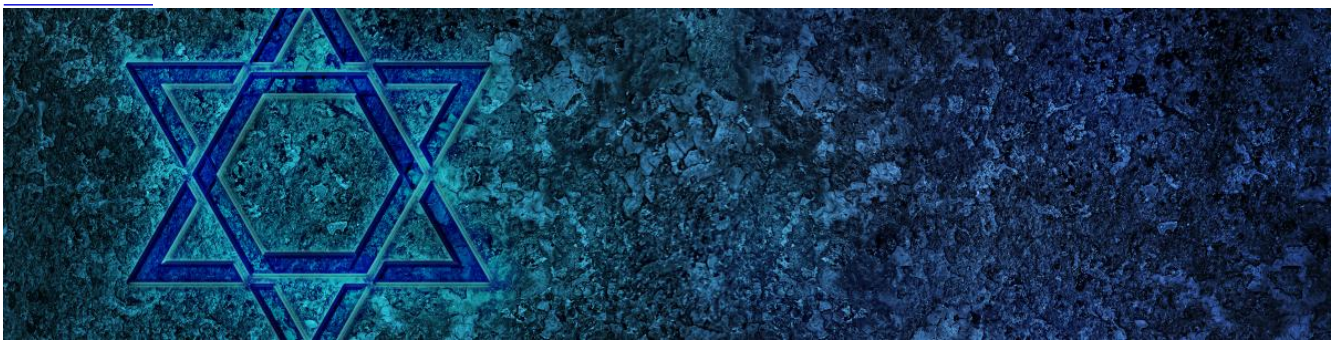
Holiday Reader of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

View PDF



Holiday Reader

For Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Succoth

Prepared by Rabbis Marc and Hayyim Angel

For

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

Eyes Open, Eyes Shut: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Paul Gaugin, the famous 19th century French artist, commented: “When I want to see clearly, I shut my eyes.”

He was referring to two different ways of perceiving reality. With our eyes open, we see surface reality—size, shape, color etc. But with our eyes shut, we contemplate the context of things, our relationship to them, the hidden meanings.

With our eyes open, a dozen roses are 12 beautiful flowers. With our eyes shut, they may be full of memories and associations—roses given or received on our first date; roses at our wedding; roses growing in our childhood home's back yard; roses on our grandmother’s Shabbat table.

How we see fellow human beings is also very different with open or closed eyes. With our eyes open, we see their physical features. With our eyes shut, we remember shared experiences, friendships, happy and sad moments. When we want to see clearly—comprehensively—we shut our eyes.

Mircea Eliade, a specialist in world religions, has written in his book, The Sacred and The Profane, about the pagan view of New Year. For them, human life is a series of recurring cycles, always on the verge of chaos. On New Year, people descend into this primordial chaos: drunkenness, debauchery, chaotic noise.

The Jewish view is radically different. For Jews, reality isn’t a hopeless cycle of returns to chaos, but a progression, however slow, of humanity. Rosh Hashana is not a return to primeval chaos, but a return to God, a return to our basic selves. Our New Year is observed with prayer, repentance, solemnity, and a faith that we can—and the world can—be better.

The pagan New Year is an example of seeing reality with open eyes. Things really do seem to be chaotic when viewed on the surface. Humanity does not seem to improve over the generations. We always seem to be on the verge or self-destruction.

The Jewish New Year is an example of viewing reality with our eyes shut, of seeing things more deeply, more carefully. While being fully aware of the surface failings of humanity, we look for the hidden signs of progress and redemption. We attempt to maintain a grand, long-range vision. This is the key to the secret of Jewish optimism. While not denying the negatives around us, we stay faithful to a vision of a world that is not governed by chaos, but by a deeper, hidden, mysterious unity.

The problem of faith today is not how to have faith in God. We can come to terms with God if we are philosophers or mystics. The problem is how can we have faith in humanity? How can we believe in the goodness and truthfulness of human beings?

With our eyes open, we must view current events with despair and trepidation. We see leaders who are liars and hypocrites. We see wars and hatred and violence and vicious anti-Semitism. We are tempted to think that chaos reigns.

But with our eyes shut, we know that redemption will come. We know that there are good,

heroic people struggling for change. We know that just as we have overcome sorrows in the past, we will overcome oppressions and oppressors of today.

Eyes open and eyes shut not only relate to our perception of external realities, but also to our self-understanding. During the season of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we focus on penitential prayers. We confess our sins and shortcomings. But as we think more deeply about our deficiencies, we also close our eyes and look for our real selves, our deeper selves, our dreams and aspirations.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, noted that the high holy day period is symbolized by the shofar. The shofar must be bent, as a reminder that we, too, must bow ourselves in contrition and humility. But shortly after Yom Kippur comes Succoth, with the lulav as a central symbol. The lulav must be straight, not bent over. The lulav teaches us to stand strong and tall, to focus on our strengths and virtues. The holiday season, then, encourages us to first experience humility and contrition; but then to move on to self-confidence and optimism. Our eyes are open to our shortcomings; but when we shut our eyes, we also can envision our strengths and potentialities.

Rosh Hashana reminds us to view our lives and our world with our eyes open—but also with our eyes shut. We are challenged to dream great dreams, to seek that which is hidden, to see beyond the moment.

Rosh Hashana is a call to each individual to move to a higher level of understanding, behavior and activism. Teshuva—repentance—means that we can improve ourselves, and that others can improve, and that the world can improve.

This is the key to Jewish optimism, the key to the Jewish revolutionary vision for humanity, the key to personal happiness.

Changing the Channel: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his short story, “The Last Channel,” Italo Calvino portrays a man who has been deemed to be insane. When this man watched television, he kept clicking his remote control button without watching any program for more than a few seconds. At some point, he started to take the remote control panel outside his house. He clicked it at buildings, stores, banks, neon signs, and at people.

But this man claimed that he was not at all deranged. In his defense, he stated that he kept clicking the remote control button because he did not like what he saw! He was looking for the “true” program, a program without drivel and artificiality and hypocrisy. He asserted: “There is an unknown station transmitting a story that has to do with me, MY story, the only story that can explain to me who I am, where I come from and where I’m going.”

This man flashed the remote control button because he was looking for the “real” program, the “real” city, his “real” self. He wanted to turn off the chaos and senselessness around him and was certain that if he kept clicking the remote button he would at last find the “right” channel.

While the man in Calvino’s story seems to have crossed the line between sanity and insanity, his desire for self-understanding and for the perfection of the world were not insane at all. Don’t we all wish we had a remote control button that we could click and make everything right, find the “real” picture, the “real” world that makes sense to us. When we confront lies and hatred, violence and injustice, hedonism and meanness—wouldn’t it be nice to have a button to click to change the channel to a better picture?

In some ways, the shofar of Rosh Hashana serves as our remote control button! It evokes a world yet in progress, a vision rooted in antiquity, fixed in the present, and arching into the distant future. It alludes to a “real” world, a finer world.

The original shofar dates back to the story of the Akeidah, when Abraham was called upon to bind Isaac on a sacrificial altar. The story teaches that God does not want child sacrifice. We are to demonstrate our faith not by murdering our children but by strengthening them in life. At the end of the episode, Abraham noticed a ram caught in the brambles by its horns. He offered the ram as a sacrifice in lieu of Isaac. The shofar blown on Rosh Hashana evokes memories of the Akeidah.

At the conclusion of the Akeidah narrative, the Torah informs us that Abraham and his retinue “rose up and went together to Be’er Sheva.” Why is this detail provided? Why do we need to know where Abraham went after the Akeidah?

If we look at the passage just before the recounting of the Akeidah, we find that “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Be’er Sheva, and he called out there in the name of God Lord of the Universe.” The Akeidah was a setting of trauma, terror, spiritual confusion. Such a crisis could have broken anyone. But Abraham clicked his remote control button. He went back to Be’er Sheva and reconfirmed his faith in God Lord of the Universe. He found inner serenity, the power to transcend the vicissitudes and trials of life. He clicked on to a better channel! When faced with overwhelming crisis, it is right and proper to return to our starting point, to our essential selves, to our rootedness in our faith. The shofar prods us to seek a firm and grand framework for life.

Just as the shofar harks back to the Akeidah story, it also reminds us of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. That dramatic occasion was accompanied by “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud.” The voice of God was heard by the trembling assembly. But we might ask: with all the thunder and lightning and voice of God, what need was there for the sound of a shofar?

The shofar’s essential sound is a *teruah*. The Torah refers to Rosh Hashana as *Yom Teruah*. The shofar is alluding to something mysterious and profound.

A *teruah* is a sound without words, a crying plaintive sound that does not verbally articulate anything. The shofar is symbolic of human feelings and thoughts that are too deep for words. The *teruah* transcends glibness; it pushes away banalities and pretenses. In a sense, it is a remote control button that allows us to penetrate beyond surface successes and failures, prompting us to think more carefully about our lives, about the world we live in. The *teruah* is the sound of self-understanding…and the sound of protest against an imperfect world and an unjust society.

And yet another symbol: the messianic age will be introduced with the sounding of the shofar. The shofar calls to mind the utopian vision of Judaism. We do not believe humanity is condemned to live forever with injustice, corruption, hatred and war. We may look at our contemporary world and be overcome with discouragement. The shofar reminds us: click the remote control button! A better time will surely come, redemption will emerge, a messianic age beckons to humanity.

The shofar suggests a grander, truer vision of who we are and who we can become. It cries out to us to keep striving for a better society and a better world. It invites us to strengthen our faith in the Almighty…and in ourselves. One day, we will find the right channel.

Shofar So Good: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Shofar plays a central role in the Rosh Hashana liturgy and invariably is one of the highlights of the synagogue service. Its primordial sounds are meant to awaken us from spiritual slumber; and to evoke thoughts and emotions relating to the Akeida story, the Revelation at Sinai, and the Messianic Redemption.

The laws relating to the ritual propriety of a shofar can be understood to convey moral lessons. A shofar must be fashioned from one horn; a shofar that is patched together using different pieces of ram's horn is not kasher for use. The moral: we need to be "whole" human beings, true to ourselves, strong with personal integrity. If we are merely a patchwork of other people's ideas and values, we are not fulfilling our responsibility as autonomous human beings.

The shofar is not to be plated with gold in such a way as to alter its authentic sound. The moral: we are not to allow material prosperity to falsify our authentic voices. Nor are we to be impressed by wealthy individuals whose "voices" have been altered by their riches e.g. who arrogate to themselves rights and privileges simply because of their wealth. A person's human worth is not to be determined by how much or how little "gold" he/she has.

If the sound of the shofar is the result of an echo i.e. the person blew the shofar in a cave or through a microphone, then this does not satisfy the religious requirement of hearing the shofar. The moral: we need to concentrate on the real thing, not on echoes or artificial magnifications. The shofar serves its role not by how loud a noise it can make, but by how natural and authentic a sound it emits.

The shofar is supposed to be bent over into a curve. The moral: we are to be contrite when we come before the Lord, bowing in humility and with honest recognition of our weaknesses.

Thus, the shofar is imbued with important symbolic messages to help us be better human beings and more devoted Jews. May we all be sensitive to the messages of the shofar. May we all be blessed with a meaningful holiday season. May the Almighty bless us and our loved ones with a year of good health and happiness, peace for America, Israel, and the world.

Deeper Meanings: Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Eleanor Roosevelt once noted: “Do not hesitate to do what you think you cannot do. Dare to reach beyond your perceived limits. Do not let yourself be trapped within the narrow confines of narrow thinking. Do not let past defeats and failures drag you down."

Yom Kippur is the ultimate day of Jewish optimism in our ability to grow, change, and redefine ourselves. It is a day to cleanse ourselves of our past failings and sins, and to imagine ourselves beginning a new phase in our lives.

Yom Kippur aims at our spiritual selves. It calls for a transformation in the way we see things and the way we experience things. It wants us to confront reality more clearly than we have done in the past. Young or old, this is a time for renewal and re-invigoration.

There is a famous story about a shohet (ritual slaughterer) who came to a new town and wanted to be employed by the community. As was the custom, he came to the town’s rabbi and sought approval. The rabbi asked the shohet to demonstrate how he prepared the knife for the slaughter of animals. The shohet showed how he sharpened the knife; and he ran his thumb up and down the blade checking for any possible nicks. When he completed the demonstration, he looked to the rabbi for validation.

The rabbi asked: “From whom did you learn to be a shohet?”

The shohet answered: “I learned from the illustrious Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov.”

The rabbi replied: “Yes, you have performed the task of sharpening and checking the knife very well. However, you did not do so in the manner of the Baal Shem Tov. When the Baal Shem Tov checks the knife, he always has tears in his eyes.”

Yes, the shohet had learned the technical skills of his trade—but he did not plumb the depths of his work. He had not internalized the emotional, psychological and spiritual elements that were the hallmark of his teacher. He was technically proficient—but he had no tears in his eyes.

Religious life (and life in general!) can sometimes be technically correct; but at the same time it might be missing the inner spiritual content, the tears in the eyes. A synagogue service might be conducted with great accuracy, and yet fail to produce a real religious experience. A person might fast and pray all day on Yom Kippur, and yet be exactly the same person at the end of the day as he/she was at the beginning of the day.

If Yom Kippur is observed without our realizing the deeper significance of the moment, then it is just another lost opportunity.

Yom Kippur offers us purification, a fresh start, a revived spirit. It reminds us of who we are and who we can yet become. It dares us to transcend our past limits. If we experience Yom Kippur deeply and clearly, we will face the adventure of life with renewed strength and wisdom.

The MIshnah (Taanit 4:8) quotes Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel that Yom Kippur was one of the two happiest days on the Jewish calendar (the other being the 15th day of Av). We should draw on this spirit of optimism as we observe Yom Kippur, recognizing that this day offers us a unique gift: the gift of personal renewal.

Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Although we popularly refer to the upcoming fast day as Yom Kippur, the Torah calls it Yom haKippurim—the day of atonements (in the plural). The plural form reminds us that there are many roads to atonement. Each person is different and is on a unique spiritual level; each comes with different insights, experiences, memories. The roads to atonement are plural, because no two of us have identical needs.

This season of Teshuvah and Kapparah—repentance and atonement—provides us with a special challenge and opportunity. We are granted a yearly period of time for intense evaluation of our lives. This period should serve as a springboard to deeper understanding and personal growth.

The first step in the process of spiritual renewal is to become humbly aware of our frailties. No matter how successful we think we are, we are mortal! We have limited physical capacities and a limited time of life on this earth. Aside from our physical limitations, we have moral and religious shortcomings that must be confronted. The Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, suggested that a person grows only after confronting deep existential crisis. “These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.” The first goal of this season is to feel “shipwrecked.”

But when we do “come up against our own reality” we often reach a point of perplexity. How are we to make ultimate sense of our lives? How are we to understand the vagaries of human existence—disease, wars, injustice? How are we to deal with all the social and professional pressures? How can we cope with problems in our families and communities? How can we advance beyond the quagmire of fear and self-doubt?

The famous Hassidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked: Where is God? And he answered: Where ever a human being lets Him in! If we want to feel the presence of God, we need to open ourselves to that experience. The season of Teshuvah and Yom haKippurim is a time to restore our relationship with the Almighty, to express our perplexities. This genuine experience of relationship with God gives us the inner strength to cope with our problems and perplexities.

A further step in the process of Teshuvah and Kapparah is balancing the feelings of alienation and belonging. We say to the Almighty: *ki ger anokhi imakh; toshav kekhol avotai*, I am a stranger with You, a sojourner as were all of my ancestors. What does this mean? I feel as though I am a stranger, alienated from God; there are barriers between me and You. But I want to be a sojourner, a permanent resident in Your presence, not a stranger or a passing visitor. I want to come home to the teachings and traditions of my ancestors who have maintained faith and courage for the past 3500 years.

A parable: A person tries to cut down a tree with a dull edged saw. He works very hard but makes little progress. A passerby sees this and asks: why don't you sharpen the saw? The person responds: I don't have time, I can't stop working, I need to cut down this tree. The passerby says: But if you would stop working for a few minutes to sharpen the saw, you would actually save time and effort, and you would better be able to accomplish your goal! The person replies: No, I don't have time to stop working, I must keep sawing.

Without the proper tools, we exert great energy but achieve inadequate results.

In spiritual life, too, we need proper tools. If we work with old habits, with stubborn attachment to stale and futile patterns, we will not grow. We need to think more clearly about our goals and how we can best attain them. Yom haKippurim provides a day when we take off from our usual routine. It is an entirely different kind of day from any other day of the year. It is a time to sharpen ourselves spiritually; to humbly face our limitations; to cope with our perplexities; to seek atonement and purification, to return to our spiritual core.

The season of Teshuvah and Kapparah provides us with a unique spiritual opportunity. Happy are they who can experience this season with an acute mind and alert spirit.

Thoughts for Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Fasting and praying are important ingredients of Yom Kippur and are signs of repentance for our transgressions against God. But, as is well known, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement for sins committed against human beings.

Maimonides teaches (Laws of Repentance, 2:9): "Repentance and the Day of Atonement only atone for sins between human beings and God, but interpersonal sins are never forgiven until a person has made restitution and appeased the one whom he has wronged….Even if he merely belittled a person with words, he must appease him and go to him until he is granted forgiveness."

Rabbinic tradition has it that a person can expect to be judged by God with the same standard of judgment that a person applies to others. If one is mean-spirited and unfair in treatment of fellow human beings, these same qualities will be applied by the Heavenly court.

The Haftarah on the morning of Yom Kippur is drawn from Isaiah, where the prophet reminds the Israelites that God wants purity of behavior, compassion to the poor and downtrodden. God rejects outward shows of piety and insists on genuine righteousness. God chastises those who "bend their heads as a bulrush and spread a couch of sackcloth and ashes" when

in fact they conduct their lives immorally. “Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose, to loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, sending the oppressed free and breaking every yoke? Is it not to break your bread for the hungry, and that you bring to your house the outcast poor…?”

It is said of the great 16th century sage, Rabbi Isaac Luria, that he would not recite his afternoon prayers until he first paid his workmen for their days’ labor. He reasoned: how can I appear before God if I do not meet my moral obligation to pay my workers on time? It is hypocritical to mouth pious words to God while at the same time being guilty of improper behavior and slander toward one’s fellow human beings.

It is customary among pious Jews to pay their debts on time, and certainly in advance of Yom Kippur. It is customary to make peace with those whom one has mistreated, disrespected, maligned or betrayed. It is customary to increase charitable contributions to those institutions that foster proper Torah values and that provide assistance to the needy.

Maimonides provides another very important lesson in his Laws of Repentance (2:10): “It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and to withhold forgiveness. Rather, one should be easy to pacify and difficult to anger. When a sinner asks forgiveness, one should grant it with a full heart and willing soul. Even if the other had sinned greatly against him and caused him much anguish, he should not take revenge or bear a grudge.”

Yom Kippur can be just another external show of piety; or it can be a transformative occasion. The decision is ours to make.

Am Yisrael Hai: Thoughts for Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, my wife and I visited Rome. Among the historic sites we visited was the Arch of Titus--a monument to the Roman conquest of Judea in 70 C.E. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem, razed the Temple, killed and enslaved many thousands of Jews--and sent our people into an Exile that lasted until the rise of the State of Israel in 1948. On the inner wall of the Arch of Titus is a depiction of the Roman victory over the Jews, with the Romans carrying off the Menorah which had graced the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

This is a somber "tourist attraction" for Jews, recalling one of the most horrific times in the history of our people. How painful to see enemies gloating over our downfall! How heart-wrenching to see our Menorah carried off into captivity!

The day we visited the Arch of Titus, we saw a small bit of grafitti which someone had managed to write onto the monument. We obviously do not condone grafitti, but I confess that we derived some inner satisfaction from this particular grafitti. It was written in Hebrew letters, and it said: Am Yisrael Hai, the people of Israel lives.

The great Roman Empire declined and fell, and is no more. The Jewish people are here, alive and well. The Arch of Titus in its arrogant glee over the destruction of the Jews has, in fact, become a symbol of the decadence of the Roman Empire and the ultimate victory of the Jews. Titus, and his Empire, are long gone; the Jews are here: Am Yisrael Hai.

A central feature of the Yom Kippur synagogue service is the description of the rituals performed in the holy Temples in ancient Jerusalem. These structures served as spiritual centers for the people of Israel. They symbolized the unique covenant between God and Israel. The Temples do not exist today; yet, when we read about the services that were conducted in them--we feel the power of the words: Am Yisrael Hai.

The people of Israel has found a way of living and flourishing and transmitting our teachings through the generations--even without these physical structures. Instead of animal sacrifices, we have prayers; instead of a central Temple, we have synagogues; instead of priestly spiritual leadership, we have Torah scholars.

We have not forsaken our covenant with God, nor has God abandoned HIs people Israel. While all of our ancient enemies have vanished, we continue to tell our story, to live and to build.

The Talmud reports that Rabbi Elazar ben Yosei visited Rome during the period following the Bar Kokhba rebellion in the second century C.E. Rabbi Elazar, aside from being a Torah sage, was well-versed in Roman culture; he served as a diplomat of the Jewish people to the government of Rome. While in Rome, Rabbi Elazar saw some of the artifacts that the Romans had stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem. "I saw the Parokhet (the curtain that covered the ark in the Temple) in Rome, and on it were several drops of blood from the Yom Kippur offering." (Yoma 57a)

What was Rabbi Elazar thinking at that moment, when he stood face to face with a tangible vestige of the Temple, when he saw the drops of blood recalling the awesome Yom Kippur Temple ceremonies? What was he thinking at that moment, when he was serving as a representative of the remnant of Israel that had recently been vanquished by the mighty Roman Empire?

I imagine that Rabbi Elazar may have been thinking: Od Avinu Hai, Am Yisrael Hai. The God of Israel lives, the people of Israel lives--and we will ultimately prevail in bringing our message of ethical monotheism, compassion and justice to the entire world.

And that is the faith that has carried us through the generations. And that is the faith that will carry us into the future, proudly and confidently.

Happiness: Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah informs us that the festival of Succoth commemorates God's providence over the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness. An old question is: why was this holiday scheduled to begin specifically on the 15th day of Tishri? The dates for Pessah (15 Nissan) and for Shavuoth (6 Sivan) are clearly linked to historical events—the day of the Exodus and the day of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. But the wandering in the wilderness was ongoing for 40 years, with no particular historic connection to Tishri 15?

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, in his *Torat Hayyim al ha-Moadim*, suggests that the Tishri 15 date was specified by the Almighty so as to be parallel to the Nissan 15 date of Pessah. Since the Exodus from Egypt is so central to Jewish thought and observance, Pessah and Succoth

were set exactly six months apart, to the day, in order to ensure that we experience the power of the Exodus on a regular basis every six months.

The great 18th century sage, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (known popularly as the Hidah), offers a different explanation in his *Midbar Kedeimot*. He notes that the lives of our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob overlapped for fifteen years. When Abraham died, his grandson Jacob was 15 years old. In rabbinic tradition Abraham is identified with Pessah, Isaac with Shavuoth, and Jacob with Succoth. (See Tur O.H. 417). Because of the merit of these extraordinary 15 years, the holy days of Pessah and Succoth were both set for the 15th of the month.

The Hidah is alluding to something deeper than the clever confluence of numbers. He suggests that the 15 years of shared lifetime among Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were a period of extreme happiness for the world. These three luminaries literally changed the course of history and brought humanity to a better understanding of the One God. Succoth, which is known in our tradition as the season of our happiness (*zeman simhateinu*), commemorates the extraordinary happiness and enlightenment that emerged at the founding of our nation.

Since Pessah (symbolized by Abraham) and Succoth (symbolized by Jacob) both occur on the 15th day of the month, this highlights the special link between grandfather Abraham and grandson Jacob. When grandparents and grandchildren share ideas and ideals, this is a sign of continuity, love…and genuine happiness. When there is a “generation gap,” there is sadness and alienation. Just as Pessah and Succoth are linked together by sharing the date of 15, so Abraham and Jacob are bound together by their shared 15 years of life.

Pessah and Succoth celebrate the Exodus from Egypt in ancient times. The relationship between Abraham and Jacob suggests the key to the future redemption of Israel—when the traditions are shared, loved and experienced by the generations of grandparents and grandchildren. A teacher of mine once quipped: Who is a Jew? Someone with Jewish grandchildren! While this is not an objectively true statement, it underscores a vital principle in the Jewish adventure: the importance of transmitting our teachings and values through the generations.

The genuine happiness that derives from family and national continuity does not just happen by chance. It is the result of deep devotion, strong commitment, and many sacrifices. There is a vast difference between happiness and amusement. Happiness entails a genuine and deep sense of wholeness. It is not attained casually. Amusement, on the other hand, is a passing sense of enjoyment. It is shallow and ephemeral. We laugh at a joke, we enjoy watching a sports event—but these amusements do not touch our souls in a lasting way. Happiness is achieved through active and thoughtful involvement; amusement is essentially a passive experience in which we sit back and wait to be entertained. Succoth, the festival of our happiness, reminds us to strive for genuine happiness, to be committed to transmitting our traditions through the generations, to distinguish between real happiness and shallow amusement.

Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Interesting insights about Succoth have come from the pen of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the First Earl of Beaconsfield. Disraeli was of Jewish birth, whose family had been associated with the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in London. Although his father had Benjamin baptized to Anglicanism at age 12, Disraeli never denied his Jewish roots. He rose to become the first—and thus far only—British Prime Minister of Jewish ancestry.

Anti-Semites never forgave Disraeli's Jewishness and constantly identified him as a Jew in spite of his conversion to Anglicanism. In response to a vicious anti-Semitic comment made in the British parliament, Disraeli famously retorted: "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honourable Gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon."

Disraeli writes about Succoth in his novel, *Tancred*, originally published in 1847. Tancred was a young British nobleman who had a spiritual longing to visit the Holy Land. When he arrived, he spent time with a Jewish family and became acquainted with Jewish religious life. His visit coincided with Succoth, and he was told that this is a great national festival celebrating the harvest. He was shown the lulav and etrog, symbols of the autumn harvest. Tancred was deeply impressed.

Disraeli writes: "The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!"

Disraeli notes that it is easier for "the happier Sephardim, the Hebrews who have never quitted the sunny regions that are laved by the Midland Ocean," to observe the festival, since they can identify with the climate and setting of the early generations of Israelites who celebrated Succoth. "But picture to yourself the child of Israel in the dingy suburb or the squalid quarter of some bleak northern town, where there is never a sun that can at any rate ripen grapes. Yet he must celebrate the vintage of purple Palestine! The law has told him, though a denizen in an icy clime, that he must dwell for seven days in a bower…."

He continues with a description of the ignominies which Jews suffer in their ghettos in Europe "living amid fogs and filth, never treated with kindness, seldom with justice....Conceive such a being, an object to you of prejudice, dislike, disgust, perhaps hatred. The season arrives, and the mind and heart of that being are filled with images and passions that have been ranked in all ages among the most beautiful and the most genial of human experience; filled with a subject the most vivid, the most graceful, the most joyous, and the most exuberant…the harvest of the grape in the native regions of the vine."

The downtrodden Jews, in observance of Succoth, find real joy in life. They decorate their Succahs as beautifully as they can; their families gather together to eat festive meals in the Succah. The outside world may be cruel and ugly; but their inner life is joyous and noble. Their external conditions may not seem too happy, but their internal happiness is real.

The Jews, while remembering the glories of the Israelite past, also dream of the future glories of the Israelites when their people will be restored to their ancient greatness.
Disraeli points to an important truth: happiness is essentially an internal phenomenon, a matter of one's attitude and interpretation of reality. External conditions are less vital to genuine happiness than one's internal state of mind.

By celebrating Succoth over the many centuries of exile, the Jewish people was able to maintain an inner strength and happiness, a vivid sense of the past and a powerful vision for the future. We are fortunate today to be living at a time when the sovereign State of Israel has been re-established. We may celebrate Succoth with the added joy of knowing that our historic dreams have begun to be realized.

We have regained our vineyards…we must aspire to the day when we may enjoy our vineyards in peace and security, free from the threats and hatred which continue to be aimed against our people. “A race that persist in celebrating their vintage…will regain their vineyards.” A people who persist in dreaming of a messianic era will ultimately see that dream fulfilled.

Succoth: Transience and Permanence

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Sometimes it takes a crisis to remind us of the transience of life. It might be an illness, the death of a loved one, an accident, a shocking and tragic news report. At these crisis moments, we suddenly and starkly remember that we are mortal, that life on this earth is temporary.

When people confront their own mortality, they often come to the realization that time is precious; that life is too valuable to be frittered away on nonsense; that it is self-destructive to engage in petty feuds or egotistical competitions. It can take a crisis to help us live on a higher, happier level. Facing the transience of life, we take our living moments more seriously.

Succoth is a festival tuned in to the issue of life’s transience. The succah is a temporary structure, reminiscent of the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness in ancient times. It doesn’t have a roof, reminding us that we are subject to the vicissitudes of nature. The lulav, etrog, aravot and hadasim remind us of the harvest, of the recurring cycles of nature, the cycles of birth, growth, decline and death.

Interestingly, Succoth is known in our tradition as *Zeman Simhateinu*, the time of our rejoicing. On one level, this refers to the rejoicing of the harvest. On a deeper level, though, it may be alluding to the joy and inner freedom we attain when we confront the transience of life.

If we sulk in gloomy thoughts of the ephemeral quality of life, we can become grim and depressed. Succoth teaches that thoughts of life’s transience actually lead to happiness—not self-pity. It is our very mortality which provides the intensity and excitement of life.

That being said, we are strengthened when we turn our minds from human mortality to God’s eternality. There is an all-encompassing, undying Power that embraces and transcends all time and all change.

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist muses: “I lift my eyes unto the mountains, whence comes my help? My help is from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth.” Why does the Psalmist look to the mountains? What do mountains have to do with the Psalmist’s call for help?

Most natural phenomena reflect change. The sun rises and sets. The moon goes through its phases. The stars sparkle at night, but are not visible during the day. Oceans, rivers and

lakes are in constant motion. Mountains, though, are steady and unchanging (at least to the human eye). The Psalmist is crying out for help, and is seeking an image of something with permanence, something that can be depended upon: mountains.

In a similar vein, one of the names attributed to God is *Tsur*—Rock. In turning to the Lord, we seek an image of something powerful and unchanging.

While Succoth highlights the transience of life, it also turns our thoughts to the Eternal God who is not transient. The succah recalls the wanderings of the Israelites—but also the Divine Providence that watched over them for forty years. The lulav and etrog remind us of the changing seasons; but also of the Eternal God who created nature and the natural rhythms. We wave the lulav and etrog in all directions, as a symbol that God's presence is everywhere, all-encompassing, and complete.

There is a story of a man who was given one wish by God. The man said: "I don't want to die suddenly. My wish is that You give me fair warning before I die." God agreed to this request.

Years later, the angel of death came to the man and said his time had come. The man objected, and called out to God: "But You promised that I would not die suddenly. You agreed to give me warning before I would die."

God replied: "I gave you plenty of warnings. Look at your hair; it is all gray. Think of how your body has weakened and declined over these past years, how you walk so slowly, how your hands tremble when you write. All of these were warnings. You are not dying suddenly."

The man bowed his head, and gave himself over to the angel of death. He realized that he had been given many warnings, but had never taken heed.

Succoth reminds us to pay attention to the warnings, to keep things in perspective, to appreciate the transience of life and the Eternity of God. It is the time of our rejoicing in the beauties of life, and the meaning of life.

Religion: Public and Private: Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Most of our religious observances are indoors--in our homes, in our synagogues. We generally do not like to create a public spectacle of our religious experiences, but we behave modestly and try not to call attention to ourselves as we perform mitzvoth.

There are some exceptions to this. On Hanukkah, it is a particular mitzvah to publicize the miracle by placing our hanukkiyot where they can be seen by the passers-by. Succoth also has some aspects of taking our religious observances into the public square. The Talmud records the custom in ancient Jerusalem where people carried their lulavim into the street when they went to synagogue, when they visited the sick, and when they went to comfort mourners. Even today, many Jews carry their lulavim in public. When it comes to the succah itself, this structure is generally in view of the public: it's built on a patio, or yard, or courtyard etc. i.e. where Jews and non-Jews can see it

Although so much of our religious life is indoors--in the private domain of family and friends--we are sometimes obligated to make a public demonstration of our religious commitments. On Hanukkah, we want to remind the entire world that the Jews heroically defended

themselves against the Syrian Hellenists and won independence for the Jewish people. We want everyone to know that, with God's help, we were victorious against powerful and far more numerous enemies.

On Succoth, we also want to convey a message to the general public. The lulav and etrog are symbolic of weapons; they indicate that we are proud of our faith and we are prepared to fight for the honor of our Torah and for our people. The succah is a symbolic statement that although we wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God's providence protected us, and we ultimately entered the Promised Land. The public demonstration of these mitzvoth indicates our pride and commitment in who we are and what we represent. If we have respect for ourselves and our traditions, we can expect that the nations of the world will also come to respect Judaism.

Sometimes it is necessary for us to stand up in public on behalf of our faith and our people. When Jews betray their faith and their people in public, this undermines the entire Jewish enterprise. If Jewish storekeepers open their shops on Shabbat and holidays, why should non-Jews respect our Sabbath and holy days? If Jews ignore the laws of kashruth, why should non-Jews respect our dietary laws? If Jews don't live up to the high standards of Torah ethics, why should non-Jews admire the Jewish way of life? If Jewish political figures hold press conferences and public meetings on Jewish holy days, why should non-Jews show any deference to our holy days?

Succoth is an important reminder that being Jewish also entails a public stance, the courage to be who we are and stand for our traditions without embarrassment or apology. If we do not stand up for ourselves, who will stand up for us? And if we do stand up for ourselves, we will be worthy heirs of a great people who have given so much--and have so much more to give--to our world.

Lies, Cries, Arise: Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Psalm associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah seems to be a strange choice. It is Psalm 12, a Psalm that Martin Buber has described as a prophecy “against the generation of the lie.” The Psalmist cries out: “Help, O Lord, for the pious cease to be…They speak falsehood each with his neighbor, with flattering lip, with a double heart they speak.” The generation is led by oppressors who say “our tongue will make us mighty,” who arrogantly crush the downtrodden.

Buber comments: “They speak with a double heart, literally ‘with heart and heart’…The duplicity is not just between heart and mouth, but actually between heart and heart. In order that the lie may bear the stamp of truth, the liars as it were manufacture a special heart, an apparatus which functions with the greatest appearance of naturalness, from which lies well up to the ‘smooth lips’ like spontaneous utterances of experience and insight.” (*Good and Evil* , New York, 1953, p. 10)

The Psalmist is not merely condemning his “generation of the lie,” but other future generations that also will be characterized by lying, bullying, oppressing; that will be led by smooth talking and corrupt demagogues. But the Psalmist turns prophet in proclaiming that

God will arise and protect the victims of the liars. Truth will prevail. “It is You, O Lord, who will guard the poor, You will protect us forever from this generation.” And yet, the Psalm ends on a realistic note: “But the wicked will strut around when vileness is exalted among humankind.”

Although God will ultimately redeem the world from the “generation of the lie,” this will not happen right away. As long as people submit to the rule of the wicked, the wicked will stay in power. In the long run, God will make truth prevail over lies. In the short run, though, it is the responsibility of human beings to stand up against tyranny, lies, and arrogant smooth talking liars. If the wicked are not resisted, they will continue to strut around and feel invincible.

What does this Psalm have to do with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah, known in our tradition as *Zeman Simhateinu*, the time of our rejoicing? On a simplistic level, the Psalm might have been chosen because it opens with *Lamnatseah al ha-Sheminith*, to the Chief Musician on the Eighth (the “eighth” being a musical instruction). Since it mentions eight, it is thus connected with Shemini Hag Atsereth, the eighth day closing festival.

It would seem, though, that our sages must have had something deeper in mind in choosing Psalm 12 to be associated with this festival. In the Amidah of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we include prayers asking the Almighty to inspire awe in all His creations and to have humanity acknowledge Him as Ruler of the universe. We pray for a time when “iniquity shall close its mouth and all wickedness vanish as smoke when You will remove the rule of tyranny from the earth.” On Succoth, our ancestors offered 70 offerings in the Temple, symbolically praying for the well-being and harmony of all humanity (understood by the rabbis to be composed of 70 nations). Psalm 12 is an appropriate continuation of these themes, and is a fitting reminder at the end of the holiday season that we depend on God to bring truth and peace to humanity.

But Psalm 12 adds an important dimension. Although we certainly must pray to the Almighty for redemption, we also bear responsibility for the sad state of human affairs. Prayer alone isn’t enough to solve our problems. We need to muster the courage to stand up against lies and tyranny, to uproot “the generation of the lie.”

Throughout the world, we see examples of simple people rising up against harsh and powerful tyrants. They risk their lives, their livelihoods, their families—but they have reached the breaking point where they can no longer tolerate the unjust tyrannies under which they live. Many suffer and die in the process—but ultimately, it is hoped that the masses of good people will prevail over the dictators and demagogues. People in power rarely cede their power peacefully and gracefully. The entrenched powers will do whatever they need to do to maintain their control.

Fortunately, we live in free societies. Although we certainly have our share of imperfect rulers and leaders, we also have a system that allows for change and peaceful transition. The people can take control by voting, by peaceful protests, by peaceful strikes. Many people are not willing to stand up and be counted. They are happy to pray for God to bring peace and truth to the world. They are comfortable letting others take the risks of fighting the establishment’s power base. Psalm 12 comes at the end of the holiday season to remind us: yes, God will make truth and justice prevail; but in the meanwhile, evil will persist as long as we let it persist.

Unless we are willing to stand up against the tyrants and demagogues, they will continue to crush us. They will continue their lies and p.r. spins and political manipulations. The concluding lesson we should take from this holiday season is: building a true, just and moral community and society depends on us.

Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth and Simhat Torah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

On August 21, 1911, Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," one of the world's most famous paintings, was stolen right off the wall of the Louvre museum in Paris. The crime wasn't discovered until the next day. The Louvre was closed for a week due to the police investigation.

When the Louvre was re-opened, a line of people visited the museum to stare solemnly at the empty space on the wall where the "Mona Lisa" had once hung. One visitor left a bouquet of flowers. Indeed, until the painting was ultimately returned to the Louvre on December 30, 1913, throngs of visitors came to the museum to gaze at the blank wall! More people seem to have come to see the blank wall than had come in the previous two years to see the actual painting.

What motivated so many visitors to come to see the blank wall?

Perhaps it was sadness at the loss of a great art treasure.

Perhaps it was due to regret. Why hadn't we come to see it more often while it was hanging? Why was security at the museum so lax?

Perhaps it was concern for the future. Will the "Mona Lisa" ever be found and returned?

Whatever the motivation, thousands of people came to the Louvre to stare at an empty space.

I think this episode can be understood as a parable of life.

Our lives are a collection of pieces of art—our family, friends, experiences, careers, successes.

We come to a blank wall: failures, losses.

We are struck with sadness. We have lost possibilities, opportunities, relationships.

We are struck with regret. We could have and should have done better with our lives.

We are concerned for the future. Can we restore our losses, or can we at least learn to live with our losses and failures?

We have come to the closing days of our holy day period. Rosh Hashana is a time to tour events of our past year and to re-examine the artwork of our lives. Yom Kippur is a time to recount sins and errors and to think about what we could have done better. Succoth is a time to celebrate our accomplishments in a spirit of happiness.

Then we come to Shemini Hag Atsereth—a blank wall. This is a holiday with no frills, no shofar, no fasting, no lulav, no succah. The blank wall symbolizes our sadness, regrets, possibilities, hopes, and aspirations.

After what we have experienced during the holiday season, we now reach a blank wall; we are called upon to start working on our new masterpiece—the life still ahead of us. It is time to rally our strength, our wisdom, our sensitivities to the needs of others.

The “blank wall” attracts us because it is latent with opportunities, it opens new challenges, it calls on us to imagine what we can be and what we can create in the year and years ahead.

It is fitting that Simhat Torah is associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth. This is a reminder that the art of the blank wall can be meaningfully restored if we ourselves rejoice in our Torah heritage. The spiritual power of Torah has infused the Jewish people for thousands of years—and it has the power to help each of us develop our lives into a new, beautiful masterpiece.

Above Tragedy: Thoughts for Simhat Torah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

We have spent many months reading about the life of Moses. Today, in one of the most dramatic episodes of the Torah, we read about his death—a very agonizing scene. Moses, the great leader, teacher, and prophet, climbs to the summit of Mount Nebo and looks out over the horizon at the Promised Land. As he stands silent and alone, God tells him: “You are beholding the land that I have promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saying, ‘I shall give it to your descendants.’ See it with your eyes. You shall not cross into the land.”

What thoughts must then have tortured Moses! What anguish must have filled his soul! To dream, to work a whole lifetime for something and then to be told in final terms that your hopes would never be realized…Is this not the heart of tragedy?

Most commentators seek a reason for such a tragic ending to Moses’ life. They look for a sin committed by Moses to explain his punishment. Some say it was the breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Others suggest that it was his striking the stone with his staff, rather than speaking to it.

I could never understand these commentators. Certainly, Moses sinned; but which human being has never sinned? Moreover, his sins were really not serious. He had good reason to be enraged when he found his people worshiping the golden calf. And the difference between striking the stone and speaking to it is, after all, insignificant. The event was still miraculous. Certainly, Moses did so many great things for which he deserved reward. He was the only human being to see God “face to face.” He was the greatest prophet, the greatest teacher, the most dedicated leader. Certainly, he was worthy of entering the Promised Land.

Moses was not being punished for a sin. Rather, the Torah is describing in a very vivid way something about the human predicament. Death is a built-in part of human existence. Though we may have noble ideals, though we may work hard, we cannot expect to fulfill all of our ambitions. Moses, perhaps the most ideal character in the Bible, was plagued by being mortal; and great mortals simply cannot realize all of their hopes. This is a profound truth of the nature of humankind.

Today, we are also introduced to another biblical character, Adam. I think it is very ironic that the birth of Adam and the death of Moses are juxtaposed in today’s Torah readings. Adam was given paradise. He was a man who had no dreams or ambitions, for he had everything

he wanted. He was complacent, satisfied, and untroubled by ideals.
Existing in such a state, though, is problematic, because there is no motivation for living. If there is no place for one to advance, he must fall back. And so, Adam fell. But whereas Moses was a tragic hero, Adam was just plain tragic. Whereas Moses had lived his life working toward a dream so that when death came it tragically cut off a living force, Adam never knew the value of life; his fall from paradise is far less climactic.

Ultimately, being mortals, we each have the choice of being either tragic heroes or simply tragic. In which category do we belong?

Unfortunately, many of us are satisfied with ourselves, with our wealth, with our social position. We are especially complacent in the realm of our religious attainments. We think we practice our religion properly and do enough mitzvoth.

Today, on Simhat Torah, we completed the reading of the Torah. We could have said that we have finished our study, we are content. But we did not do these things. We began immediately to read Bereishith. We started the Torah all over again. We know that we will never fully comprehend the Torah or fully realize its sacred dreams—but we move forward and onward. We cannot rest from the Torah; to rest is to become tragic.

As Jews, therefore, we are part of a tradition that not only thrives on noble ideals, but which loves noble actions. Like Moses, we should seek to keep our religious ideals and practices on fire within us, so that they give light not only to ourselves but to all who come near us. We should devote our lives to attaining religious perfection for ourselves and for our society; and though we may never enter the Promised Land, we will be able to stand on a summit and see our dreams realized in the future through our children. We may never walk into the land, but we will have led an entire generation to the point where they can enter.

Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism:
The Binding of Isaac as a Test Case for the Limits of Devotion[1]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Introduction

The *Akedah*, or binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1–19),[i] is a foundational narrative in Jewish tradition. It plays a prominent role on Rosh Hashanah, and many communities include it in their daily morning liturgy.

The *Akedah* is a religiously and morally challenging story. What should we learn from it with regard to faith and religious life? Perhaps more than any other narrative in the Torah, the *Akedah* teaches how one can and should be extremely religious, but also teaches how to avoid the dangers of religious extremism. This essay will consider the ideas of several modern thinkers who explore the religious and moral implications of the *Akedah*.

Why Did Abraham Not Protest?

Although the idea of child sacrifice is abhorrent to us, it made sense in Abraham's historical context. Many of Israel's neighbors practiced child sacrifice. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham may have surmised that perhaps God required this of him. Of course, God stopped Abraham and went on to outlaw such practices as a capital offense (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5). We find child sacrifice abhorrent precisely because the Torah and the prophets broke rank with large segments of the pagan world and transformed human values for the better.[ii]

In its original context, then, the *Akedah* highlights Abraham's exemplary faithfulness. He followed God's command even when the basis of the divine promise for progeny through Isaac was threatened.[iii]

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was deeply troubled by the *Akedah*. He maintained that nobody is certain that he or she is receiving prophecy, whereas everyone knows with certainty that murder is immoral and against God's will. Therefore, Abraham failed God's test by acquiescing to sacrifice Isaac. According to Kant, Abraham should have refused, or at least protested.[iv]

However, the biblical narrative runs flatly against Kant's reading. After the angel stops Abraham from slaughtering Isaac, the angel proclaims to Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). God thereby praises Abraham's exceptional faith and commitment.[v]

Adopting a reading consistent with the thrust of the biblical narrative, Rambam draws the opposite conclusion from that of Kant. The fact that Abraham obeyed God demonstrates his absolute certainty that he had received true prophecy. Otherwise, he never would have proceeded:

> [Abraham] hastened to slaughter, as he had been commanded, his son, his only son, whom he loved…. For if a dream of prophecy had been obscure for the prophets, or if they had doubts or incertitude concerning what they apprehended in a vision of prophecy, they would not have hastened to do that which is repugnant to nature, and [Abraham's] soul would not have consented to accomplish an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:24).[vi]

Although Rambam correctly assesses the biblical narrative, there is still room for a different moral question. After God informs Abraham about the impending destruction of Sodom, Abraham pleads courageously on behalf of the righteous people who potentially lived in the wicked city, appealing to God's attribute of justice (Gen. 18:23–33).[vii] How could Abraham stand idly by and not challenge God when God commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son?

By considering the Abraham narratives as a whole, we may resolve this dilemma. Abraham's actions in Genesis chapters 12–25 may be divided into three general categories: (1) responses to direct commands from God; (2) responses to promises or other information from God; and (3) responses to situations during which God does not communicate directly with Abraham.

Whenever God commands an action, Abraham obeys without as much as a word of protest or questioning. When Abraham receives promises or other information from God, Abraham

praises God when gratitude is in order, and he questions or challenges God when he deems it appropriate. Therefore, Abraham's silence when following God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac is to be expected. And so are Abraham's concerns about God's promises of progeny or information about the destruction of Sodom. The Torah thereby teaches that it is appropriate to question God, while simultaneously demanding faithfulness to God's commandments as an essential aspect of the mutual covenant between God and Israel.[viii]

The Pinnacle of Religious Faith

Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz suggests that Abraham and Job confronted the same religious test. Do they serve God because God provides all of their needs, or do they serve God under all conditions? Both were God-fearing individuals prior to their trials, but they demonstrated their unwavering commitment to God through their trials.[ix]

Professor Moshe Halbertal derives a different lesson from the *Akedah*. God wishes to be loved by us, but pure love of God is almost impossible, since we are utterly dependent on God for all of our needs. We generally express love through absolute giving. When sacrificing to God, however, we always can hold out hope that God will give us more. Cain and Abel could offer produce or sheep to God, but they likely were at least partially motivated to appeal to God for better crops and flocks next year. What can we possibly offer God that demonstrates our true love?

Through the *Akedah*, God gives Abraham the opportunity to offer a gift outside of the realm of exchange. Nothing can replace Isaac, since his value to Abraham is absolute. As soon as Abraham demonstrates willingness to offer his own son to God, he has proven his total love and commitment. As the angel tells Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12).

Halbertal explains that Abraham's offering a ram in place of Isaac becomes the paradigm for later sacrifice. Inherent in all sacrifice in the Torah is the idea is that we love God to the point where we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves or our children to God. The animal serves as a substitution. The *Akedah* thereby represents the supreme act of giving to God.[x]

> The ideas explored by Professors Leibowitz and Halbertal lie at the heart of being extremely religious. Abraham is a model of pure, dedicated service and love of God. Such religious commitment is ideal, but it also comes with the lurking danger of religious extremism. We turn now to this critical issue.

Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) composed a classic work on the *Akedah*, entitled *Fear and Trembling*. He argued that if one believes in religion because it appears reasonable, that is a secular distortion. True religion, maintains Kierkegaard, means being able to suspend reason and moral conscience when God demands it. Kierkegaard calls Abraham a knight of faith for his willingness to obey God and sacrifice his son.

Although Kierkegaard did not advocate violence in the name of religion, his view is vulnerable to that horrific outcome. In his philosophy, serving God must take precedence over all moral or rational concerns. A fatal problem arises when the representatives of any religion claim that God demands violence or other forms of immorality.

In a powerful article written in the wake of the terrorist attack on New York City on September 11, 2001, Professor David Shatz addresses this urgent question.[xi] He observes that in general, one must create a system that balances competing ideals in order to eliminate ideological extremism. For example, one may place law against liberty, self-respect against respect for others, and discipline against love. In religion, however, there is a fundamental problem: Placing any value against religion, especially if that competing value can prevail over religion, defeats religious commitment.

> Professor Shatz suggests a way to have passion for God tempered by morality and rationality without requiring any religious compromise. One must embrace morality and rationality as *part* of the religion. The religion itself must balance and integrate competing values as part of the religion. This debate traces back to Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, who insisted that God chooses moral things to command. In contrast, the medieval Islamic philosophical school of *Ash'ariyya* maintained that whatever God commands is by definition good.[xii]
> Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah* fails Professor Shatz's solution to religious extremism and is therefore vulnerable to the dangers of immorality in the name of God. In fact, Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah* fails the Torah itself: God stops Abraham, and then repudiates child sacrifice in the Torah. Whereas Kierkegaard focuses on Abraham's willingness to suspend morality to serve God, God rejects immorality as part of the Torah's religion. The expression of religious commitment in the Torah is the fear of God, which by definition includes the highest form of morality.[xiii] There must never be a disconnect between religious commitment and moral behavior, and Israel's prophets constantly remind the people of this critical message.[xiv] Thus, the Torah incorporates morality and rationality as essential components of its religious system.
> In a similar spirit, Rabbi Shalom Carmy maintains that the *Akedah* teaches religious passion without fanaticism, and that even when a God-fearing individual keeps God's commandments, he or she remains responsive to the validity of the ethical.[xv]

It also is important to stress that people who act violently in the name of religion generally are *not* crazy. Rather, they are following their religious system as they understand it and as their clerics teach it. Such manifestations of religion themselves are evil and immoral. Postmodernism thinks it can relativize all religion and thereby protect against the violence generated by religious extremism. In reality, however, postmodernism achieves the opposite effect as its adherents no longer have the resolve to refer to evil as evil and to battle against it. Instead, they try to rationalize evil away. This position empowers the religious extremists.[xvi]

Professor Shatz acknowledges that, lamentably, there are negative extremist elements among some Jews who identify themselves as religious. However, their attempts to justify their immorality with Torah sources in fact do violence to our sacred texts.[xvii] Such Jews are *not* extremely religious, but rather pervert the Torah and desecrate God's Name. Similarly, all religions must build morality and rationality into their systems so that they can pursue a relationship with God while avoiding the catastrophic consequences of religious extremism. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has remarked, "the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion."[xviii]

Conclusion

The *Akedah* teaches several vital religious lessons. Ideal religion is about serving God, and is not self-serving. We aspire to be extremely religious, and Abraham serves as a paragon of the ideal connection to God. The *Akedah* also teaches the key to avoid what is rightly condemned as religious extremism. Morality and rationality must be built into every religious system, or else its adherents risk lapsing into immorality in the name of their religion.

One of the best means of promoting our vision is to understand and teach the underlying messages of the *Akedah*. We pray that all faith communities will join in affirming morality and rationality as being integral to their faiths. It is imperative for us to serve as emissaries of a different vision to what the world too often experiences in the name of religion, to model the ideal fear of Heaven that the Torah demands, and ultimately to sanctify God's Name.

Notes

[1] This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, *The Keys to the Palace: Essays Exploring the Religious Value of Reading the Bible* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2017), pp. 132-142.

[i] The Hebrew root for *Akedah* appears in Gen. 22:9, and refers to binding one's hands to one's feet. This is the only time that this root appears in the entire Bible.

[ii] Samuel David Luzzatto suggests that this legislation was in part an anti-pagan polemic, demonstrating that the Torah's idea of love of God does not involve the immoral sacrifice of one's child.

[iii] Cf. *Lev. Rabbah* (Margaliot) 29:9.

[iv] Kant was not the first person troubled by the moral implications of the *Akedah*. In the second century BCE, the author of the non-canonical book of Jubilees (17:16) ascribed the command to sacrifice Isaac to a "satanic" angel named Mastemah, rather than God Himself as presented in the Torah. Adopting a different tactic, Rabbi Eleazar Ashkenazi b. Nathan Habavli (fourteenth century) maintains that the *Akedah* must have occurred in a prophetic vision. Had the *Akedah* occurred in waking state, he argued, Abraham surely would have protested as he did regarding Sodom (in Marc Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* [Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, p. 70]).

[v] See Rabbi Yonatan Grossman, *Avraham: Sippuro shel Massa* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2014), pp. 300–301.

[vi] Translation from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 501–502.

[vii] See especially Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?" in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 62–88.

[viii] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Abraham Narratives and Commentary," in *Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp.

192–212; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127–154; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 99–122.

[ix] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 48–49, 259. Cf. Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005), pp. 351–366.

[x] Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 22–25.

[xi] David Shatz, "'From the Depths I Have Called to You': Jewish Reflections on September 11th and Contemporary Terrorism," in *Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th*, ed. Michael J. Broyde (New York: Beth Din of America and K'hal Publishing, 2011), pp. 197–233. See also Marvin Fox, "Kierkegaard and Rabbinic Judaism," in *Collected Essays on Philosophy and on Judaism*, vol. 2, ed. Jacob Neusner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 29–43.

[xii] See Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 38.

[xiii] See, for example, Gen. 20:11; 42:18; Exod. 1:17, 21; Deut. 25:18.

[xiv] See, for example, Isa. 1:10–17; Jer. 7:9–11; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–25; Mic. 6:4–8.

[xv] Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "Passion, Paradigm, and the Birth of Inwardness: On Rabbi Kook and the *Akeda*," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 459–478.

[xvi] For a chilling study of the virtual elimination of the very concept of sin and evil from much of Western literature, see Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

[xvii] See Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, "Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionists and Moral Constraints," *Tradition* 34:4 (Winter 2000), pp. 39–60.

[xviii] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 11.

THE MEANING OF THE BOOK OF JONAH[xviii]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The Talmud ascribes the composition of the Twelve Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly (*Bava Batra* 15a). Rashi explains that the books were bound together in one scroll because each was so short that some might get lost if not combined into a scroll of greater size.

Together they span a period of some 250-300 years. Jonah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah were eighth century prophets; Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Obadiah prophesied in the seventh-early sixth century; and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied in the late sixth century. Of the twelve, Joel is the most difficult to date, and we will discuss him in the fourth chapter on the Twelve Prophets.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to find a comprehensive theory to explain the purpose of the book, or why Jonah fled from his mission. For millennia, great interpreters have scoured the Book of Jonah's forty-eight verses for their fundamental messages.

One midrashic line suggests that unrepentant Israel would look bad by comparison were non-Israelites to repent.[xviii] Another proposes that Jonah was convinced that the Ninevites would repent and God would pardon them. Jonah feared that he then would be called a false prophet once his prediction of Nineveh's destruction went unfulfilled.[xviii]

Abarbanel does not find either answer persuasive. Perhaps Israel would be inspired to repent in light of Nineveh's repentance. Moreover, since the Ninevites did repent, they obviously believed Jonah to be a true prophet. Nowhere is there evidence of Jonah's being upset about his or Israel's reputation. It is unlikely that Jonah would have violated God's commandment for the reasons given by these midrashim.

Abarbanel (followed by Malbim) submits that Jonah feared the future destruction of Israel by Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital (cf. Ibn Ezra on 1:1). Rather than obey God's directive, Jonah elected to martyr himself on behalf of his people. However, the Book of Jonah portrays Nineveh as a typological Sodom-like city-state, not as the historical capital of Assyria. Jonah's name appears eighteen times in the book, but nobody else—not even the

king of Nineveh – is named. Additionally, there is no mention of Israel or its king in the story. The Book of Jonah appears to have a self-contained message that transcends its historical context.[xviii]

Seeking another approach, the twentieth century scholars Yehoshua Bachrach,[xviii] Elyakim Ben-Menahem,[xviii] and Uriel Simon[xviii] cite Jonah's protest from the end of the book:

He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)

These scholars understand Jonah's protest as a rejection of the very idea of repentance. To support their reading, they cite a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud:

It was asked of wisdom: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, Misfortune pursues sinners (Prov. 13:21). It was asked of prophecy: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, The person who sins, only he shall die (Ezek. 18:4, 20). It was asked of God: what is the punishment for a sinner? He replied, let him repent and gain atonement. (J.T. *Makkot* 2:6 [31d])

From this point of view, there is a fundamental struggle between God on the one hand and wisdom and prophecy on the other. Jonah was not caught up in the details of this specific prophecy; rather, he was protesting the very existence of repentance, preferring instead that God mete out immediate punishment to sinners.

Although this approach is more comprehensive than the earlier interpretations, it remains incomplete. Much of the book has little to do with repentance or God's mercy – particularly Jonah's lengthy encounter with the sailors in chapter 1 who never needed to repent, and his prayer in chapter 2 where Jonah likely did not repent. Aside from downplaying the role of the sailors in chapter 1, Uriel Simon sidesteps Jonah's prayer by contending that it was not an original part of the story.[xviii] Regardless of its origins, however, Jonah's prayer appears integral to the book, and likely contains one of the keys to unlocking the overall purposes of the narrative.[xviii] Finally, most prophets appear to have accepted the ideas of repentance and God's mercy. Why should Jonah alone have fled from his mission?

Although these interpreters are correct in stressing Jonah's protest against God's attribute of mercy in 4:2, Jonah also disapproved of that attribute particularly when God applies it to pagans. It appears that this theme lies at the heart of the book, creating an insurmountable conflict between Jonah and God. Jonah was unwilling to accept God's mercy even to the most ethically perfected pagans because that manifestation of mercy was antithetical to Jonah's desired conception of God.

CHAPTER 1

Although they were pagans, the sailors were superior people. They prayed to their deities during the storm, treated Jonah with respect even after he had been selected by the lottery as the cause of their troubles, and went to remarkable lengths to avoid throwing him overboard even after he confessed. They implored God for mercy. When they finally did throw Jonah into the sea, they made vows to God.

Jonah, on the other hand, displays none of these lofty qualities. He rebelled against God by fleeing and then slept while the terrified sailors prayed. Remarkably, the captain sounds like a prophet when addressing Jonah— “How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish” (1:6)—while Jonah sounds like the inattentive audience a prophet typically must rebuke. The captain even uses the same words in 1:6 (*kum kera*) that God had in commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh in 1:2 (*kum lekh…u-kera*).

When Jonah finally does speak in the text, the narrator divides the prophet’s words between a direct quotation and narrative:

“I am a Hebrew! (*Ivri anokhi*),” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land.” The men were greatly terrified, and they asked him, “What have you done?” And when the men learned that he was fleeing from the service of the Lord – for so he told them . . . (1:9-10)

Although Jonah told the sailors what they wanted to know, that his flight from God had caused the storm, it is the narrator who relates those crucial words rather than placing them into Jonah’s direct speech. Moreover, Jonah’s statement that he was a Hebrew who worshipped the true God appears tangential to the terrified sailors’ concerns. Why would the narrator frame Jonah’s statement this way?

The term “*Ivri* (Hebrew)” often is used when contrasting Israelites with non-Israelites.[xviii] In this vein, Elyakim Ben-Menahem notes that Jonah’s usage of *Ivri* in 1:9 is fitting, since he was contrasting himself with pagans. Jonah’s perceived dissimilarity to the pagan sailors is the main emphasis of chapter 1. Ben-Menahem further suggests that the text does not report Jonah’s response to the captain so that his dramatic proclamation in 1:9 could appear as his first words recorded in the book.[xviii] This contrast with the sailors was most important to Jonah; therefore, the narrator placed only these words in his direct quotation.

To explain the bifurcation of Jonah’s statement, Abarbanel advances a midrashic-style comment: “The intent [of the word *Ivri*] is not only that he was from the Land of the Hebrews; rather, he was a sinner [*avaryan*] who was transgressing God’s commandment.” Abarbanel surmises that the sailors deduced from this wordplay on *Ivri* that Jonah was fleeing! For Abarbanel’s suggestion to work as the primary meaning of the text, of course, the sailors would have to have known Hebrew and to have been as ingenious as Abarbanel to have caught that wordplay. Though not a compelling *peshat* comment, Abarbanel’s insight is

conceptually illuminating regarding the overall purpose of chapter 1. Jonah emphatically contrasted himself with the pagan sailors; however, the narrator instead has contrasted Jonah with God. In chapter 1, Jonah was indeed Abarbanel's *Ivri*—a prophetic hero of true faith contrasting himself with pagans, and an *avaryan*—a sinner against God.

CHAPTER 2

After waiting three days inside the fish, Jonah finally prayed to God. Some (for example, Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel and Malbim) conclude that Jonah must have repented, since God ordered the fish to spew Jonah out, and Jonah subsequently went to Nineveh. However, there is no indication of repentance in Jonah's prayer.[xviii] One might argue further that God's enjoining Jonah to return to Nineveh in 3:1-2 indicates that Jonah had indeed not repented.[xviii] In his prayer, Jonah was more concerned with being saved and serving God in the Temple than he was in the reasons God was punishing him (2:5, 8).

Jonah concluded his prayer with two triumphant verses:

> They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare, but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the Lord's! (2:9-10)

Ibn Ezra and Radak believe that Jonah was contrasting himself with the sailors who had made vows in 1:16. Unlike their insincere (in Jonah's opinion) vows, Jonah intended to keep his vow to serve God in the Temple. Abarbanel and Malbim, however, do not think that Jonah would allude to the sailors. In their reading of the book, the sailors are only tangential to their understanding of the story, which specifically concerns Nineveh as the Assyrian capital. Instead, they maintain that Jonah was forecasting the insincere (in Jonah's opinion) repentance of the Ninevites.

One may combine their opinions: the sailors and Ninevites both are central to the book of Jonah, each receiving a chapter of coverage. They were superior people—the sailors all along, and the Ninevites after their repentance—but Jonah despised them because they were pagans. Jonah's prayer ties the episodes with the sailors and Ninevites together, creating a unified theme for the book, namely, that Jonah contrasts himself with truly impressive pagans. It seems that Rashi has the smoothest reading:

> *They who cling to empty folly*: those who worship idols; *forsake their own welfare*: their fear of God, from whom all kindness emanates. *But I*, in contrast, am not like this; *I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You*. (Rashi on Jon. 2:9-10)

As in chapter 1, Jonah's contrasting himself with pagans is the climactic theme of his prayer in chapter 2. To paraphrase the prayer in chapter 2, Jonah was saying "*Ivri anokhi* [I am a Hebrew]" (1:9)! I worship the true God in contrast to all pagans—illustrated by the sailors, and

later by the Ninevites. At the same time, Jonah still remained in his rebellion against God; he still was an *avaryan* [sinner]. According to this view, God allowed Jonah out of the fish to teach him a lesson, not because he had repented.

CHAPTER 3

Did Jonah obey God when he went to Nineveh? Radak assumes that he did. In contrast, Malbim believes that Jonah rebelled even as he walked through the wicked city. He should have explicitly offered repentance as an option, instead of proclaiming the unqualified doom of the Ninevites.

The Ninevites, on the other hand, effected one of the greatest repentance movements in biblical history. The king of Nineveh even said what one might have expected Jonah to say: “Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish” (3:8-9). We noted earlier that the same contrast may be said of the captain of the ship, who sounded like a prophet while Jonah rebelled against God.

Nineveh’s repentance might amaze the reader, but it did not impress Jonah. Abarbanel and Malbim (on 4:1-2) suggest that Jonah was outraged that God spared the Ninevites after their repentance for social crimes, since they remained pagans. This interpretation seems to lie close to the heart of the book. Jonah did not care about the outstandingly ethical behavior of the sailors nor the impressively penitent Ninevites. Jonah still was the *Ivri* he proclaimed himself to be in 1:9, sharply contrasting himself with the pagans he encountered, and thereby remaining distanced from the God he knew would have compassion on them.

CHAPTER 4

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Lord, saying, “O Lord! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.” (4:1-3)

Outraged by God’s sparing of Nineveh, Jonah revealed that he had fled initially because he knew that God would not punish the Ninevites. In his protest, Jonah appealed to God’s attributes of mercy, but with a significant deviation from the classical formula in the aftermath of the Golden Calf:

The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness . . . (Exod. 34:6)

For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)[xviii]

Jonah substituted “renouncing punishment (*ve-niham al ha-ra’ah*)” for “faithfulness (*ve-emet*).” Jonah’s God of truth would not spare pagans, yet God Himself had charged Jonah with a mission to save pagans! Thus, God’s prophecy at the outset of the narrative challenged Jonah’s very conception of God. Jonah would rather die than live with a God who did not conform to his religious outlook. Ironically, then, Jonah’s profound fear and love of God are what caused him to flee initially, and to demand that God take his life.

In an attempt to expose the fallacy of Jonah’s argument, God demonstrated Jonah’s willingness to die stemmed not only from idealistic motives, but also from physical discomfort:

“O Lord! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish . . . . Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.” The Lord replied, “Are you that deeply grieved?” (4:1-4)

And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah’s head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, “I would rather die than live.” Then God said to Jonah, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” “Yes,” he replied, “so deeply that I want to die” (4:8-9)

God added a surprising variable when explaining His sparing of the Ninevites. Although it had seemed from chapter 3 that the Ninevites had saved themselves with their repentance, God suddenly offered a different reason[xviii]:

Then the Lord said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (4:10-11)

God had been willing to destroy the Ninevites for their immorality, but forgave them once they repented. Although the Ninevites had misguided beliefs, God had compassion on them without expecting that they become monotheists. After all, they could not distinguish their right from their left in the sense that they served false deities. For Jonah, however, true justice required punishing even the penitent Ninevites because they still were pagans.

To paraphrase God’s response: You, Jonah, wanted to die for the highest of ideals. However, you also were willing to die rather than face heat. Your human limitations are now fully exposed. How, then, can you expect to understand God’s attributes?[xviii] God has little patience for human immorality, but can tolerate moral people with misguided beliefs. Jonah’s stark silence at the end of the book reflects the gulf between God and himself. He remained an “*Ivri*” to the very end.

CONCLUSION

The story of Jonah is about prophecy, the pinnacle of love of God, and the highest human spiritual achievement. But prophecy also causes increased anguish, as the prophet apprehends the infinite gap between God and humanity more intensely than anyone else. Jonah's spiritual attainments were obviously far superior to those of the sailors or the people of Nineveh – he most certainly could tell his right hand from his left. The closer he came to God, the more he simultaneously gained recognition of how little he truly knew of God's ways. This realization tortured him to the point of death.

God taught Jonah that he did not need to wish for death. He had influenced others for the better and had attained a deeper level of understanding of God and of his own place in this world. Despite his passionate commitment to God, Jonah needed to learn to appreciate moral people and to bring them guidance. He had a vital role to play in allowing God's mercy to be manifest.

The Book of Jonah is a larger-than-life story of every individual who seeks closeness with God. There is a paradoxical recognition that the closer one comes to God, the more one becomes conscious of the chasm separating God's wisdom from our own. There is a further challenge in being absolutely committed to God, while still respecting moral people who espouse different beliefs. A midrash places one final line in Jonah's mouth: "Conduct Your world according to the attribute of mercy!"[xviii] This midrash pinpoints the humbling lesson Jonah should have learned from this remarkable episode, and that every reader must learn.

[xviii] This chapter appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim* (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 163-172.

[xviii] See, for example, *Mekhilta Bo*, J.T. *Sanhedrin* 11:5, *Pesahim* 87b, cited by Rashi, Kara, Ibn Ezra, and Radak.

[xviii] *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 9, cited by R. Saadyah (*Emunot ve-De'ot* 3:5), Rashi, Kara, Radak, and R. Isaiah of Trani.

[xviii] See further discussion and critique of the aforementioned views in Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), introduction pp. 7-12.

[xviii] Yehoshua Bachrach, *Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu: le-Hora'at Sefer Yonah al pi ha-Mekorot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Religious Department of the Youth and Pioneering Division of the Zionist Organization, 1967), p. 51.

[xviii] Elyakim Ben-Menahem, *Da'at Mikra: Jonah,* in *Twelve Prophets* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction pp. 7-9.

[xviii] Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction pp. 12-13.

[xviii] Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction pp. 33-35; commentary pp. 15-17.

[xviii] See further critique of Simon in David Henshke, “The Meaning of the Book of Jonah and Its Relationship to Yom Kippur,” (Hebrew) *Megadim* 29 (1998), pp. 77-78; and see response of Uriel Simon to Henshke, “True Prayer and True Repentance,” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 31 (2000), pp. 127-131.

[xviii] See, e.g., Gen. 39:14, 17; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32; Exod. 1:15, 16, 19; 2:7, 11, 13; 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3. Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 42:13: R. Judah said: [*ha-Ivri* signifies that] the whole world was on one side (*ever*) while [Abraham] was on the other side (*ever*).

[xviii] Ben-Menahem, *Da’at Mikra: Jonah*, pp. 6-7. In his introduction, pp. 3-4, Ben-Menahem adds that chapter 1 is arranged chiastically and Jonah’s proclamation in v. 9 lies at the center of that structure, further highlighting its centrality to the chapter.

[xviii] Cf. Rashi, Kara, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency. Even Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Malbim, who assert that Jonah must have agreed to go to Nineveh, grant that Jonah was unhappy about this concession. Adopting a middle position, Sforno suggests that Jonah repented, but the prayer included in the book is a psalm of gratitude after Jonah already was saved. Rob Barrett (“Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between Y-H-W-H and Jonah,” *JSOT* 37:2 (2012), p. 244) suggests additional ironies in Jonah’s prayer: Jonah proclaims that he has called out to God (2:3), but in fact has refused to call out to Nineveh or to God while on the boat. Jonah states that God saved him because he turned to God, while he is fleeing God’s command.

[xviii] Ibn Ezra counters that Jonah specifically stayed near Nineveh so that he would be ready to go with a second command. Alternatively, Ben-Menahem (*Da’at Mikra: Jonah*, p. 13) suggests that Jonah might have thought that God had sent someone else.

[xviii] For further analysis of the interrelationship between Joel, Jonah, and Exodus 34, see Thomas B. Dozeman, “Inner Biblical Interpretation of Y-H-W-H’s Gracious and Compassionate Character,” *JBL* 108 (1989), pp. 207-223.

[xviii] For fuller exploration of this and related disparities, see Hayyim Angel, “The Uncertainty Principle of Repentance in the Books of Jonah and Joel,” in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 148-161.

[xviii] See further discussion in Bachrach, *Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu*, pp. 66-68.

[xviii] *Midrash Jonah*, ed. Jellinek, p. 102, quoted in Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction p. 12. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that during the entire episode, Jonah needed to learn important lessons in becoming a prophet. God therefore sent him on this initial mission to Nineveh. Only after this episode did God send him on a more favorable prophetic mission to Israel (II Kings 14:23-27). “Commentary on Jonah” (Hebrew),

HaMa'ayan 51:1 (Tishri 5771-2010), pp. 8-9.

KOHELET: SANCTIFYING THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE[xviii]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

INTRODUCTION

Tanakh is intended to shape and guide our lives. Therefore, seeking out *peshat*—the primary intent of the authors of Tanakh—is a religious imperative and must be handled with great care and responsibility.

Our Sages recognized a hazard inherent to learning. In attempting to understand the text, nobody can be truly detached and objective. Consequently, people's personal agendas cloud their ability to view the text in an unbiased fashion. An example of such a viewpoint is the verse, "let us make man" from the creation narrative, which uses the plural "us" instead of the singular "me" (Gen. 1:26):

> R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonatan's name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, "And God said: Let Us make man," etc., he said: "Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics (for maintaining a plurality of gods)?" "Write," replied He; "And whoever wishes to err will err." (*Gen. Rabbah* 8:8)

The midrash notes that there were those who were able to derive support for their theology of multiple deities from the this verse, the antithesis of a basic Torah value. God would not compromise truth because some people are misguided. It also teaches that if they wish, people will be able to find pretty much anything as support for their agendas under the guise of scholarship. Whoever wishes to err will err.

However, a second hazard exists, even for those sincerely seeking the word of God:

?It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master. God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him, God created in the beginning, I shall make man in image and likeness. (*Megillah* 9a)

This narrative reflects the concern that by popularizing the Torah through translation, less learned people may inadvertently derive the wrong meaning from the "plural" form of "Let *Us* make man." For this anticipated audience, God inspired the elders to deviate from the truth and translate with the singular form so that unwitting people would not err.

While this educational discussion is central to all Tanakh, Ecclesiastes probably concerned our Sages and later commentators more than any other biblical book. By virtue of its inclusion in Tanakh, Ecclesiastes' teaching becomes truth in our tradition. Regarding any book of Tanakh, if there are those who wish to err in the conclusions they draw, they will do so. However, our Sages worried that Ecclesiastes might cause even the most sincerely religious people to draw conclusions antithetical to the Torah, thereby causing greater religious harm than good. and consequently they considered censoring it from Tanakh:

R. Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilat said in Rav's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching. (*Shabbat* 30b)

Our Sages discerned *internal* contradictions in Ecclesiastes, but they also worried that Ecclesiastes contained *external* contradictions, that is, verses that appear to contradict the values of the Torah. They addressed this alarming prospect by concluding that since Ecclesiastes begins and ends with religiously appropriate teachings, those verses set the tone for the remainder of its contents. If one reaches anti-Torah conclusions from Ecclesiastes, it means that something was read out of context. A striking illustration of this principle is a midrashic teaching on Ecclesiastes 11:9. The verse reads:

O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes—but know well that God will call you to account for all such things.

To which our Sages respond:

R. Benjamin b. Levi stated: The Sages wanted to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, for they found in it ideas that leaned toward heresy. They argued: Was it right that Solomon should have said the following: O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you

to enjoyment in the days of your youth (Ecc. 11:9)? Moshe said, So that you do not follow your heart and eyes (Num. 15:39), but Solomon said, Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes (Ecc. 11:9)! What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Is there neither justice nor judge? When, however, he said, But know well that God will call you to account for all such things (Ecc. 11:9), they admitted that Solomon had spoken well. (*Lev. Rabbah* 28:1; cf. *Ecc. Rabbah* 1:3)

Were our Sages genuinely worried about people not reading the second half of a verse and consequently adopting a hedonistic lifestyle? Based on the midrashic method of reading verses out of their natural context, this verse likely posed a more serious threat in their society than it would for a *pashtan* who reads verses in context. The best defense against such egregious errors always is good *peshat*. This chapter will briefly consider the challenges of learning *peshat* in Ecclesiastes, and then outline a means of approaching Ecclesiastes as the unique book it is.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the level of *derash*, many of our Sages' comments on Ecclesiastes appear to be speaking about an entirely different book, one that is about Torah. The word "Torah" never appears in Ecclesiastes. Such midrashim appear to be radically reinterpreting Ecclesiastes to make it consistent with the rest of Tanakh. Similarly, many later commentators, including those generally committed to *peshat*, sometimes follow this midrashic lead of radical reinterpretation of the verses they find troubling.

This approach is rooted in the dual responsibility of our commentators. As scholars, they attempt to ascertain the original intent of the biblical text. However, they also are students and teachers of Jewish tradition. Their educational sensitivities often enter the interpretive arena, particularly when the surface reading of Ecclesiastes appears to threaten traditional values.[xviii]

For example, Kohelet opens by challenging the enduring value of the two leading manifestations of human success: wealth and wisdom. That Kohelet focuses on the ephemerality of wealth and physical enjoyment is not surprising, but his focus on the limitations and vulnerability of wisdom is stunning:

For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache. (1:18)

Sforno is so uncomfortable with this indictment of wisdom that he reinterprets the verse as referring to the ostensible wisdom of heretics. I often wonder if the *parshan* himself believes that a suggestion of this nature is *peshat*, that is, does he assume that Kohelet cannot possibly intend what he appears to be saying; or is he reinterpreting primarily to deflect such teachings from a less learned readership, as did the authors of the Septuagint in the Talmudic passage

cited above.[xviii]

Some commentators attempt to resolve certain internal and external contradictions in Ecclesiastes by attributing otherwise troubling (to these commentators) statements to other people—generally evil people or fools. Take, for example, one of Kohelet's most life-affirming declarations:

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. (9:7-9)

Ibn Ezra—the quintessential *pashtan*—writes, "This is the folly that people say in their hearts." Ibn Ezra maintains that Kohelet's own view is the opposite of what this passage says.[xviii] However, such attempts to escape difficult verses appear arbitrary. Nothing in the text signals a change in speaker (particularly if Kohelet wishes to reject that speaker's views), leaving decisions of attribution entirely in the hands of the commentator.[xviii]

Commentators also devote much energy to reconciling the internal contradictions of Ecclesiastes. See, for example, the lengthy discussions of Ibn Ezra (on 7:3) and Mordechai Zer-Kavod (introduction in *Da'at Mikra*, pp. 24-33). Some reconciliations are more textually convincing than others. Regardless, it is critical to ask why there are so many contradictions in the first place.[xviii] That so many strategies were employed to bring Ecclesiastes in line with the rest of Tanakh and with itself amply demonstrates that this Megillah is unusual. Ecclesiastes needs to be understood on its own terms rather than being reinterpreted away. *Pashtanim* also developed a methodology for confronting Ecclesiastes' challenges directly, as will be discussed presently.[xviii]

ATTEMPTING A *PESHAT* READING: GUIDELINES

In order to approach Ecclesiastes, we must consider a few of its verifiable features. Ecclesiastes is written about life and religious meaning in this world. The expression *tahat ha-shemesh* (beneath the sun) appears twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. *Tahat ha?shamayim* (under heaven) appears three additional times, and Rashi and Rashbam[xviii] maintain that this expression is synonymous with *tahat ha?shemesh*. In the same vein, people are called *ro'ei ha-shemesh* (those who behold the sun) in 7:11. The word *ani* (I) appears twenty-nine times, and its appearance is not grammatically necessary. The emphasis on *tahat ha-shemesh* demonstrates a this-worldly perspective, while the repetition of the word *ani* highlights the personal nature of the presentation. Michael V. Fox notes the difference between how 1:12-14 is written:

I, Kohelet, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun.—An unhappy business that, which God gave men to be concerned with! I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit of wind.

Fox then imagines how these verses could have been written without the focus on the personal narrative:

Studying and probing with wisdom all that happens under the sun is an unhappy business, which God gave men to be concerned with! All the happenings beneath the sun are futile and pursuit of wind.

Without the personal reflections that are central to Kohelet's thought, we are left with a series of dogmatic pronouncements. Kohelet's presentation invites readers into his mind as he goes through a personal struggle and process of reflection.[xviii]

Given this starkly anthropocentric perspective, Ecclesiastes *should* reflect different perspectives than the theocentric viewpoint of revealed prophecy. All people perceive the same reality that Kohelet does. On the basis of this observation, R. Simeon ben Manasia maintained that Ecclesiastes was not inspired altogether:

R. Simeon ben Manasia says: The Song of Songs defiles the hands because it was composed with divine inspiration. Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands because it is only Solomon's wisdom. (Tosefta *Yadayim* 2:14)[xviii]

Though his minority view was rejected by our tradition (which insists that Ecclesiastes is divinely inspired), Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of human wisdom.

The word *adam* appears forty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, referring to all humanity (except for one instance in 7:28, which refers specifically to males). Kohelet speaks in a universal language and does not limit its discourse to a Jewish audience. Torah and other specifically Jewish themes do not appear in Ecclesiastes, which focuses on more universal *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *yirat Elokim* (fear of God).

Similarly, God's personal name—the Tetragrammaton—never appears in Ecclesiastes. Only the generic name Elokim appears (forty times), signifying both the universalistic discourse of Ecclesiastes and also a distant, transcendant Deity, rather than a close and personal relationship with God. In Ecclesiastes, God appears remote, and it is impossible to fathom His means of governing the world. For example, Kohelet warns:

Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few. (5:1)

Since God is so infinitely superior, there is no purpose and much harm in protesting against God (cf. 3:11; 7:13-14). Moreover, Kohelet never speaks directly to God; he speaks *about* God and the human condition in a sustained monologue to his audience.

Tying together these strands of evidence, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) attempts to explain why Ecclesiastes is read (primarily by Ashkenazim[xviii]) on Sukkot:

> It is written in Zechariah chapter 14 that in the future the nations of the world will come [to Jerusalem] on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot to bring offerings…. And this was the custom in King Solomon's time. This is why Solomon recited Ecclesiastes on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot in the presence of the wise of the nations…. This is why it contains only the name Elokim, since [non-Jews] know only that Name of God. (*Harhev Davar* on Num. 29:12)

Needless to say, this means of justifying a custom is anachronistic from a historical vantage point. Nonetheless, Netziv's keen perception of Kohelet's addressing all humanity with universal religious wisdom captures the unique flavor of this book.

From a human perspective, life is filled with contradictions. Ecclesiastes' textual contradictions reflect aspects of the multifaceted and often paradoxical human condition. Significantly, Ecclesiastes' inclusion in Tanakh and its consideration as a divinely inspired book elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious truth.

While Ecclesiastes contains truth, it is but one aspect of truth rather than the whole truth. For example, Kohelet considers oppression an unchangeable reality:

> I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun. (4:1-3)

Kohelet never calls on God to stop this oppression, nor does he exhort society to stop it. He simply laments that human history repeats itself in an endless cycle of oppression. Kohelet sets this tone in 1:4-7 by analogizing human existence to the cyclical patterns in nature (Ibn Ezra).

In contrast, prophecy is committed to changing society so that it ultimately matches the ideal messianic vision. While a human perspective sees only repetitions of errors in history, prophecy reminds us that current reality need not mimic past history.

Kohelet grapples with the realities that wise/righteous people do not necessarily live longer or more comfortable lives than the foolish/wicked and that wisdom itself is limited and fallible:

> Here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration…. For I have set my mind to learn wisdom

and to observe the business that goes on in the world—even to the extent of going without sleep day and night—and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them. (8:14-17)

Kohelet maintains both sides of the classical conflict: God is just, but there are injustices manifested in the real world. While Kohelet cannot solve this dilemma, he discovers a productive response. Once a person can accept that the world appears unfair, one can realize that everything is a gift from God rather than a necessary consequence for righteousness.[xviii] We ultimately cannot fathom how God governs this world, but we can fulfill our religious obligations and grow from all experiences. Wisdom always is preferred to folly,[xviii] even though wisdom is limited and the wise cannot guarantee themselves a more comfortable life than fools, and everyone dies regardless.[xviii]

On a deeper level, the human psyche is profoundly attracted to being godlike. This tendency lies at the heart of the sins of Eve (Gen. 3:5, 22) and the builders of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).[xviii] Kohelet blames God for creating us with this desire while limiting us, rendering this innate drive impossible (7:14; cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra on 1:13). Confrontation with our own limitations leads to the extreme frustration manifest in Ecclesiastes. However, once we can accept that we cannot be God, this realization should lead to humility and awe of God:

He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass. Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; also, that whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God. I realized, too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore: Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it—and God has brought to pass that men revere Him. (Ecc. 3:11-14)[xviii]

Michael V. Fox summarizes Ecclesiastes' purpose as follows:

When the belief in a grand causal order collapses, human reason and self-confidence fail with it. This failure is what God intends, for after it comes fear, and fear is what God desires (3:14). And that is not the end of the matter, for God allows us to build small meanings from the shards of reason.[xviii]

While Kohelet challenges us at every turn, he simultaneously provides us the opportunity to find meaning beneath the unsolvable dilemmas.

Similarly, the universality of death tortures Kohelet. Once Kohelet accepts the reality of death, however, he concludes that it is preferable to attend funerals rather than parties, since focusing on our mortality will encourage us to live a more meaningful life:

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart. (7:2, cf. Rashbam)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik expands on this idea, and says that it is not that there can only be meaning in life if there is death:

The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality…. For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts. There is no future to be anticipated, no past to be remembered.[xviii]

Certain paradoxes and limitations are inherent to human existence, and not even the wisest of all men can make them disappear. Instead, Kohelet teaches us how to confront these challenges honestly and then embark on a process of intense existential frustration that ultimately leads to a greater recognition of the infinite gap between ourselves and God, leading in turn to humility and fear of God, leading in turn to living more religiously in every sense.[xviii]

CONCLUSION

A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims. (12:9)

Kohelet relentlessly challenges received wisdom rather than blindly accepting it. This process is accompanied by formidable dangers and responsibilities; but ignoring that pursuit comes with even greater dangers. Kohelet never abandons his beliefs nor his normative sense of what all God-fearing people should do; yet he also never abandons nor solves his questions and his struggles with human existence. By presenting this process through a personal account with inspired wisdom, he becomes the teacher of every thinking religious individual.

One midrash suggests that Solomon made the Torah accessible in a manner that nobody had done since the Torah was revealed. He taught those who were not prophets how to develop a relationship with God:

He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims (12:9)—he made handles (*oznayim*) to the Torah…. R. Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So until Solomon arose, no one ?could properly understand the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the Torah. (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:8)

Tanakh needed prophecy so that we could transcend ourselves and our limited perspectives to aspire to a more perfected self and world, and to reach out across the infinite gulf to God. Ultimately, however, it also needed Ecclesiastes to teach how to have faith from the human perspective, so that we may grow in our fear of Heaven and observe God's commandments in

truth.

Notes

This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim* (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 288-300.

[xviii] Throughout this chapter, "Ecclesiastes" refers to the name of the book, and "Kohelet" refers to the author. This chapter is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective," *Sukkot Reader* (New York: Tebah, 2008), pp. 39-54; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 190-204.

[xviii] For a survey and analysis of some of the distinctions between the readings of Rashi and Rashbam on Ecclesiastes, see Robert B. Salters, "The Exegesis of Rashi and Rashbam on *Qoheleth*," in *Rashi et la Culture Juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age*, ed. Gilbert Dahan, Gerard Nahon and Elie Nicolas (Paris: E. Peeters, 1997), pp. 151-161.

[xviii] For a discussion of the interplay between text and commentary regarding the faith of Abraham, see Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives," in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 192-212; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127-154.

[xviii] It should be noted that Ibn Ezra suggests an alternative interpretation for these verses. Precisely because he is so committed to *peshat*, Ibn Ezra occasionally resorts to attribution of difficult (to Ibn Ezra) verses to other speakers instead of radically reinterpreting those verses. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Hab. 1:1, 12; Ps. 89:1; Ecc. 3:19.

[xviii] Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some critical scholars employed the opposite tactic, i.e., that Eccelesiastes was a work that denied beliefs found elsewhere in Tanakh, and a later "Orthodox glossator" added to the text to correct those errors. One traditional rabbinic commentator—Shadal—actually adopted this argument in his commentary (published in 1860) and expressed the wish that our Sages would have banned Eccelesiastes from Tanakh. Four years after publishing his commentary, however, he fully regretted and retracted that view and expressed appreciation of Eccelesiastes' religious value. For a discussion of Shadal's initial interpretation of Eccelesiastes in light of his anti-haskalah polemics, see Shemuel Vargon, "The Identity and Dating of the Author of Eccelesiastes According to Shadal" (Hebrew), in *Iyyunei Mikra u?Parshanut 5, Presented in Honor of Uriel Simon*, ed. Moshe Garsiel et al. (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 365-384.

[xviii] Ibn Ezra and those who followed his approach assumed that intelligent people do not contradict themselves: "It is known that even the least of the sages would not compose a book and contradict himself" (Ibn Ezra on Ecc. 7:3). However, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik considered this perspective Aristotelian. Jewish thought, in contrast, accepts dialectical understandings of humanity and halakhah (*Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Eli D. Clark et al. [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007], p. 29). Cf. Michael V. Fox:

“Even without systematically harmonizing the text, the reader tends to push Qohelet to one side or another, because the Western model of rational assent regards consistency as a primary test of truth. But Qohelet continues to straddle the two views of reality, wavering uncomfortably but honestly between them” (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1999], p. 134).

See also Shalom Carmy and David Shatz, who write that “the Bible obviously deviates, in many features, from what philosophers (especially those trained in the analytic tradition) have come to regard as philosophy… Philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology: Ecclesiastes is entirely constructed on this principle. The philosophically more sophisticated work of harmonizing the contradictions in the biblical text is left to the exegetical literature” (“The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy* vol. 2, ed. Daniel H. Frank & Oliver Leaman [London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 13-14).

[xviii] See further discussions in Gavriel H. Cohn, *Iyyunim ba-Hamesh ha-Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 253-258; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, pp. 1-26.

[xviii] *The commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth*, ed. and trans. by Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

[xviii] Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), introduction p. xvii.

[xviii] See discussion of sacred scriptures ritually defiling the hands in Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), pp. 104-120.

[xviii] In Tractate *Soferim* chapter 14, the practice of reading Ecclesiastes is not mentioned when the other Megillot are. The first references to the custom of reading Ecclesiastes on Sukkot are in the prayer books of Rashi and *Mahzor Vitry* (eleventh century).

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 7:12, 19; 8:1; 9:18; 10:12.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:13-15; 6:8; 7:15-16, 23; 8:17; 9:1, 11, 16.

[xviii] In relation to the introduction of this chapter, Lyle Eslinger (“The Enigmatic Plurals Like ‘One of Us’ [Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7] in Hyperchronic Perspective,” *VT* 56 [2006], pp. 171-184) proposes that the “plural” form of God that appears three times in Genesis expresses the rhetorical purpose of creating boundaries between God and humanity. The first (“Let *Us* make man”) distinguishes between God and the godlike human; the other two occur when the boundaries are threatened by Eve and then the builders of the Tower of Babel.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 5:6; 8:12; 12:13.

[xviii] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, p. 49.

[xviii] *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, p. 33.

[xviii] In this regard, Eccelesiastes resembles the Book of Job. While a rigid system of direct reward and punishment is refuted by empirical evidence, this belief is replaced by an insistence on humble submission to God's will and the supreme value of faithfulness to God. Suffering has ultimate meaning even if we cannot fathom God's ways. See Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," *ZAW* 117 (2005), pp. 351-366.