

Sacred Time

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Meir Y. Soloveichik

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Nicole and Raanan Agus

Cherished friends

&

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Wise editor



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Introduction

The Secret of Jewish Endurance

I open with a sweeping statement: the Jewish calendar is a key that unlocks the very essence of Judaism.

How so? What is it about the calendar that justifies so blunt an assertion? What do I mean by my use of the phrase “*sacred time*,” and what is so special about it?

Addressing such questions, some writers have suggested that Judaism in its entirety is a religion of sacred time, as distinct from other faiths that have elevated the concept of sacred *space*. Thus, pagans who worship finite gods see those deities as living in defined spatial enclosures; by contrast, the infinite and eternal Almighty is encountered within and through the boundless fluidity of time, whether historical or calendrical.

But this is not quite right. After all, Judaism does proclaim the inherent sanctity of, for instance, the finite land of Israel. And the Jewish romance with the city of Jerusalem, along with the millennia-long Jewish yearning for the restoration of its sanctity, fully rivals the

age-old Jewish love affair with the Sabbath, the quintessential event in time.

A more balanced view is called for: The supreme Jewish insight is that holiness can inhere both in space *and* in time. To speak of a space as holy is to recognize that holiness as restricted to the site's boundaries. The land of Israel, in Judaism, possesses a holiness that the rest of the earth does not; the specific sanctity of Jerusalem is not shared with the rest of the land of Israel; the Temple Mount retains

a special status apart from the rest of Jerusalem.

“Our experience of God’s saving power in our history also enables a faith in the future.”

In sacred time, of which the Sabbath is the supreme example, not the place but the day is saturated with holiness, not the grains of sand but the hours. And that holiness-saturated day can unite Jews – so long as they are sensitive to it,

welcome it, bless it, and celebrate it – across the vastness of space, be they in the Far East (when daylight arrives there) or in the far reaches of the West (when it arrives there).

This is sacred time as encountered in the weekly Sabbath: a time when, to quote my great-uncle, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “days and hours are saturated with holiness.”¹ Also special about the Sabbath is that it is first and foremost a commemoration of *creation*: the recalling of a moment that occurred long before there were Jews. In the calendar, by contrast, sacred times memorialize covenantal moments in Jewish *history*.

And here an even more extraordinary idea introduces itself, one whose nuances and implications we shall unfold as we go along. For if, for Jews, the sanctity of Jewish time extends everywhere on earth, and overcomes all manner of physical separation, the same goes for all manner of temporal or historical separations. Through its calendar, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, “Judaism developed a very particular philosophy of memory – indeed, an ethics of memory. One does not simply recollect the past, or just remember by-gones but *re-experiences* that which has been, and quickens events that are seemingly dead.”

At the Passover Seder, which we shall encounter in chapter 7, we re-experience the Exodus from Egypt. In the synagogue on Shavuot (ch. 9), we recite the Ten Commandments and instinctively rise from our seats in the certainty that we, too, are standing like our ancestors at the foot of Mount Sinai and hearing for the first time the voice of the Almighty.

Verses in the Torah itself signal this age-old orientation. “Because of *this* did God act for me when I went forth from Egypt” (Ex. 13:8), the Torah says, thereby obligating us to convey these same words to our children, establishing for all time that not only our ancestors but we as well were redeemed from Egypt.

Next, and perhaps even more intriguingly: “You shall tell your children and grandchildren of the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Sinai” (Deut. 4:9–10). By teaching our offspring that each of us, in every generation, has stood at Sinai, the event becomes as real for them as it is for us – a reality that they, in turn, can re-enact for, and transmit to, their own children. Thanks to this generational link, notes Rabbi Soloveitchik, “bygones turn into facts, pale memories into living experiences, and archaeological history into a vibrant reality.”²

And there is still more. “On this night” – as Jews cry out on the fast of the ninth of Av – we bemoan the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem as if it were still burning right in front of our eyes. More frequently, however, it is not tragedy but the prospect of divine *redemption* that insists on retaining its prominence in Jewish memory. We are not only the receptacles of an eternally living past; our experience of God’s saving power in our history also enables a faith in the future. To some extent, this aspect of our faith even allows us to experience the future as if *it* has already happened.

Consider for a moment the astonishing words of the prophet Isaiah as he first describes Israel lamenting Jerusalem’s destruction – “Zion said, ‘God has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me’” (49:14) – only to follow almost immediately afterward with words of consolation and, in a sudden grammatical shift, with a vision of ultimate redemption as if the promised consolation has already occurred: “For God has comforted Zion and all its waste places, has made its wilderness into Eden and its desert into the garden of the

Lord wherein joy and gladness can be found, thanksgiving and the voice of melody” (51:3). In our era, this last verse, read every year in the weeks following the great fast of the ninth of Av, has been at least partially fulfilled in the miracle of modern Israel.

It is this aspect of Jewish time that so sustained Jews throughout the centuries as they marked Passover, the Festival of Freedom, while restrained within the suffocating walls of a ghetto, celebrated Sinai while exiled across the earth, or observed the holiness of Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement,” while locked by a dictator in a prison cell. If Jews could endure amidst persecution and pogroms, it was thanks to the extraordinary audaciousness of Isaiah’s prophetic vision of the Temple rebuilt. If, when everything seemed hopeless, the Jewish people found the strength to survive, it was thanks to the phenomenal faith of a Rabbi Akiva who, even while mourning the Roman army’s massacre of Jerusalem’s Jews, stubbornly invoked the wondrous spectacle, in the uplifting words of the prophet Zechariah, of grandfathers and grandmothers once again gazing with delight at their grandchildren at play on the sidewalks of a Jerusalem restored, and sharing with their little ones the memory of the time they themselves merited to stand at Sinai.

In sum: To encounter the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, to comprehend its commemorations, is not merely to understand the significance of each joyous holiday and each moment of mourning, each feast and each fast. It is also to partake of the ability to unite East with West, to journey between past and present, and to set forth from the here-and-now toward the redemption that is yet to be. It is to understand nothing less than the secret of Jewish endurance.

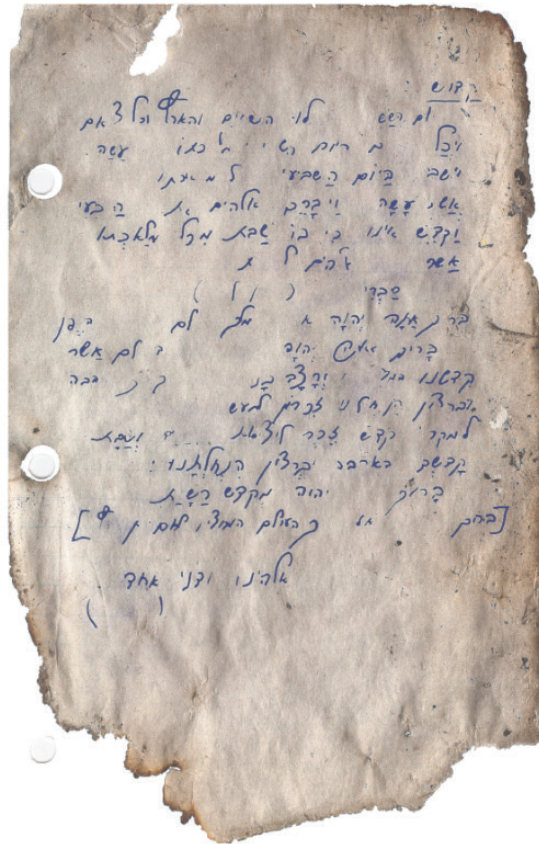
Before proceeding to this book’s chapters, let’s linger for a moment longer on the distinction between Sabbath and holidays that I identified briefly above. To help illustrate the Sabbath – a universal message, bequeathed to the world by the Jewish people – I offer a story of our time.

In February 2003, Ilan Ramon became the first Israeli astronaut to take part in the American space program by joining the crew of the space shuttle *Columbia*. While training for the flight at Cape Canaveral in Florida, Ramon – a hero of the Israeli Air Force and, in 1981, the youngest participant in a famous raid that incapacitated the



▲ Ilan Ramon

Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak – turned to a local rabbi with a highly original question in the area of Jewish religious law. Seeing himself on this forthcoming flight as a representative not only of his country but of the Jewish people everywhere, he intended to mark, while in space, the onset of the Sabbath – and to do so while holding a goblet that he was taking along with him, filling it with wine, and pronouncing the special prayer that sanctifies the arrival of the Sabbath.



▲
Kiddush, from the remains
of Ilan Ramon's diary

His problem, as the rabbi described it: How *does* one mark the advent of a particular moment in time in a situation where one is passing constantly through past and future, where a sunset occurs every ninety minutes, a new “week” every ten and a half hours, and a “new year” every twenty days?

Ramon's dilemma was circulated by the rabbi to scholars throughout the world, inspiring a lively discussion. In the end, he was advised to mark the onset of the Sabbath according to the time in Cape Canaveral. And thus, to this day, we have a stunning image of a Jew, floating in the heavens and sailing among the stars, as he is

vocally commemorating God's creation of the universe in six days and blessing the Sabbath, the day of God's rest, over a cup of wine.

Tragically, this was one of the last moments of Ilan Ramon's life. Upon attempting reentry to the earth, the *Columbia* disintegrated, and he and all of the American astronauts aboard were lost to their loved ones and fellow citizens.

But they were not entirely lost. Several months later, remains of the *Columbia* were discovered in a field in Texas, and amidst the wreckage was Ramon's diary. Having survived the explosion, the fall through the atmosphere, and months of rain, the notebook was nevertheless in a condition to be reconstructed and studied. Among the words on the pages was the text of the Kiddush, the millennia-old prayer of sanctification, handwritten by Ramon in preparation for his journey.

At a NASA memorial service, the rabbi to whom Ramon had addressed his question mused on the circumstance that the legacy of this military hero would now be bound up forever with his unusual attention to Jewish religious law. Ramon, he reflected, taught us in his sanctification of a Shabbat that “no matter how fast we're going, we need to stop and ponder why God has put us here on earth.”

And that, ultimately, is the message of Shabbat. Why, asked the eighteenth-century sage known as the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797), *did* God put a stop to creation after six days? The answer: to show us that what we create becomes meaningful only once we stop creating it and start remembering why it was worth creating in the first place. This is the Sabbath: an idea, universal in nature, whose point, as the writer Judith Shulevitz once put it, is that in our lives we must remember to stop because we must stop in order to remember.

By their mindfulness in keeping and observing the Sabbath down through the generations, the Jews have faithfully proclaimed that message to all humanity.

What, then, about the holidays? They, by contrast, along with the annual calendar on which they are based, are not universal but, as I noted earlier, covenantal. They mark moments in Jewish history and embody the message of what might best be thought of as Jewish *particularity*.

For Jewish tradition, therefore, the calendar, which every year indicates when the observance of each holiday begins and when it ends, is an irreplaceable resource. And that calendar is itself linked to an astronomical phenomenon that for centuries has symbolized the particular uniqueness of the Jewish experience.

What is that phenomenon? It is the moon, on whose monthly cycle the Hebrew calendar (like that of a handful of others in the world) is based. How does this work? In summary: Because each month in the moon's regular cycle of phases is between twenty-nine and thirty days in length, Hebrew months tend also to alternate between twenty-nine and thirty days. And because those months are lunar, each of them begins at the sighting of the earliest visible crescent – the birth of the “new” moon – whose light waxes gradually toward full illumination at roughly mid-month and then wanes toward darkness over the next two weeks (or so) before the cycle starts all over again.

But there's also more to the story than that. For Jews, the lunar cycle has always been linked to the Exodus from Egypt, which occurred at full moon in the Hebrew month of Nisan, the month specifically named by God as “the first of the months of the year” (Ex. 12:2). And the moon is linked not just to the Exodus. According to tradition, the very first commandment given to the Israelites on the eve of that event – “You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time” (12:17) – would obligate the linkage of *all* Jewish holidays to the waxing and waning of the moon. Thus, if the advent of Passover in the spring and Sukkot in the fall occurs in mid-month to coincide with a *full* moon, Rosh HaShanah, which takes place on the first of the month (*Rosh Hodesh*) of Tishrei, always coincides with the *new* moon.

Why did the Jewish calendar become linked to the lunar cycle at the very moment of the Exodus? The reason, according to rabbinic tradition, is that the moon itself embodies the essence of the Jewish people. In its seeming disappearance into darkness, only to be suddenly reborn, the ancient rabbis saw the ultimate symbol of

the eternal people: a nation born as it emerged from the night of slavery into the daylight of liberty. The Talmud – the great record of rabbinic discussion and teachings – informs us that during periods of persecution, when the observance of Jewish ritual was restricted, and circulating the year’s calendar was forbidden, there existed a secret Hebrew code for announcing the arrival of a new moon: *David melekh Yisrael hai v’kayam* (“David, king of Israel, lives”). In other words: Judaism survives, the Jewish people endures.

All of this is embodied in the slender sliver of light reborn in the midst of darkness. As the Talmud insists, Jews see in the renewal of the moon’s light a rendezvous between themselves and their Father in heaven, a reminder of God’s promises to His people, the indelibility of the Torah and the eternity of the covenant, and the fact that, despite the insistence of others to the contrary, the never-superseded bond between Israel and God remains in place forever.

The Jewish observance of two sacred times – Shabbat on the one hand, and the holidays founded upon the lunar cycle on the other hand – represents the distinct nature of Jewish *existence*: at once a part of and apart from the world, at once chosen and linked to our connection with, and our monotheistic message to, humanity. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) put the dual point this way:

From the onset of the creation, the Sabbath was an integral part of humankind, teaching men the awareness of their function as creatures and servants of God. [By contrast,] the new moon is a distinctive mark instituted at the start of Jewish history to serve as a catalyst for the understanding and fulfillment of the Jewish people’s history. The Sabbath is the signature of our human existence, and the new moon the symbol of our particular Jewish calling.³

And what is that mixed calling? In the blessing recited over the Torah, we proclaim that we have been chosen from among the nations, but we never forget that part and parcel of our chosenness involves God’s proclamation to Abraham: “Through you will all the families of the

world be blessed” (Gen. 12:2). The renewal of the moon reminds Jews that we are chosen, but Judaism never lets us forget that we have been chosen as God’s messenger to humanity.

Seen through the prism of modern cosmology, an interesting scientific parallel emerges here. The moon, as we know, orbits the earth, is bound to the earth, and might be seen by some as a rather insignificant astronomical addendum to the earth. Yet scientists, pondering what has been called the “Goldilocks paradox” – that is, why only in our world do the conditions seem to be “just right” for the emergence of sentient life? – have concluded that a large part of the answer has to do with what the French astronomer Jacques Laskar calls “our climate stability,” a stability that owes its existence to “an exceptional event: the presence of the moon.”⁴ As the science journalist Fred Heeren describes the consensus view:

Without an extra-large moon orbiting at the right distance from us, ... earth would be subject to a runaway greenhouse effect as on Venus, or a permanent ice age such as Mars would experience if it had more water.⁵

Thus has the moon – minuscule as compared with other celestial bodies like the planets of our solar system – become positioned, against the odds, to play a crucial role in the survival of the human race. And thus has the Jewish people, a minuscule nation, vanishingly small when compared with other peoples and nations swirling in the solar system of societies and civilizations, been perfectly positioned, against the odds, to exercise a critical moral impact on humanity. “I will insist,” said the great American founder John Adams,

that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation.... [Even] if I were an atheist... who believed that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to... preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty Sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently all civilization.⁶

Says the Talmud: Israel calculates its years by keying its calendar to the moon while other nations – here it refers to Christian civilization – count by the sun (Sukkah 29a). This isn't a superficial statement of merely arbitrary calendrical preferences. Rather, the sages are implying, Israel has long been moonlike in its relation to other nations – revolving around those nations and never free to choose its own trajectory.

This might suggest that, logically, we Jews should have become extinct long ago. And yet not only have we survived but, separate from other people as the moon is separate from the earth while also indelibly affecting it, we have influenced and shaped the nature and destiny of the human race. Even in the darkest moments of its history, when it experienced nothing but hate from humanity, Israel understood that its mission was to be in connection *with* humanity. To cite Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once again, “Jewish history is nothing but a moonlit reflection of how we have carried out our moral obligations – the moonlit resolution of our destiny.”⁷

Ilan Ramon, the man who testified in orbit to the Jewish belief in the Creator of the universe, also, just before he died, testified to the eternal rebirth of the Jewish people. Along with his “Sabbath kit,” he took with him into orbit a tiny Torah scroll that, decades earlier, in the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, belonged to a Dutch prisoner named Simon Dasberg, hitherto the esteemed chief rabbi of Amsterdam. Among its many other clandestine uses, the Torah had figured in the rabbi's preparation of another inmate, a young boy, Yoachim “Yoya” Joseph, for his bar mitzvah ceremony. The rabbi would perish in the camp; the boy to whom he had entrusted the precious Torah scroll would survive the Holocaust and later befriend and in turn entrust the scroll to Ilan Ramon.

In the *Columbia*, holding up Rabbi Dasberg's Torah, Ramon addressed his countrymen in Hebrew. “This,” he said, “is a small Torah scroll that sixty years ago a child in Bergen-Belsen received from the rabbi of Amsterdam, who taught him from it in preparation for his bar mitzvah. And now it is with me in space.” For one breathtaking moment, we can see Ramon, overcome with emotion, loosen his grip on the Torah, which begins to float further upward in the capsule toward the heavens.

Rabbi Dasberg's daughter, when interviewed in Israel following the space shuttle's disastrous end, suggested that the second life of the Torah scroll, whose remains would never be found, was both a sign of life from the past and a greeting dispatched to earth from heaven: an extraordinary emotional bond that more than anything represents the ability of the Jewish people to endure, to survive, and to thrive.

Shabbat, even as it unites Jews everywhere, marks God's creation of the whole world and His concern for all mankind; our Hebrew calendar, primarily lunar in essence, marks the covenantal uniqueness and chosenness of the people Israel. We proclaim both truths, and we will do so until both, as predicted by the prophets, are recognized by the world, and the verse in Isaiah is fulfilled: "It shall be on every new moon and Sabbath that all humanity will come to bow to Me, says the Lord" (66:23).

Let us begin.



CHAPTER ONE
Rosh HaShanah



▲ *The Anointing of Solomon, Cornelis de Vos*

No date in the Jewish calendar presents more diverse facets than the High Holy Day known as Rosh HaShanah. Instead of attempting to draw all of these facets together in a single chapter, my goal here is to highlight three central themes. Each of the three finds expression in the liturgy, each builds on one or more aspects of the other two, and each in its own way is made manifest in the shofar – the ancient musical instrument whose sound summons up for most Jews the mood and spirit of the entire High Holy Days season, and especially the ten days from Rosh HaShanah through Yom Kippur.

We can begin by noting that the most common statement made about Rosh HaShanah – namely, that it is the “Jewish New Year” – is, to be blunt, incorrect. True, the two Hebrew words do translate as “Head of the Year.” In fact, however, the Jewish calendar marks at least two separate other years, and neither one of them is Rosh HaShanah as it has come to be known.

On Passover, during the spring month of Nisan, we commemorate every year the Exodus from Egypt and the birth of the Jewish people. The historical and calendrical significance of these events is stated explicitly, as we saw in the Introduction, in the book of Exodus: “This month [Nisan] shall be unto you the beginning of months” (12:2). In other words, this *is* the Jewish new year or, perhaps more exactly, the Jewish people’s new year.

As for the second new year, it occurs three and a half months after Rosh HaShanah and one and a half months prior to Nisan. It is the festival of Tu BiShvat, the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, known as *Rosh HaShanah LaIlanot*, the Jewish “new year for trees”; to it I devote chapter 5 in this book.

What, then, of Rosh HaShanah? On that two-day holiday, the inception of the ten-day period of introspection and repentance culminating in Yom Kippur, we commemorate nothing less than the creation not of the Jews but of the entire universe. Over and over again, the liturgy proclaims: *Hayom harat olam*, “Today is the birthday of the world” – and therefore the time, every year, when the *whole world* stands in judgment. This is the new year for humanity.

This introduces the first of our three themes, which is that in many ways, and in contrast to most other Jewish holidays, Rosh HaShanah is not particularistic in nature but universal. It is the day when, in commemorating God’s creation of the world and all that is in it, we renew our fidelity to Him as King. Again and again, the Almighty is proclaimed *melekh al kol ha’aretz*, “king over *all* the earth.” Again and again, we emphasize His universal monarchy and majesty, His absolute omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence, and our contrasting human frailty, fallibility, and mortality.

Indeed, it is to emphasize the kingship of God that the sound of the shofar is introduced in the Torah as a key element of Rosh HaShanah: the day “when the horn is sounded for you” (Num. 29:1).

The word “shofar,” commonly rendered in English as a ram’s horn, deserves its own explanation. In the Bible it refers simply to any kind of animal horn; only later did it become more narrowly defined as a ram’s horn. These instruments were nothing less than the original coronation trumpets of the biblical age, a prominent

feature in the ceremony marking the ascension of a flesh-and-blood Israelite king. For example: “And Zadok the priest took the vessel of oil out of the Tent, and anointed Solomon. And they blew the shofar; and all the people said: long live King Solomon!” (I Kings 1:39).

Indeed, that ancient Israelite ceremony would inspire and legitimize the monarchical procedures of at least one other worldly kingdom. For more than a thousand years, the crowning of an English king or queen has harked back to, and freely borrowed from, the very same language to be found in the biblical anointing of King Solomon. Here, from 1953, are the words of the archbishop of Canterbury in anointing Queen Elizabeth II: “As Solomon was anointed by Zadok the Priest and Nathan the prophet, so be thou anointed, blessed, and consecrated Queen over the peoples whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to govern.”

“Over and over again,
the liturgy proclaims:
Hayom harat olam,
“Today is the birthday of
the world.”

On Rosh HaShanah, then, the sound of the shofar is meant to evoke the majesty and authority of God as Creator and King, the providential overseer of the universe. The liturgy stresses in particular the great sounding of horns that accompanied the Almighty’s entry into history and His revelation to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, as “all the nation saw the thunder and the lightning, and the mountain afire, and the call of the shofar growing ever stronger” (Ex. 20:15).

In doing so, moreover, the liturgy looks at once back to the birth of the Jewish nation at Sinai and forward to the ultimate redemption of the world, reminding us not only of what was but also of what is yet to be when all whom God has created will recognize their absolute dependence on Him. “And it will be on that day, a great shofar will be sounded and all the lost... will come and worship the Lord on the holy mount, in Jerusalem” (Is. 27:13).

In the Ashkenazi tradition, the liturgical linking of the shofar and the majesty of God's kingship achieves its apotheosis in the section of the Rosh HaShanah service known by its first words as the *Untaneh tokef* ("Let us give voice to the power"). A great shofar is blown, all humanity is summoned before the divine judge, and, "as a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree the limit to each person's days, and inscribe their final judgment."

This is our first theme: God as the Creator and King of the universe, a theme resonating like a shofar blast everywhere in the prayer services on both days of Rosh HaShanah.

And yet, at the midway point in these services, something else occurs: Just as on every Sabbath and festival, the Torah scroll is taken out of the ark, escorted to the reader's desk, and placed at the center of the worshippers' attention. A part chosen specifically for each of the two days is then read, and is followed by its own specifically chosen *haftarah*, or reading from the prophets. It is in this critical interlude of the liturgy that our second theme emerges.

If you were designing the sacred Torah service on these most awesome of days, which scriptural readings would you choose? Which biblical texts would best reflect the resonant, fearsome, magisterial, and universal themes that are so exquisitely invoked and stressed in the liturgy?

Surely, one would think, and as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted, the Torah reading should itself commence with the earliest verses of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..." Similarly with the reading from the prophets: perhaps a passage from Isaiah 45, for instance, with its declaration, "It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it." Should not both of each day's scriptural texts parallel and complement the prayers? Should not their respective themes coincide with and reinforce each other?

Any one of these choices, as Rabbi Sacks put it, would make perfect, logical sense – but every one of them, he added, would be wrong. Instead, the readings from the Torah and the prophets contrast, almost blatantly, with the liturgy's focus on the creation

of the world and God's kingship over all. Rather, they are about fathers and mothers, parents and children: about, in a word, family.

Thus, on the first day, the selection from the Torah concerns the miraculous advent of Isaac, the child born to a woman of ninety years and a man of one hundred. The parallel selection from the prophets is the story of Hannah, a childless woman who wants nothing more than the infant who, ultimately, will be given to her, whom she will name Samuel, and whom she will then consecrate to the service of God.

Before addressing these readings for the first day, let's dwell briefly on the family-centric theme itself – and, in this connection, let's note an additional fact about the shofar. Although the sounding of this horn was first understood as a manifestation of God's majesty and sovereignty over human history, in time it came to be interpreted as something else entirely: as a human cry, perhaps the cry of a mother, perhaps of a child, perhaps even of an infant at the moment of its birth. Today, in fact, researchers tell us that before newborns learn (at the age of about nine months) to adopt the specific linguistic intonations of their environments, it is impossible to differentiate their cries one from another; they all bawl alike. We might say that it is thus, too, on the birthday of the world, when the shofar, representing our helpless selves, marks not only the coronation of God but what might seem its exact opposite: the birth of a mewling, helpless infant.

So wherein lies the connection between the liturgy of majesty and these two readings from the Torah and the prophets – between the cosmic and the personal, the universal and the familial, between God as King and Creator, Judge and Redeemer, and us as decidedly lower-case parents and children? How can these two be reconciled?

The answer lies in Judaism's introduction of a startling, revolutionary notion of God's creation. If we cherish the relationship between parents and children, it is because *this* is the form of love that most imitates God's own love for humanity and God's particular love for His chosen people.

Rabbi Sacks cites a Jewish woman who joked, "Now that I'm a parent, I know what it's like to be God, because now I know what

it's like to create someone you can't control." It's funny, but also true. If Rosh HaShanah is a remembrance of the time the universe was born, the most powerful way of reminding ourselves of the miracle of creation is to think about the only other similar miracle we know of. This – to have been bequeathed a creative capacity of our own – is what it means for us to have been created in the image of the Creator.

And in considering this, we also realize that our first two themes – the kingship of God and the parenthood of human beings – actually enhance one another. God is our King because He is our Creator, a fact that on Rosh HaShanah we seek to emphasize. Yet all the liturgical tropes in the world, all the verbal exclamations, all the metaphors at our disposal, cannot bring us to a comprehension of creation. No matter how vividly it is described, it cannot be imagined. But it can be intuitively grasped, and profoundly internalized and understood, when the cosmic is joined with the familial and when we, too, create a universe, however small, of our own.

Toward this end, the first chapter of Genesis about the creation of the world will do little to enlighten us, but the later chapters in Genesis, about our first fathers and mothers, are a big help. There is an old joke, told by the writer George Will, about the five-year-old child in a religious school who is busily drawing on a piece of paper. "What are you doing?" the teacher asks. The child replies: "I'm drawing a picture of God." The teacher objects: "Nobody knows what God looks like." The child replies: "They will, in five minutes." For in Hebrew Scripture, even if we cannot see God, we can see, in a mother and father's creation of a child, birthing of a child, and love for a child, what His love looks like.

Let me further illustrate this point with a personal anecdote from my own family. At the circumcision ceremony for our fifth child, my wife spoke about a conundrum pondered by medieval Jewish mystics: How is it that God, infinite and all-inclusive, could still make room for creation? Their answer to the puzzle invoked a process called in Hebrew *tzimtzum*, a kind of divine contraction, a sacrifice of God's own all-inclusiveness in order to allow a world to emerge into existence apart from and outside of His transcendent self.

*Hannah and Samuel in
the Temple*,
Rembrandt van Rijn
or Rembrandt's
studio



In explicating this notion, my wife invoked a parallel drawn in the twentieth century by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: the parallel, that is, between the “sacrificial divine action” by which God made room for the universe, thereby creating a world to be cared for, sustained, and loved by Him, and the way in which a man and a woman, in becoming parents, “withdraw from their own self-centered romanticism into a love-oriented community”¹: the family.

In “making room” for our own children, she said, our own lives as husband and wife had become more crowded but simultaneously more capacious, and our inner resources wondrously richer and more agile. She concluded: “I thank the Master of the Universe for the small but wonderful universe He has helped us fashion in our home.”



◀ Abraham and Isaac,
Rembrandt van Rijn
(1645)

And yet: lest we celebrate parenthood too unreservedly, we need to stop and apprehend its dangers. The very love of children can lead to self-love, self-important possessiveness, and a rejection of one of the central premises of Rosh HaShanah and the penitential season.

That central premise, difficult to absorb, is the renouncing of absolute ownership over anything in our lives. Jews repeat throughout the season: *Haneshamah lakh vehaguf shelakh*, “The soul is Yours and the body is Yours.” From a Jewish perspective, our lives are not our own. To acknowledge this is the first step toward repentance and repair.

Nor is that all. If our lives are not our own, neither are the lives of our children, lives more precious to us than our own. That is the key lesson brought home in the reading from the prophets on the

first day of Rosh HaShanah when, her prayers answered, the formerly childless Hannah gives birth to a son and names him Samuel (in Hebrew, Shmuel). In a characteristic bit of biblical wordplay, Hannah explains her reason for the name: *Ki meHashem she'iltiv*. Although this is often translated as “because I asked God for him,” the proper translation, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggested, is “because I have *borrowed* him from God” (I Sam. 1:20). In then consecrating Samuel to the service of God, Hannah recognized the great truth: our children are not so much “owned” by us as on loan to us as their custodians and guardians on behalf of God.

Which brings us to the readings on the second day. If the first day’s readings remind us of our capacity as parents to imitate God’s love for us even as we must always remain mindful of our children’s “borrowed” state, the second day’s readings offer extreme instances of the rule.

First comes the intensely disturbing Torah story known in Hebrew as the *Akeidah*, “the binding,” and in English traditionally referred to as the Sacrifice of Isaac, the only child of Abraham and Sarah. Here is God’s instruction to Abraham, in the King James Version’s unforgettably haunting translation:

Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (Gen. 22:2)

The images and themes of this biblical story also pervade the Rosh HaShanah liturgy. According to our prayer books, one of the biblical names for Rosh HaShanah, Yom HaZikaron, “The Day of Remembrance,” is a reference to God as the One who remembers the promises made to Abraham after the trauma of the *Akeidah*. That, indeed, was surely one of the prime reasons in later Jewish history for the preferred shofar to become not merely an animal horn but, specifically, a ram’s horn: as a reminder of the twisted appendage of the ram caught in a thicket, the animal that in Genesis serves as the sacrificial replacement for the son who was restored to his father.



▲ *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Rembrandt van Rijn

Every Sephardi and Mizrahi Jew knows, or knows of, *Eit Shaa-rei Ratzon*, “The Gates of [God’s] Will,” a twelfth-century liturgical poem by Judah ben Samuel ibn Abbas, whose dramatic verses are sung immediately prior to blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShanah. The rhymed and agonizingly suspenseful six-line stanzas of *Eit Shaa-rei Ratzon* retell the entire story of the *Akeidah*, from God’s first instruction to Abraham till the last-minute heavenly reprieve. The poem became the Sephardi version of the *Untaneh Tokef* – a verse

prayer on the theme of divine judgment that instantly conjures up the advent of the new year.

And just as the first theme of Rosh HaShanah – creation – is enhanced by the second theme – the birth of children – so, too, are both themes, and especially the second, enhanced by the third: the *Akeidah*.

A contemporary anecdote may help illustrate what is entailed here. Once, on a Friday morning in London, Rabbi Sacks accompanied Penelope Leach, a prominent British child psychologist, on a visit to a Jewish primary school. There she witnessed children play-acting the rituals of the Shabbat meal that, as Friday evening fell, would take place in their homes. Boys blessed the wine, girls kindled candles, Sabbath songs were sung.

Leach was struck by everything she saw, but was enthralled by one moment in particular: the children’s reenactment of a tradition in many Jewish homes in which, before the Sabbath meal begins, the father extends his hands over the head of each child and intones a brief one-sentence blessing, varied only slightly according to whether the child is a boy or a girl and followed by the so-called priestly blessing from the book of Numbers: “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord cause His Presence to shine upon you and grace you. May the Lord turn with favor to you, and give you peace” (6:24–26).

Moved by this dramatic example of the centrality of family life in traditional Judaism, Leach, as Rabbi Sacks reports, marveled at “the five-year-old mother and father blessing the five-year-old children with the five-year-old grandparents looking on.”

“May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord cause His Presence to
shine upon you and grace you. May the
Lord turn with favor to you, and give
you peace” (Numbers 6:24–26).



Friday Evening Blessing, ▶
Moritz Daniel
Oppenheim

The ritual of Jewish parents blessing their children is indeed a marvel, and a very moving one. But it is easily misconstrued. The standard form of showing love to our children is physical, through an embrace that draws them close to us; as an action, it is at once protective and possessive. By contrast, the biblical words stress not the bond between parent and child but rather the bond between each child and God. Blessing our children by extending our hands sets them apart, acknowledging that, like us, they belong to Someone other than ourselves.

In the Torah, the one ritual act comparable to this blessing has to do with Temple sacrifice. As the book of Leviticus informs us, an Israelite worshipper making an offering of an animal in the Temple prefaces the ritual by placing his hands on the animal's head, thereby renouncing his own claim and dedicating the offering to God: "And he shall place his hands on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted as an atonement for him" (1:4).

In this sense, one might say that the *Akeidah* is symbolically recreated every Friday evening in many Jewish homes all over the world. When parents place their hands on their children's heads as their ancestors did over offerings in Jerusalem millennia ago, a sacred familial experience recalls one of the most petrifying tales ever told about parent and child.

This point was made by Rabbi Soloveitchik in a correspondence with a Catholic priest in the 1950s. At the heart of the religious worldview, he suggested, is the idea that man is merely “a guardian in whose care the works of God have been placed as a precious charge.” And this is especially true of children, “the greatest and most precious charge,” concerning whom the “irrevocable though bitter truth” is that they are not ours. For Abraham to deserve fatherhood, he too, at the *Akeidah*, had to prove his acceptance of that same bitter, irrevocable truth. Today, as Rabbi Soloveitchik put it, “parents must always remain aware that it is only through God's infinite grace that this infant has been returned to them in sacred trust.”²

For many modern Jews, the story of the *Akeidah* is an embarrassing anachronism, and the descriptions of animal sacrifice in Leviticus are seen as utterly irrelevant to our lives. But are they? As the prominent ethicist Leon Kass has noted, many parents devote their children to “some ‘god’ or other, to Mammon or Molech, to honor or money, to pleasure or power, or, worse, to no god at all.” A true father and mother, by contrast, in devoting their children only to godly ways, recognize that parenthood is a duty and not a right, and that children are “a gift and a blessing from God.”³

And this makes the third and last theme the most relevant of all to an affluent age that has lavished love on children, coddled and protected them, denied them little or nothing, and (as Senator Ben Sasse has noted in his book *The Vanishing American Adult*) produced a generation of young people too often locked in perpetual adolescence. Is it not possible that what we need is less embracing and more blessing, less possession and more consecration? Every parent would prefer to consign the *Akeidah* story to oblivion, and yet, especially today, the *Akeidah*, the shofar, and the liturgy of Rosh HaShanah continue to call out to us.

These, then, are three of the central themes of this day. First: God is our King and our Creator. Second: It is in imitation of divine creation that Jews bring children into this world. Third: These children, though created by us, are not owned by us; we are their custodians, and our most important role is to raise them to moral adulthood so that they in turn can, like Abraham millennia ago, come to comprehend God as Creator and partner with Him in becoming creators of families of their own.

I promised three themes. But they are complemented, finally, by a fourth that is integrally connected with them and by no means exclusive to Rosh HaShanah but is integrally connected with it and with the other three themes. And that is the theme sounded with exquisite appropriateness in the prophetic reading for the second day, immediately after the reading of the *Akeidah*. Voiced by God through the prophet Jeremiah, it is a thrilling vision of consolation and restoration that, in emotionally charged and vivid imagery, reiterates the certain promise of His unbreakable love for His people – “My firstborn” (31:9), for whom “My heart yearns” (v. 20) – and, no matter what Israel might do to incur God’s anger, the no-less-certain promise of their redemption: “Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, ‘He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd his flock’” (v. 10).

It is the combination of all four of these themes that once again presents a key to the endurance and eternity of the Jewish people.