medieval *piyut*, but the setting has moved from the heavenly court to the kitchen table. Strong, spiritually engaged texts by contemporary writers, which do not try to paraphrase or compete with the language and imagery of our historical texts, can open up meaning, resonance, and connection for many who would not otherwise respond to the language of the liturgy, while reinvigorating the liturgical landscape for all.²²

A well-known Talmudic passage speaks about the multivocality of the biblical text. First, Rabbi Abbaye interprets Psalm 62:12—"God has spoken once, twice have I heard this..."—to mean that any particular verse can be used in support of multiple teachings. The school of Rabbi Ishmael goes further, imagining the multiplicity of possible meanings and interpretations found in any particular text, citing Jeremiah 23:29: "'Is not My word like fire?' declares Adonai, 'And like a hammer which shatters a rock?'"²³ Our theology of human agency and capacity can and should extend the tradition's insistence on the multivocalic possibility in every verse of the *Tanach* to the siddur as well, even if we recognize the prayer book as an entirely human creation. If the Torah speaks *b'lashon b'nei adam* (in human idiom), is it too far to imagine that over the last two thousand years, our human prayer language has also come to speak, as it were, *b'lashon shamayim*?

While I was once quite ready to overhaul the entire historical liturgy, I am no longer willing to do so. While there are still metaphors, themes, and texts that I cannot digest, my capacity to hold and honor them so that others may explore them has grown over the years; I am trying to practice aesthetic and theological *tzimtzum*. While it is necessary and valuable to continue to emend, reimagine, and revise the historical liturgy, I have redefined my own task, trying less to "fix" or make palatable the historical texts than to seek to bring ever richer and deeper counter texts—the Yom Kippur morning haftarah reading being the example par excellence—that can inform and open up the liturgy.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg teaches that true prayer always means opening ourselves to encounter: it is confronting the unexpected,

seeking to step outside of the ordinary. The language of prayer, whether an ancient text or a contemporary source, seeks to put into words the internal experience we have or that we seek to evoke. Many of us are yearning for a prayer life that is authentic and honest, a prayer language whose metaphors and images are both comfortable and provocative, a prayer experience that reaches deep within and deep beyond the self. The particular privilege of Reform Jews is the freedom to hold more than one set of metaphors, to speak in more than one language.

NOTES

1. Dan Bellm, *Practice: A Book of Midrash* (San Francisco: Sixteen Rivers, 2008). Used by permission.
2. *Pirkei Avot* 5:8. Compare similar ideas in *Genesis Rabbah* 5:9 and *Exodus Rabbah* 21:6.
3. *Nidah* is the complex of laws regulating menstrual purity; *Tahunin* is the name of the short section of supplicatory prayers in the daily service; it has never been part of Reform liturgy.
4. Adrienne Rich, "Sources," section XV, in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 17.
5. I believe that "historical liturgy"—rather than the more common "traditional liturgy"—is a more accurate and neutral term to refer to pre-modern Jewish practice and its preservation and interpretation across the varieties of contemporary Judaism. After more than 150 years, Reform liturgical texts and customs are now surely worthy themselves of being considered "traditional."
6. *Gates of Repentance* (revised, 1996), p. 549, has a litany "Shechina, M'kor Chayenu," with creative, original Hebrew, and *Shechinah* translated nine different ways in English. This was clearly an effort to address just such concerns.
7. *Gates of Prayer*, p. 132.
8. Elyse Frishman and Peter Knobel use it in the Introduction to *Mishkan T'filah*, p ix. Rabbi Edwin Goldberg sums up the "theology of human adequacy" in a comment about the opening reading for Shabbat Service I on page 3:

The new reading reflects a perspective of strength rather than humility. Instead of beseeching God out of a place of relative worthlessness, we recognize that we have the potential to perform many mitzvot and thereby improve the world. We ask for God's help in efforts already begun. We are far from helpless supplicants. In these words, we are more like able partners of God. ("Ten Minutes of Torah," 6/12/2008, <http://urj.org/torah/ten/>.)

9. *Gates of Repentance*, p. 310.
10. Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Harvard University Press, 1997). The classic description of Halbertal's "charitable reading" is Maimonides' assertion in the *Guide to the Perplexed* (II, 25) that he could as easily defend the claim that the world is eternal as the one he does that the world was created in time; see Halbertal's discussion, p. 29. The example from *Pirkei Avot* is my own.
11. Lois C. Dubin, "Who's Blessing Whom?: Transcendence, Agency, and Gender in Jewish Prayer," *Cross Currents* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2002). <http://www.crosscurrents.org/dubin.htm>.
12. The historical liturgy was sometimes phrased with the specific goal of making some people so uncomfortable that they would not want to participate; see Lawrence Hoffman, "Censoring In, Censoring Out: A Function of Liturgical Language," in *Ancient Synagogues: The State of Research*, ed. Joseph Guttman (Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1981) 19–37.
13. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), pp. 420–421.
14. For a summary of the halachic standards for licit blessings, see Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah In Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), pp. 19–40; compare the discussion by Falk, *Book of Blessings*, pp. xvi–xvii.
15. Kabbalat Shabbat is a singular example; it is an entire liturgical unit, but it is appended to the front end of the Shabbat evening service. Before its widespread adoption, the Shabbat evening service began with Psalm 92, the Psalm for Shabbat. A hint of this history is the custom of greeting the mourners immediately before Psalm 92, the prior beginning of the Shabbat evening liturgy, and after *L'chah Dodi*, the last element of the "new" Kabbalat Shabbat service.
16. *Gates of Repentance*, p. 49.
17. In *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), pp. 19–21, Lawrence Hoffman describes how women who grew up on the Union Prayer Book explain that the meaning of lighting candles is that "Light is a symbol of the Divine." The candle-lighting sensibility of these women was formed by the kavanah in the Union Prayer Book, which included this phrase.
18. The introductory kavanah is given the rubric *Un'taneh Tokef* in Hebrew but is not given an English translation. This is the book's style for the major modules of the service; e.g., *Sh'ma Uv'irchoteha* and *T'filah*.
19. *Gates of Repentance*, p. 311.

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20. For example, the many asterisked passages in *Gates of Prayer*.
21. © Ellen Bass. Used by permission. For more of her work, see www.ellenbass.com.
22. The complementary readings may, of course, generate new dissonances.
23. TB *Sanhedrin* 34a.