

THE TAB

CONTENTS

Vol. 2 Issue 34

- 1 **Reading Jonah Backward**
A new look at the biblical tale we read on Yom Kippur reveals a story of God's ability to change
- 3 **The Rise of the Yom Kippur Appeal**
Why synagogues turned away from weekly 'shnuddering' and adopted an annual donation campaign instead
- 5 **A Tale of Two Atonements**
Why I couldn't forgive my brother as a Christian—but could ask his forgiveness as a Jew
- 7 **Leonard Cohen at Queen's Park**
Music made Cohen rich and famous, but it deprived us of the brilliance of his poetry
- 11 **Twofold**
For Yom Kippur, fiction by Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon
- 16 **Yizkor, Book**
On Yom Kippur, offering a blessing for the life and death of books
- 18 **During Kol Nidre, a Shocking Reminder of My Mortality**
As we recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer on Yom Kippur, we remember that life is finite. For me, that realization came with a jolt of electricity.
- 20 **How to Have Fun Breaking the Fast**
Cookbook author Jake Cohen offers advice on how to whip up a memorable post-Yom Kippur meal. But first, don't forget the coffee.

ARTS & LETTERS

Reading Jonah Backward

A new look at the biblical tale we read on Yom Kippur reveals a story of God's ability to change

BY NEIL HIRSCH

Growing up, I loved the nights where my parents would take my brother and me to the bookstore. We would get to wander around the kids' section and pick out a few new titles to bring home. I would find my father over in the thriller section, reading the last chapter of a book first to see if he wanted to buy it.

"But you already know the ending," I'd say to him.

"Sure, but then I know whether it'll be worth reading to figure out how the author got there," he'd respond.

Sometimes, if you want to best understand a book, you need to read it backward. Which is true for the Bible as much as for a good thriller. To best understand the Book of Jonah, read it backward.

That's because the Book of Jonah is written like a surprise. Each chapter builds on the last, with the moral of the entire book delivered in its last two verses. It's the last sentences that matter the most, finally cluing in readers that the book isn't about Jonah, the Ninevites, the sailors, or even the whale. The book is about God, and God's ability to change and show mercy and kindness.

We are getting ready to read the Book

of Jonah on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, a practice that is set in the Talmud, with no explanation as to why (BT Megillah 31a). Several generations later, Rabbi Joseph Karo writes in the Beit Yoseph, his first legal code, that we read the Book of Jonah to strengthen a person's *teshuvah*, the repentance we perform on Yom Kippur (Orach Hayyim 622:2:1).



UPCOMING HOLIDAY

Yom Kippur
The Day of Atonement



tabletmag.com/sections/holidays/yom-kippur

That rationale, though, generates more questions than answers. Who is the ultimate model of *teshuvah* in the Book of Jonah? Clue: The answer comes at the end of the book.

Indeed, Jonah himself cannot be our ultimate example, a man who runs away from God. Not only does Jonah go in the opposite direction of his calling, but when he is swallowed by the whale, his moment of transformation is lacking. On the third day in the whale's belly, Jonah calls out to God in prayer, "In my trouble I called to the Lord, / And He answered me; / From the belly of Sheol I cried out, / And You heard my voice" (Jonah 2:3, NJPS). The prayer that flows from this moment is not one of regret. As many scholars have noted, it is a psalm of lament. Jonah mourns his condition, sitting in a whale's stomach, rather than repenting for his misdeeds and committing to righteous actions, should he be released. "I thought I was driven away / Out of Your sight: / Would I ever gaze again / Upon Your holy Temple?" (Jonah 2:5, NJPS) These are the words not of a repentant man but of a despairing person. Sure, that is its own form of transformation, but it is not what we typically think of when calling for repentance.

The Ninevites are also an obvious model for *teshuvah*. They have transgressed, although we, as readers, are given no sense of their sins. They receive a prophet who tells them that God will destroy them if they do not repent. They take that threat seriously. The king calls for a fast day and dresses everyone—including the animals—in sackcloth.

Notably, the Ninevites' *teshuvah* seems to satisfy God. God does not destroy the city. Still, the Ninevites' modeling of repentance, too, is—to a degree—imperfect. The king's decree that even the beasts should fast and wear sackcloth adds a comical touch. And, with respect for those who prefer expansive readings of biblical texts, Jewish commentators over the generations voice discomfort that the model for Yom Kippur comes from outsiders.

These characters' imperfections as models of *teshuvah* encourage a different reading of the story. To solve the question of modeling, readers should look to the last verses of the book.

“Were he not given the time to sit in the whale’s stomach, Jonah would have never had the second chance to go to Nineveh.”

Jonah has set up camp east of the walls of Nineveh after delivering his prophecy. He sets up a booth there, waiting to see what comes of the city. The sun is fierce, and Jonah grows deeply uncomfortable, praying for death. So, God provides a *kikayon*—a gourd or shade plant—that eases Jonah's discomfort. The next day, though, God also provides a worm that kills the plant, and Jonah again grows desperate in the heat.

And so it is in the end that God delivers the book's ultimate message, which communicates a sense of mercy over punishing justice. "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 not I 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!" (Jonah 4:10–11, NJPS). Until the final two verses of the book, God only speaks to Jonah twice, instructing him with almost identical words to go to Nineveh.

Now, God speaks to Jonah to offer a moral for him and us.

Had Jonah not run in the other direction, there would have been no need for the sailors. If the storm had not come, Jonah would have never been heaved overboard and swallowed by the whale. Were

he not given the time to sit in the whale's stomach, Jonah would have never had the second chance to go to Nineveh. Each chapter builds toward the final verses, in which God speaks enigmatically.

Yet, reading the story backward, God's intent becomes more evident. God seems to say, *I care about the city of Nineveh. I have cultivated it, like a gardener cultivates a plant for shade, helping its people grow it into a significant—albeit imperfect—place. At first, I may have wanted to destroy it, but now seeing how they've changed, I realize I too must change. I care for those people.* That is why God sent Jonah to the city, to deliver a message that enables God to be merciful and kind, rather than wrathful and destructive.

It is the final verses we should put first, especially when reading the book to reinforce what we are attempting to do on Yom Kippur. God is the model for *teshuvah* in the story of Jonah. God has impulses toward destruction, which have been on display since Noah. Jonah is upset because he embodies the expectation that God's justice will come in the form of destruction. But Jonah says it himself, "I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment" (Jonah 4:2, NJPS). The message is that God can transform. God can change to do the caring thing rather than the punishing thing. And we—especially at a time of repentance—should strive to do the same.

Throughout Yom Kippur, we recite prayers that straddle this tension between a punishing and merciful God. Each time we lean toward that sense of punishment, the liturgy pulls us back from despair, encouraging us that God is slow to anger and abounding in kindness, if only we commit to lives of repentance, prayer, and righteous action. We read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur to emphasize the same point. The book strengthens our sense of *teshuvah*, because God is full of mercy and compassion, and is—as we come to see with the final two verses of the book—the ultimate model of repentance for humanity. ■

This article was originally published on September 21, 2023.

The Rise of the Yom Kippur Appeal

Why synagogues turned away from weekly ‘shnuddering’ and adopted an annual donation campaign instead

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

If ever there was a Rube Goldberg-esque contraption connected to the synagogue, consider the *Alyias Donation Book*. A cross between a computational device and a children’s book, it was composed of paper flaps, ribbonlike strips of linen, and rows of columns rendered in both English and Yiddish lettering. Its purpose was to record the name of a donor and the amount donated without using a pen or a pencil: peek-a-boo alchemized into peek-a-pledge. As Kestenbaum & Co, of 41 Delancey Street, New York, N.Y., its manufacturer and distributor, explained, this distinctive product “eliminat[ed] writing on Sabbath days and Jewish holidays.”

The *Alyias Donation Book*, copyright 1930, was designed to solve a problem: how to raise money on the Sabbath without coming into physical contact with it, lest the sanctity of the day be violated and marred. Or, more to the point, how to raise money on the Sabbath and remember who made a contribution and in what amount so that, in the course of the week, said contributor might be contacted and reminded, lest honoring his pledge slip his mind.

The purview of the synagogue’s sexton or *shamas*, the equivalent of his little black book (except this one wasn’t so little; when opened, it measured 26 inches wide and 15 inches long), it called on him (or “the person operating this book”) to maneuver the strips up and down and across so that their letters would properly align to form the name as well as the address of a donor and their numbers would properly align to reflect the

exact amount of his contribution. The whole would then be manipulated into position to correspond to a specific honor, say the sixth aliyah to the Torah, and to record in whose name—the rabbi’s, the cantor’s, the sexton’s, or that of some other person, entity, or occasion—said contribution was made.

No longer in use, the *Alyias Donation Book* is, these days, the treasured property of Rabbi Michael Strassfeld who, over the years, has assembled a marvelous collection of American Jewish religious and cultural objects. It, along with two kindred objects in the collection, shed light on an aspect of synagogue life that doesn’t usually receive much play: maintenance. The *Alyias Donation Book* keeps company with a second volume, a spiral notebook whose pages made use of tiny metal arrows and row upon row of paper sundials composed of letters and numerals to record donor and sum.

Rounding things out is a handmade, elongated wooden box that contained a set of at least six, possibly more, individual wooden pieces that bring to mind either the tile holder used in Scrabble, or a miniature mailbox. Tiny slots run the length of every 13-inch-long piece, each one marked by Hebrew words designating the recipient. One, for instance, was marked, “shul,” another “Tzion,” a third “Bikkur Holim.” Equally tiny paper slips with printed Hebrew letters or numerals would be inserted into each slot to document the donor’s name, the scale of his contribution, and its destination.

All three objects intrigue as much as delight, raising questions about their makers as well as the circumstances of their creation and use. Who was

responsible for moving the linen strips and the metal arrows, and filling in the slots? And at what point during or after the proceedings were they activated? We just don’t know, which adds to their mystique.

What we do know is that within traditional circles of the early 20th century, fundraising in the sanctuary was not limited to Yom Kippur—as, thankfully, it is today—but was a weekly affair. Any time anyone (read: any male) received a *kibbud*, or an honor, on Shabbos morning or on a *yontef*, especially if it took the form of an aliyah to the Torah, he was expected to make a monetary contribution in return, and to have the amount announced in a sufficiently loud voice so that everyone present might learn of his generosity. In another variation, usually associated with the High Holidays, communal honors would be auctioned off to the highest bidder. This customary practice was known as “shnuddering,” an Anglicized conflation of the Hebrew word *she-nadar*, or “he who made a pledge or a vow.”

At the time, traditional congregations depended on shnuddering as a steady source of revenue. Then, as now, dues didn’t stretch nearly far enough to cover all the expenses, from salaries to supplies, associated with running even the most modest of religious institutions. Those in charge of finances relied on this informal monetary transaction to keep their institution, and its clergy, afloat.

Its social function was nearly, if not just, as significant. Congregations depended on shnuddering to know who was up and who was down, who was stalwart and true, apt to made good on his pledge, and who was given to grandstanding and defaulting on, or deferring, his pledge. The size of the donation Moshe made in honor of the rabbi and Yankel made in honor of his wife, Chanele, alerted everyone in the pews

SCIENCE

Everything you need to know at
tabletmag.com/sections/science

as to whether Moshe and Yankel were doing well (or wanted to appear as if they were), or had fallen on hard times. Shnuddering, then, was at once a barometer and a declaration of status.

Despite the this-world associations, the practice had more than a whiff or two of sanctity about it; actually, “inviolability” might be an even better word. It’s not that shnuddering had the force of Halacha, of Jewish law, for it did not; its authority was derived from *minhag*, or custom. But as anyone who has ever tried to mess with a domestic, institutional, or a local *minhag* will tell you, it functions as if it does. Shnuddering was not to be touched.

Still, there’s no getting away from the fact that it was an intrusive practice that disturbed Shabbos morning services, interrupting the flow of the Torah reading, much less the flow of higher thoughts. At that one moment during the week when shulgoers might possibly be attuned to something higher than the costs of fixing the boiler or paying for the next shipment of coal, the steady accumulation of bulletins from the front about monetary contributions brought them down to earth with a thud.

When these two cultural systems—commercialism and sanctity, the holy and the profane—collided, which increasingly they did in modern America, things could get nasty. Shnuddering gave rise to many a communal tussle when either the new rabbi in town or several congregants of a refined sensibility proposed at the next board of trustees meeting that the practice be abolished. All hell would break loose. Tempers flared so hotly you’d think abolishing the Torah reading was on the table.

Those in favor of bidding farewell to the practice couched their petition in terms of decorum, advocating its civilizing effects on the body politic; those opposed insisted that its abolition, the first chink in the armor of tradition, led directly to Reform, a trajectory that was not to be contemplated.

Congregants in the first camp had sociology on their side. A more decorous service was unquestionably a quieter, more contemplative affair. With fewer disruptions, it was likely to hew New

“There’s no getting away from the fact that it was an intrusive practice that disturbed Shabbos morning services.”

World than Old, itself a most welcome development. Those in the other camp had history on their side. Since one of the first things the European founding fathers of Reform Judaism did was to abolish shnuddering, those who fretted about the future of traditional Judaism in America had cause to worry when the issue came up on their side of the Atlantic.

The dueling perspectives made for an impasse, which synagogue minutes referred to time and again, especially when the process of change was a protracted one. At Manhattan’s flagship Orthodox congregation, Kehilath Jeshurun, it took 40 years—yup, the biblical 40—before the powers-that-be could see their way clear to bidding a final farewell to shnuddering. During that stretch of time, a number of “innovations” designed to heighten decorum were implemented—among them, ushers to keep the peace and singing in unison—but shnuddering stayed the course and remained.

When, at long last, at Kehilath Jeshurun and elsewhere, the practice became one with the spittoon and the snuff box, vestiges of yesteryear, nothing untoward resulted: no rush to the exits, no decrease in membership, no quaking heavens.

At most, shnuddering’s retirement prompted congregations to come up

with alternative forms of fundraising to compensate for the deficit created by its absence. Enter: the Yom Kippur appeal. What a rich irony that the elimination of one form of Jewish fundraising gave rise to another and that the much-rued Yom Kippur appeal turns out to be one of the legacies of the often-rose-tinged immigrant generation.

Shnuddering hasn’t entirely vanished—it’s still done in many a *shtiebl*, especially on the High Holidays—but, over time, the practice became increasingly marginal to how most self-consciously modern American synagogues conducted themselves. With fewer and fewer American Jews able to make heads or tails out of the *Alyias Donation Book* or its ilk, fewer and fewer copies were produced.

Thanks to the timely intervention, dedication, and keen eye of collectors such as Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, a scant few artifacts of shnuddering have managed to survive, gifting us with the capacity to contemplate the inventiveness of the *yidische kop*. ■

This article was originally published on September 18, 2023.

 **PODCAST**



UNORTHODOX

Ep. 380: Talking the Talk

Linguist Deborah Tannen on ‘cooperative overlap,’ Peoplehood founder Julie Rice on creating community through conversation, and Mitchell Silk on communicating across languages and cultures

tabletmag.com/podcasts

A Tale of Two Atonements

Why I couldn't forgive my brother as a Christian—
but could ask his forgiveness as a Jew

BY THOMAS BALAZS

I was with my family at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. I was 12. The five of us—my parents, my two brothers, and I—were moving through a carnivalesque square full of people and vendors outside the stadiums when we passed between two groups of religious enthusiasts, one dressed like hippies that my oldest brother said were “Jesus freaks,” the other wearing orange robes, dancing and playing tambourines: Hare Krishnas. My parents and brothers drifted toward the Krishnas. I wandered over to listen to the Jesus freaks.

I was a Christian but not an especially religious one. I had been raised in the Trinity Lutheran Church, in a type of faith I used to describe as Catholic in black and white, meaning we were strong on belief but short on show. I didn't yet know about my parents—that they were born and raised as Jews, had survived the Holocaust, and had converted to Christianity, partly out of sympathy but mostly out of fear. I'd find out about that a year later when my father would sit down with me one morning and tell me the tale, but that's another story.

I can't remember exactly what the hippie preacher preached. I do remember him making a crack about the guys wearing orange and dancing with tambourines. But he also spoke about God and love and building a life around the teachings of Jesus, and I found it inspiring, was sincerely caught up in the enthusiasm. But when he was done, and I looked around for my family, I found myself alone in the throng.

I was scared, but I didn't panic. I went up to one of the nice Jesus freaks, and he got on the microphone and announced I was looking for my parents; they didn't show up. So, I waited with him, and we talked about God. He asked me if I wanted to pray with him. It was a strange idea to me, to worship out in the open like that, but I said OK. I was too embarrassed to pray out loud, so he spoke for both of us, asking Jesus to help me find my parents and to help me find Him. I felt safe with the Jesus freaks. I felt loved. I felt like I had maybe found an answer to all my problems, the problems of a depressed little kid.

What did I have to be so sad about? Certainly not my living conditions. My parents were both doctors. We had a nice big house in White Plains, New York, with a Mercedes in the driveway and a brook running in the backyard. We could afford to go skiing and to the Olympics. There were, as far as I knew, no tragedies in my family (I didn't yet know that three of my four grandparents and my uncle were murdered before I was born). My brothers and I had everything we needed—except our parents' attention. My mother made more of an effort but was emotionally withdrawn. Neither shared any physical affection with us beyond a routine goodnight kiss. I don't remember either of them ever so much as putting an arm around me. And they left me alone—a lot.

Some of that had beneficial side effects. Early on, I became resourceful. When I was in seventh grade, for example, I got myself a therapist without even telling my mother (who was a

psychiatrist). And by the time I was 12, I could confidently navigate public transportation on my own, which is why, eventually, I told the kindly Jesus freak I could find my way back home. We had been in Montreal for maybe a week, and I knew the Metro system by then.

He gave me some pamphlets and let me go, and I did, indeed, find my way back to where we were staying. And as I rode those shiny, rubber-tired Montreal subway trains, I felt I had embarked on a new life, one centered on God and Jesus and the teachings of the Bible. I would be like those kindly, joyous Jesus freaks. I wouldn't be unhappy anymore.

I sat down on the hard plastic seat to read one of the things the Jesus hippie gave me and learn more about the Christian way of life I was going to lead. What, exactly, would it mean to follow the teachings of the Lord? One thing the pamphlet said it would mean was forgiveness. Jesus forgave our sins, and I, too, would have to forgive. And that's where I hit the wall.

I was the youngest of three brothers. The oldest was six years older than me, and we didn't interact a whole lot. But the next oldest, “my middle brother” as I used to call him, was less than three years older, and he was a cross I had borne for as long as I could remember.

He was, in the grand scheme of things, not so bad. But he tormented me in the small ways big brothers often do. He teased me for being fat. He made fun of me whenever I didn't know something. And he mocked the way I talked, my Elmer Fudd accent—pronouncing R's like W's, a speech impediment I didn't grow out of until high school. Putting all that in print, it doesn't seem to add up to much, but at the time it was more than I could take. He wasn't the source of my childhood sadness, but he made it just a little worse than it might otherwise have been, and I couldn't forgive him that, especially when I knew that forgiveness would do nothing to stop him from teasing me. And when I realized that, my time as a Jesus freak was over.

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart,” God says to the Israelites, and I didn't hate my brother, but I couldn't forgive him until he stopped picking on me and said he was sorry. Of

course, he was only 15 at the time and had problems of his own, having been raised in the same troubled family. But eventually, when we were older, he did apologize. I don't recall if he formally asked forgiveness, but he said he felt bad about how he had been when we were kids. And his actions showed he was a different person, and so I was able to forgive, and we established a friendship; throughout my adult life I've looked to him for advice and support. But strangely enough, that inability—or unwillingness—as a child to forgive him kept me from being saved as a Christian and saved me for forgiving as a Jew.

It was *erev* Yom Kippur, 2005, and I was at the Kotel on the last leg of a month-long trip to the Holy Land to research a novel I was writing—a “gnostic midrash” based on the Book of Acts. Decades after learning about my family's Jewish heritage, I still considered myself Christian but was trying to work some things out in the wake of my father's death the previous year.

The Western Wall was not as carnivalesque as the Montreal Olympics, but once again, I found myself between two groups of religious enthusiasts, albeit smaller ones: two bareheaded young men in jeans, and two men of about the same age wearing black suits and fedoras. The former were evangelizing Christians, the latter yeshiva *bochurs* (though I didn't know that term at the time).

“This is the holiest place in the world for Jews on the holiest day of the year,” said one of the men in black. “You don't belong here.”

“That's exactly why we *do* belong here,” said one of the Christians.

A third *bochur* in black who, like me, was eavesdropping, turned to me. “Can you believe these guys?” he asked, indicating the Christians.

I said I could see both sides and told him my background. “Oh,” he said, “you've got to meet a friend of mine.”

He introduced me to Jeff Seidel, a guy famous for practicing *kiruv* at the Kotel, and Seidel told me to come back the next day for a class at a synagogue in the Jewish Quarter.

In short, where the Jesus freaks

“God saved me from being saved so that, among other things, decades later, I could ask my brother's forgiveness as a Jew.”

failed, the *frum* guys succeeded. When I got home to Chicago, I began learning with a rabbi. He set me up with a family who had me over for meals and mentored me in observant Judaism, and not long after that I found myself at Mount Sinai for a long overdue procedure. It wasn't a conversion (an Orthodox *posek* said that wasn't necessary), just a belated *brit milah*.

At first, my mother was concerned about what looked like religious fanaticism, but when I stuck with the program, she not only accepted my decision but eventually returned to Judaism herself, after a fashion. My brothers also thought I had gotten carried away, but they, too, came to accept this new me (neither considered himself Jewish, but they had both been “out” for a while as having been born of Jewish parents). It's been a long, slow road of religious growth since then, but eventually, I married a Jewish woman, had a son who got his *brit milah* on time, and am now *shomer shabbat*, part of a *frum* community in Sandy Springs, Georgia.

And the irony of the Day of Atonement being what I have come to think of as my “Jewish birthday” is not lost on me.

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says. “Do good to those who hate you, bless those

who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also ...” (Mathew, 5:38). These are beautiful words, inspiring. But they've always seemed to me to ask too much.

It's not that Judaism doesn't promote forgiveness. But the “turn-the-other-cheek” kind of forgiveness is not so much a thing. Yes, we are told, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart,” but God goes on to say, “and You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account” (Leviticus 19:17). The next line then forbids taking vengeance or bearing a grudge. So, it's complicated. We're not supposed to return wrong with hate, but we're also not supposed to tolerate wrongdoing. We're certainly not told, “When your brother teases you about being fat, also remind him you talk like Elmer Fudd.”

In the upcoming Yom Kippur service, Jews will confess a whole host of sins to God, “for those of which we are aware” and “for those of which we are not aware,” all of which, we are told, God forgives. But, says Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, “for transgressions between a person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.” (Mishnah Yoma 8:9)

In Judaism, forgiveness is not unconditional. Certain requirements must be met by both those who ask forgiveness and those who grant it. The person who needs forgiveness must enact *teshuva*, repentance. He must realize his wrong, change his behavior, and ask forgiveness from the person he has wronged. And only then is it that, according to Maimonides, the sinned against should “forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit.” (Mishneh Torah, *Teshuva* 2)

It was the Jewish concept of atonement that came to my aid a few years ago, when I sought forgiveness from the same brother who, as a child, I couldn't forgive.

He and I are on opposite sides of the political divide, and on the eve of the 2020 election, he wrote something in a chat with me and my oldest brother that really pissed me off, and I lashed out and wrote back some much nastier

things that he had the good sense to delete before reading. Looking back, I realize my anger with him was partly a function of my love and respect, which is to say that his holding strong opinions diametrically opposite to mine was especially galling given that I wanted his approval. Regardless, I was in high dudgeon, on the verge of severing ties altogether—until the High Holidays approached, and a friend said to me, “Are you going to go into Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur with all this anger in your heart against your brother?” And that’s when I realized I had wronged him and had to ask his forgiveness, which I did, and which he graciously granted. We still can’t discuss politics together, but we’re friends again.

Might we have made it up without Yom Kippur? Maybe. But the annual reminder to seek forgiveness certainly helped heal a wound that otherwise

might have festered. So, yes, as a child I didn’t go whole-hog Christian because I couldn’t forgive my brother. But maybe if I had, I would never have come back to Judaism later in life. I like to think that God saved me from being saved so that, among other things, decades later, I could ask my brother’s forgiveness as a Jew. ■

This article was originally published on September 20, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

Leonard Cohen at Queen’s Park

Music made Cohen rich and famous, but it deprived us of the brilliance of his poetry

BY KENNETH SHERMAN

On May 22, 1967, I attended a “love-in” at Toronto’s Queen’s Park. Advertisements for the event hinted at psychedelic drugs, tantric sex, and spiritual rejuvenation through meditation. On the musical bill was the now-forgotten rock group The Rabble, the little-known Isabella Blues Band, folk artist Buffy Sainte-Marie, as well as the poet, novelist, and newly fashioned singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen.

Earlier that year I’d been introduced to Cohen’s poetry by my grade 11 English teacher. Young and savvy, Ms. T. reasoned that if she was to convert her class—composed mostly of Jewish students—to poetry, it would be best to sidestep our stodgy poetry text and hand out mimeographed copies of works by three of Canada’s prominent Jewish poets: A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, and Leonard Cohen. It was an inspired mix: Klein’s nostalgic “Heirloom” was heart-rending, Layton’s

“The Convertible” raunchy, and Cohen’s “Song” whimsical and endearing.

I almost went to bed
without remembering
the four white violets
I put in the button-hole
of your green sweater

and how I kissed you then
and you kissed me
shy as though I’d
never been your lover

While all three poems spoke to me, I felt closest to Cohen’s. I was what Cohen called “an inner-directed teen,” and found the poem’s longing to recapture innocence irresistible. From our neighborhood library I checked out his second collection, *The Spice Box of Earth*, and was struck by the perfectly pitched lyricism, the imaginative leaps, the wry, self-deprecating voice that for decades would speak to me and others of my generation. I soon read through

the poetry of Klein and Layton, too, and while I marveled at their work, (Klein’s “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” is one of the great poems of the 20th century) I identified most strongly with Cohen’s persona. I went to Queen’s Park that May day to get a glimpse of a poet I revered.

According to the journal I kept at the time, it was an unusually cool day for late May: 46 degrees Fahrenheit. Buffy Sainte-Marie wore a sweater. An experienced performer with two well-known hits, she drew an enthusiastic reaction from the crowd of 4,000—a mix of hippies, activists, students and professors—with her engagingly tremolo voice and stage acrobatics. Cohen, too, was dressed for the weather in a thick turtleneck and suede jacket. He began his brief performance by saying “Spring called me here.” Then he sang two songs—“Suzanne,” and “So Long, Marianne”—followed by a recitation of two of his poems: One was “Travel”:

Loving you, flesh to flesh,
I often thought
Of travelling penniless to some
mud throne ...

The crowd’s response was muted. Most people do not know how to react to spoken poetry. More to the point, Cohen’s musical performance was disappointing. He played without any backup musicians and while his guitar work was adequate his singing was not. He’d given his first public performance a few months earlier in NYC, the widely known event where Judy Collins

pushed him on to the stage, encouraging him to perform. Shortly after, in a letter to his girlfriend, Marianne Ihlen, concerning that first performance (the Toronto engagement was his second), Cohen observed that his guitar “had gone completely out of tune,” and that his voice “was unbelievably flat.” At the Toronto concert his guitar was in tune, but the voice was again thin and off key.

While Cohen had failed to win the hearts of the audience, the songs, I thought, were exceptional. Some months before, I’d heard him sing “Suzanne” and “The Stranger Song” on the CBC and was impressed. A guitar player myself, I had figured out the chords to “Suzanne” and would play it at weekend parties. The song, I noticed, had a mesmerizing effect on listeners. They’d stare into space and dream.

At that point I thought of Cohen’s music as nothing more than an intriguing diversion from his literary pursuits. Years later I discovered that, initially, he thought the same. In a 2006 interview with Shelagh Rogers of the CBC, Cohen explained, “I thought of myself as a writer, but I couldn’t make a living that way.” He went on to say that, inspired by artists like Dylan and Phil Ochs, he began writing songs “as an interim activity, just to tide myself over.” Those who heard the songs, including star-maker John Hammond, knew their worth. Three days before Toronto, on May 19, Cohen had gone into NYC’s Columbia Studio E in the CBS Radio building on East 52nd Street to begin recording his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*. Released later that year, it garnered much praise. After that, there would be no more novels and the quality of the poetry would decline as songwriting became Cohen’s *métier*.

Cohen’s success as a popular songwriter has its roots in his early poetry. More than other poets of his generation, he was tuned into contemporary culture and had a gift for coming up with the timely image, the memorable turn of phrase. By his third book he was writing credible poems concerning the Cuban revolution, Joseph Goebbels, opium, and junkies. He called his ability to cull from the contemporary scene

“scavenging.” It culminated in the funny, profound, and moving novel *Beautiful Losers*, which Cohen described as “this odd collection of jazz riffs, pop-art jokes, religious kitsch, and muffled prayer.”

From his earliest books, his metrical proficiency was notable. One can draw a line from several of the early poems to the music he later produced. Here is the six-lined, “For Anne”:

With Annie gone,
Whose eyes to compare
With the morning sun?

Not that I did compare,
But I do compare
Now that she’s gone.

“Go by Brooks” is the enactment of an erotic encounter that begins with staring, moves to stimulation, and culminates in an oceanic outpouring.

Go by brooks
Where fish stare
Go by brooks
I will pass there.
Go by rivers
Where eels throng
Rivers, love,
I won’t be long.
Go by oceans,
Where whales sail
Oceans, love,
I will not fail.

In that same 2006 interview with the CBC, Cohen explains his motive for adhering to traditional structure at a time in modern poetry when most practitioners were leaving it behind:

I don’t trust my own spontaneous nature to come up with anything interesting, and form imposes a certain opportunity to get deeper than your first thought ... When you submit yourself to form, then something happens and you’re invited to dig deeper into the language and to discard the slogans by which you live, the easy alibis of language and opinion.

W.H. Auden espoused the same. In his collection titled *Shorts*, he wrote:

Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self.

It wasn’t only money that attracted Cohen to lyrics. In an age that saw the Beats, the Projectivists, and the Post Modernists take over the poetry field, song writing allowed Cohen to pursue his love of rhyme and meter. As his voice deepened and darkened with experience, the early metrical verses proved to be a training ground for the brilliance of “a long-stem rose,” “without your clothes,” and “Everybody knows.” But not all the early poems are formally structured; in fact, the strongest (“Last Dance at the Four Penny,” “To a Teacher,” “What I’m Doing Here”) are examples of what can be accomplished with free verse and it is these sorts of poems that would, sadly, no longer be forthcoming.

Did Cohen think he’d given anything up by moving into the arena of song? Did he even make a distinction between the composing of songs and poems?

Over the years, he spoke in interviews about poetry and song writing. At times he presents song writing as “poetry by other means.” Other times, he distinguishes between the two, stating, “Poetry is a private experience, songs are public.” In poetry, he explains, one can shift modes of time, one can linger. Not so with song writing. “A song,” he tells us, “is a fast-moving train.” Ultimately, he believed the two were separate genres which is why he continued to publish books of poems alongside the albums.

When Dylan received the Nobel Prize for literature, some claimed it as a victory for those who see no difference between a practitioner of the literary arts and a serious composer of songs. Certainly, Cohen’s testimony of the many verses written and discarded for each of his lyrics, speaks to the long and intense labor involved in their creation. Still, there are obvious differences between a poem and a song. In a poem, words are surrounded and strengthened by silence. In a song, words are bolstered by melody and harmony, which is why the poet Robert Lowell discounted Bob Dylan as a poet, claiming “he relied on

the crutch of his guitar.” Most song lyrics, when divorced from their music and read on the page, come off as surprisingly thin. There may be exceptions, and some would say that the lyrics of Cohen, Dylan, and Paul Simon *can* stand on their own. But why should they? Isn’t song writing the art of marrying musical phrases and words, and isn’t that as complex a process as the one involved in writing a long poem or a short story?

There is another question we can ask: Does the experience of reading a poem differ substantially from that of listening to a song? Baudelaire thought the intent of poetry was to provide a frisson, a shudder. Is the frisson experienced in hearing Gordon Lightfoot’s “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,” or Dylan’s “Man in the Long Black Coat,” any different from that had by reading a poem by Margaret Atwood or W.S. Merwin? A shudder, after all, is a shudder. Yet there are perceived differences. When Cohen talked about shifting modes of time in a poem, he was thinking of its hold on our attention, its way of prompting us to go back and reread it as it unfolds. The reading of a poem is demanding in a way that listening to a song is not. And it is that difficulty that makes poetry more of a counterculture event than even the most avant-garde song, especially given our increasingly limited attention spans.

Cohen said he liked the idea that people would listen to his songs while doing the dishes, a thought that repulsed Auden who gloried in poetry’s demands. As he so eloquently put it:

After all, it’s rather a privilege
amid the affluent traffic
to serve this unpopular art which
cannot be turned into
background noise for study
or hung as a status trophy by
rising executives,
cannot be “done” like Venice
or abridged like Tolstoy, but stubbornly still insists upon
being read or ignored

What happens when “this unpopular art” is practised by a celebrity? The first book of poetry that Cohen published after he became an international star was

“After all, it’s
rather a privilege
amid the
affluent traffic
to serve this
unpopular art
which cannot be
turned into
background noise
for study.”

The Energy of Slaves. It was a greatly anticipated event in Canada, and the shock of it generated debates on CBC radio and in newspapers at a time when—imagine this—literature could shock:

the 15-year-old girls
I wanted when I was 15
I have them now
it is very pleasant
it is never too late
I advise you all
to become rich and famous

or

The amazing vulgarity
of your style
invites men to think
of torturing you to death

Several of Cohen’s fellow poets and critics were kind and came to the conclusion that he was writing anti-poetry, but it was not the anti-poetry of the great Eastern European poets (Miroslav Holub, Vasco Popa, Zbigniew Herbert) who used their unadorned style to goad poetry into a deeper humanity. Cohen’s is a book of resentments. Each fragment (most read like embryonic notes for poems) is headed by the tiny icon of a razor blade. The speaker

is disillusioned, bitter, and seemingly angry at poetry itself for abandoning him.

I have no talent left
I can’t write a poem anymore
You can call me Len or Lennie now
The poems don’t love us anymore
they don’t want to love us
they don’t want to be poems

I’d be remiss if I didn’t cite the one fine poem in the book, written in traditional form and psychologically insightful regarding the shifting power dynamics of a relationship:

You tore your shirt
to show me where
you had been hurt
I had to stare
I put my hand
on what I saw
I drew it back
It was a claw
Your skin is cured
You sew your shirt
You throw me food
and change my dirt.

From this point forward, Cohen’s poetic adventure would rest on our interest in his narcissism. Here on in, he would play the ingenious game of, on the one hand, inviting the reader’s envy, while on the other indulging in what the critic Eli Mandel called “masochistic revelation and sexual self-pity.” It says much about our culture that so many found this attractive.

Cohen’s game is continued in his next book, *Death of a Lady’s Man*, which employs journal entries, drafts of poems, and commentary. Some of it is brilliant: the mordant humor of “The Unclean Start,” the imaginative weaving of “The Radio,” the lyric power of “The Rose.” Like all of Cohen’s projects, *Death of a Lady’s Man* is extremely ambitious, yet it ultimately fails because it substitutes an ironic voice for the structural concerns that are poetry.

Close to the book’s end there is once again an admission:

Lost my voice in New York City
never heard it again after sixty-seven

That is, after Cohen recorded his first album.

There are those who contend that Cohen's poetic career was resuscitated by his next collection, *Book of Mercy*, a suite of 50 prose psalms. Professor Brian Trehearne calls it "the greatest of his [Cohen's] works, as essential to my experience of twentieth-century literature as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*." High praise. But I have always considered it Cohen's weakest work. Adopting the cadences of the Jewish prayer book, the speaker professes spiritual struggle. The poems, however, fail to convincingly enact this, and the language comes across as turgid. Yet in the same year that *Book of Mercy* appeared (1984), Cohen released *Various Positions*, an album that includes some of his most cherished songs: "Hallelujah," "Coming Back to You," "and "Dance Me to the End of Love." Is the Muse that presides over Song different than She who presides over Poetry?

Cohen's ongoing assessment of his own poetic achievement is in keeping with the self-conscious attitude of modern artists. It also provides us with clues to his thinking about poetry. In *Book of Longing*, for instance, there is the five-part poem "All My News," that concludes,

Undeciphered
let my song
rewire circuits
wired wrong
and with my jingle
in your brain
allow the Bridge
to arch again.

Cohen believed that his art healed, not through intellect ("Undeciphered") but through emotional rewiring. It is true that we appreciate a poem through its imagery and sound before we are able to decipher it. But the word "jingle" is telling. The OED defines it as "a short slogan, verse, or tune, designed to be easily remembered, especially as used in advertising." There is an advertising quality to pop music with its hooks,

"You missed
the point
Of poetry
It's all about them
Not about me."

riffs, and earworms. It consolidates us as a community in that we share its effect, while poetry foregrounds our individuality by speaking to our inner selves.

Perhaps Cohen's most insightful assessment appears in his posthumously published collection *The Flame*. The poem "No Time to Change" ends:

How dare I care
What's on my plate
O gentle book
You're much too late
You missed the point
Of poetry
It's all about them
Not about me

Did Cohen feel that his later work was not enough—to use Martin Buber's phrase—*I and Thou*; was it too much *I and I*? Poetry, by its very nature, is autobiographical, if not in content then in the poet's singular use of language. But it is not self-obsessed. It's a concern with self vis-a-vis the world. At its best, it can help us broaden our imaginative selves and sympathies.

While listening the other day to Cohen's album *Dear Heather*, I was reminded in a concrete way of what was gained and lost when Cohen took to songs. The album is his least typical,

least commercially successful—and his most interesting. A song like "On that Day," concerning 9/11, with its simplicity, humility, and brevity, reaches beyond jingle with its questioning lines: "Did you go crazy or did you report / On that day they wounded New York?" The double sense of "report" as in reporting for duty, but also providing a report, i.e., witnessing, cuts to the heart of the matter. There is little doubt that Cohen's literary sensibility added a degree of gravitas to the culture of popular song, that he significantly raised its bar.

At its heart, *Dear Heather* is a return to Cohen's Montreal roots. On the pamphlet accompanying the CD are his playful line drawings of fellow poets Irving Layton and A.M. Klein. On some tracks, Cohen, backed by jazz musicians, recites poetry as he did in Montreal night clubs back in the '50s. He recites the powerful lines "From bitter searching of the heart / We rise to play a greater part," from "Villanelle for Our Time" by the Canadian poet F.R. Scott, Cohen's professor at McGill University. He recites his early published poem, "To a Teacher," his lament for A.M. Klein, who midway through his career, suffered a complete mental breakdown and was hospitalized, after which he no longer wrote or spoke:

And now the silent loony-bin
where the shadows live in the rafters
like day-weary bats,
until the turning mind,
a radar signal,
lures them to exaggerate
mountain-size
on the white stone wall
your tiny limp.

Here is the Leonard Cohen who went missing when the albums began to appear. In the stanza above, the music is embedded in the words. And the words, released from the tyranny of rhyme and set rhythm, go naked in their effect, free of jingle and slogan. Authentically, they reach out to touch the pain of a fellow poet, and by extension, all who suffer. ■

This article was originally published on September 21, 2023.

Twofold

For Yom Kippur, fiction by Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon

At that hour I had not prepared myself for Yom Kippur; rather, on the afternoon before Yom Kippur, towards evening, I went to the synagogue in my neighborhood, unlike every other year when I was accustomed to pray in the city. The Holy One blessed be He fills the whole world with His glory; wherever a man prays, his prayer is desired. How much more so in the synagogue, and how much more so in Jerusalem, which is wholly sanctified for prayer? It's true that the synagogues in town are full of pious and perfect Jews who know how to appease their Creator with prayer and prayer leaders who pray with special intention. But, I said to myself, who am I that I should seek special intents? It's enough for a man such as myself to pray that which is written in the *machzor*.

2.

The synagogue was jam-packed. Even people who do not attend all year long came and stood, with *tallit* around their necks and *machzor* in hand, and the reflection of the holiness of the day shone in their faces. Standing next to them were their sons and daughters. The hearts of the children were still pure—this thing we see, what is it? Pleasant or unpleasant?

The chazzan approached the prayer stand, drew a breath, and paused. The *gabbai* opened the Holy Ark and searched in the assembled crowd for those who would be honored by standing to the right and left of the chazzan. The chazzan instructed that the windows be closed, so he wouldn't be struck with a chill, and he began reciting Kol Nidre—"Al da'at haMakom ..." The congregation assisted him, some with tunes without words, others with words without tune. At the end

they returned the Torah scrolls to the ark and prayed. They sang much, but prayed very little.

The *gabbai* honored whomever he chose to honor with opening the ark before the beginning of each *pizmon* (prayer). The honorees screwed up their faces with a look of self-importance and walked up to the Holy Ark. The shoes on their feet shone like their clean-shaven chins. Their little sons and daughters stood in awe as they gazed at their fathers, who quickly opened the ark that others had just closed. When most of the congregation had gone out, but one *pizmon* remained in the *machzor*, the *gabbai* honored even me with the opening of the ark.

3.

After the prayer I returned to my home. It was not yet 7 o'clock, and 12 hours or more remained until the morning service. What would I do with these hours, how would I spend them? I thought it over and went out onto the roof of my house.

In one direction rests the City of God, and in another direction lies the Dead Sea. The moon stood in the middle of the heavens, and all the mountains that surround the Wilderness Sea were covered by the light until the desert thorns could be seen. The most sublime silence rested upon everything.

Silently I strolled along the roof of my house, gazing now at the mountains, now at the City of God. At that moment when I stood on my rooftop all of Israel in the city was reciting the Song of Unity and the Psalms. I consoled myself by saying: A man of Israel on Yom Kippur, even if he is alone in the desert, can dedicate his heart to his Master. I recited the Shema and went to bed.

4.

I hadn't intended to sleep so long, but nevertheless I arrived late to the

synagogue. A man isn't in control of things. The night before, I wanted to extend the prayers, and in the morning when the time for prayer arrived I was late in showing up.

The synagogue was practically empty. Perhaps there were 10 men present, perhaps more, but no more than a minyan and a half. Where were all those who had been present last night? Ours is a suburban neighborhood, whose inhabitants aren't careful to be among the first 10 to arrive. Boredom rose from the empty pews; if only they had mouths they might yawn. The ark stood open, the chazan stretched forth his neck, raised high his head, and cried, "Forgive this Holy Nation on this Holy and Exalted Day!"

I hung my hat on the peg in the wall, put on my small yarmulke, wrapped myself in my *tallit*, and sat in my seat. I opened the *machzor* and thumbed around in it, not knowing where to begin—with *Hodu* or with *Barukh She'amar*. Before I could decide, I became preoccupied with something else.

The chazan stood praying like those who are paid for their prayer, and yet like a proper person who doesn't cheat at his task he elaborated and elongated. I remained watching the door like a host who'd prepared for guests who hadn't arrived. In truth I was nothing more than a guest myself, but at that moment I made myself like the host.

While I was looking at the door, it seemed to me that I was asking to take leave. I removed my *tallit* and yarmulke and left.

5.

The day was pleasant and the air clean and clear. A pure breeze wafted throughout the world, and a scent of dew rose from each tree and each blade of grass. The sun was not too strong and didn't injure the earth, all of its heat having been spent in the great heat wave that stretched from the day after Rosh Ha-Shanah until the day before Yom Kippur. This is God's kindness with Jerusalem, that He removes the heat wave on Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur, and the sun is pleasant to His creatures.

One by one people started appearing, taking slow, small steps like those

who think being on the way is as good as arriving. Having left their houses, they've fulfilled their obligation to the synagogue. In truth, what's the need to rush? Yom Kippur is a long day, and even if you walk at your leisure, you'll arrive at synagogue ere the prayers are through. When they arrived at the synagogue gates, some went in and some remained outside. It's not every day that you run into your neighbor, and, having met him, you must ask after his welfare.

From inside the synagogue one could hear the chazan's melodies, those melodies that do not penetrate one's heart. Maybe the chazan's voice is lovely, and his tunes are like those of all the other chazanim, but the heart isn't receptive to them—neither the chazan's heart nor mine.

6.

I said to myself, Perhaps Yom Kippur has not yet arrived. If so, why is the chazan standing in there praying? Perhaps just to practice the prayers, and those assembled are merely listening to the tunes. This must be so, since most of the congregants were wearing shoes, but not kittels. I know that Jerusalemites aren't accustomed to wear kittels on Yom Kippur, but I was trying to find an excuse. Had I found a different excuse I would have used it.

The sun rose to the midpoint in the sky. The pine trees perfumed the hot air, letting off a unique scent. Between them stood the tall, erect cypresses, enveloped in their shady sorrow. This is the shady sorrow of creatures that God has lifted yet not raised up entirely to the Heavens.

I strolled among the trees, telling myself that Yom Kippur had not yet arrived but was on the way, and I must prepare myself for the awesome and holy day.

Before I could prepare myself, the evening of Yom Kippur overtook me. Not this year's, not last, nor the previous year's, but the Yom Kippur from the days when I was 7 or 8 years old.

Countless large candles, one for each worshipper, were standing and burning, and the smell of wax and honey filled the synagogue and mixed with the smell of straw covering the floor, and a new light sparkled from the candles. Wrapped in

his *tallit*, Father stood among the other worshippers, with a large, radiant *tallit*-crown of silver over his head. Frightened and flustered I stood gazing at Father and the doubly radiant light shining from his forehead.

How I loved the night of Yom Kippur! The Gates of Heaven are open and God Himself, as it were, bows down to hear the prayers of Israel. He needn't bow, since He knows the heart of every man, but out of affection for the Jewish people, He bows down, like a father who inclines his ear to his little boy. At that moment I saw that my father and all the other folk in the synagogue, whom I had thought were all adults, were in fact as small as I and my friends, except that my father and his friends knew how to recite the *piyutim* with ease and were wrapped in *tallitot*, while my friends and I knew only a few prayers and how to answer "Amen." But when I grow up I too will wear a *tallit* and pray all that is written in the *machzor*.

After thinking back to the days of my youth, I recalled many other things: Each and every one of them that I remembered was about Yom Kippur, as if all other days had been erased, leaving only the memories of Yom Kippur. Like a holy chain of memories, each Yom Kippur was linked with the next. It's in this way that Yom Kippur appears in a man's dream in order that he repent.

7.

Once again I found myself standing in the synagogue on Yom Kippur night. And again all the thoughts of Yom Kippur from my childhood arose in my mind. There are times and seasons of the year that are appointed for the repetition of certain acts, and even one's thoughts of mind and heart return and repeat at the same moment and time, as if we and our actions and our thoughts are annexed to time itself. This is especially true on Yom Kippur, the day of the Holy One Blessed be He, when a man's soul—that piece of God in man—wishes to cleave to Him so that the man becomes indistinguishable from God. Wherever man should wander, his thoughts travel with him.

I don't recall how I wound up in that particular German city, but I remember

it was the eve of Yom Kippur. I entered a certain synagogue to pray Mincha and recite Kaddish. I saw they were rolling the Torah scrolls to the correct place for the Yom Kippur reading but were doing so upside down—with the words facing down and the parchment's back facing up. I was disturbed that they were treating the Torah with disrespect, yet I kept my quiet since I was a guest. When I finished my prayer I went to eat the final meal. I forgot to take the trolley and walked on foot. By the time I reached my room it was time to return to synagogue. But since I had arrived, I went in. A small oil lamp burned in the room. The landlady knew that the Jews' big day was tomorrow, and since her tenant was a Jew she did me a favor by lighting the lamp. She had placed a clay pot next to the lamp so that, if I chose, I could cover the lamp so its light wouldn't disturb my sleep. That old Adventist, who spent all her days reading Holy Scripture, sometimes thought about the nation they spoke of in the Prophets.

I asked myself if I wanted to eat the final meal. I found no morsel of food in my room, and I didn't wish to eat their bread on Yom Kippur eve. I took my *machzor* and my canvas shoes and left.

A few goyim sat on the stoop in front of the house, with their short clay pipes in their mouths, and a child—battered slice of bread in hand—was spinning on his heels singing a Jewish tune. Together with the neighbors he made fun of himself, like the goyim who make fun of us. Or perhaps they were just playing.

I entered the synagogue and showed the sexton a ticket that I had paid for my seat. I went over and sat in my place. The synagogue was full of distinguished people. Many lamps were lit, and a type of longing and anticipation filled the air. Someone put on his *tallit*, reciting the blessing out loud so that others might merit by answering "Amen." After him came a second and then a third and then the whole congregation, except for one old man who did not put on a *tallit*. He said to me, "I am old and about to die and I'm saving my *tallit* to be buried in."

The chazan approached the prayer stand, backed by a choir. Their voices

were pleasant, and they were nicely dressed; their faces showed years of plenty, like folks who lack nothing and come to synagogue to give pleasure to their Creator. As they started praying, a sigh went up from the chazan's heart, along with his choir, and then with them, most of the congregation.

After Kol Nidre the rabbi sermonized about the sanctity of the day, repair of the soul, and God having dispersed the Jews around the world to serve as a light unto the nations. Following the sermon they stood and prayed the evening service. In the midst of praying, the people's size seemed reduced, they stood small and low, just like my father and the other men had in our synagogue on Yom Kippur nights. And it seems to me that even the Holy One, may He be Blessed, crouched down to hear their prayers, as it were, like a father who crouches down toward his little child. As this came into my mind, I remembered that I had already thought those thoughts once, twice, and three times before. There are seasons and times each and every year when a man's thoughts come back and repeat themselves.

8.

Like a flower bud plucked from the ground and planted in a pot, so I stood in front of the synagogue, remembering days gone by. The chazan's voice rose up and entered my ears. Coming back to myself, I remembered it was time to enter. My legs were heavy and did not move. When a person's heart is heavy his legs grow heavy as well. At a little distance from me stood people talking about the affairs of the neighborhood. Someone who has a plot of land has sold it, and anyone who's purchased one waits to sell it at a profit. In the meantime Syrians come from Syria and surround us with big houses, separating us from the city. And the buses come less often and stop coming on time. Because of that, it's hard to get to the city.

But I ignored those conversations about the plot owners who do not build and those who can't get to work on time, and I thought instead about the dream I once had—until the dream was as real as if I were awake.

“Like a flower bud plucked from the ground and planted in a pot, so I stood in front of the synagogue, remembering days gone by.”

9.

That morning was neither hot nor cold. In a half-dark room sat a few of my acquaintances eating and drinking like any other day. Two or three times I asked myself how it was possible to eat and drink on that day, since it was Yom Kippur. Most of all I was astounded by the presence of the Judge's son. I had thought him to be counted among the pious, even though he disparaged various customs—and now in the end he was eating and drinking on Yom Kippur. I said nothing to him. What could I say that wasn't already stated in the Torah? I turned my back to the assembled men and picked at my teeth, like someone with a bit of food stuck in there who wants to remove it. My hand grew weary and my eyes grew sleepy. I jumped up from my chair to shake off the sleep. I saw all the synagogues and study halls open and all of Israel standing in those holy places wrapped in their *tallitot*, lifting their hands to their Father in heaven. I too stood up to go and join the rest of Israel. But my feet were lazy, as was the rest of my body. Children came out of the synagogue and told of a spring of tears found under the ark, and how a white dove had come and fluttered by the hands of the chazan as he beat his breast in penitential prayer. I had heard a lot about that

one-eyed chazan, and I wanted to listen to him praying.

The assembled men ate and drank until their foreheads shone from the power of food and drink. One man, with a round yarmulke atop his head, was so buried in his bowl that his face looked like an orange. Because his face was so far inside the bowl his shoulders stood out even more.

The day was passing. Surely they had already finished the Mussaf prayer and were about to start the afternoon service. If I hurried I might still make it for the concluding Neilah prayer.

I told my two children, “Children, shine my shoes.” Since I was anxious to leave I hurried them and told them each to shine one shoe so as not to delay me much.

They took my shoes and began cleaning them. It was clear that their hearts weren't in the work.

I was sad yet not sad. Sad because the children didn't seem glad to fulfill the will of their father; and not sad because they didn't abandon the task.

While the shoes were still in their hands I recalled that today was Yom Kippur, when we are forbidden from wearing leather shoes. Yet I waited for them to finish. When they were done I put on my shoes and walked to synagogue. My legs suddenly regained their strength. And not only my legs, my whole body sprang up to the walk. When I approached the synagogue I heard the sound of closing doors and saw people wrapped in white clothing exiting in my direction, lit candles in hand. These were the flames left over from the *yahrzeit* lamps.

10.

I noticed what was going on and told myself that I would enter the synagogue. Today is Yom Kippur, one day of the year. Even if God should grant me many more years, this day shall never return.

At this time, when I was about to go inside, the whole city peeked through the hills and the sun shone down on the city and its walls, bathing it in a glorious glow. Even greater was the shine of the green dome above the place of the Holy Temple, yet at the time when the Temple still stood the color would

have been golden. Now it is destroyed and covered by a green dome—green being the sign of hope for God’s return and rebuilding.

Just below it stands the Western Wall, where I could always find multiple *minyanim*. At that moment I wasn’t at the Wall, and it appeared that neither was anyone else. The Holy One Blessed be He stood there asking about us, “What’s with them? Why haven’t they come?” The heavens stood silent, and a noiseless sound was heard from the firmament. This was the sound of the scales weighing out good deeds versus sins. Along with it came the sound of Jewish prayer from the city’s synagogues and study halls. Almost an hour’s walk separates the city from my neighborhood, and the city sounds can’t reach us here. Yet on that holiest of days, when the whole world is at rest, the city sounds could be heard. I inclined my ear and heard them reading the day’s Torah portion. And more than what could be heard from below was what could be heard from above—the earthly and heavenly Yom Kippur

I walked to the synagogue so I might pick up my *tallit* there and walk to town. I remembered that I was bareheaded. How? When I took off my *tallit* I had taken off my yarmulke and forgotten to place my hat on my head. What could be done? One cannot enter a holy place bareheaded.

I saw a child and told him to fetch my *tallit* and yarmulke. He sought but did not find them. I asked him, “Are there thieves here? Did someone else wrap himself in my *tallit*? You are lazy and neglected to ask.”

The child’s eyes filled with tears. I hid my face from him in shame and asked to borrow a yarmulke from someone else so that I might enter. But just as I cannot enter bareheaded, so too this man then was unable to stand bareheaded in front of the synagogue.

Someone removed a small package from his pocket and said, “Here’s a yarmulke for you.” I thought for a moment. Could it be that there’s a yarmulke in the package? I untied the knot and found paper wrapped in paper. Out fell a small, hole-riddled, knitted yarmulke, bigger than the size of my head.

11.

That moment was the time of Yizkor, and the synagogue was full of relatives of the dead. People I knew, and those I didn’t, stood and cried. While I had been standing outside, they had arrived and entered, filling the whole synagogue. Even at my place stood someone I did not recognize. I drew near but didn’t find my belongings. It seems someone else had come and wrapped himself in my *tallit*. Or perhaps that man who was standing in my place was wrapped in my *tallit*. I feared looking at him and snuck outside.

12.

The world was full of that same halting sound as before, filling the Heavens and circling in the air. I wanted to go after the sound before it ceased. But how could I go without my things?

I placed my hand on my heart and felt and saw that between each beat time was running out. Only in dreams can you see such things, yet imagination is useless.

The assistant *gabbai* saw me and asked, “Do you need a *tallit*? Here’s my *tallit*.” I took it and noticed that it was too small to wrap myself in. One who needs to travel at sea and sees the ship about to set sail just as he reaches the port and then sees his passport is expired will understand my anguish. I broke out in a cold sweat, and the heat that had previously cheered me suddenly abated and disappeared.

The temperature changed, and the trees’ shadows grew long. The sun was getting ready to set. How much longer would it stay light? If I didn’t hurry I wouldn’t make it for Neilah. But how could I go to town and how might I enter the synagogue of the Hasidim with a *tallit* so small that it would betray me as a simpleton?

I raised my eyes in prayer and beseeching. I remembered that I had a *tallit* at home. Not only one *tallit*, but two *tallitot*: one I used to wear when I lived in the city and would pray within the walls, and another that was wrapped around a Torah scroll sent to me from Germany. Once I remembered my two *tallitot* I ran home and threw open my closet to take one out. I told myself how

fortunate I was to have two *tallitot* besides the one I left in the synagogue. I looked at the two *tallitot* in my closet, folded and wrapped together.

13.

I hadn’t worn them yet that year. If I had worn one of these *tallitot* here in our local synagogue I would have stood out. I stood looking at them, like one who encounters a beautiful object after having forgotten about it. Since my heart was confused, I tried to organize my thoughts.

How did that *tallit* that came with the Torah get to me? My father-in-law, may he rest in peace, had written a Torah scroll for each of his sons and daughters. While my father-in-law was alive the Torahs remained in his house of study. When he died, each of the sons and daughters took their scrolls, and my wife’s was sent here, wrapped in a beautiful *tallit*. I had bought the other *tallit* when I moved to Jerusalem and prayed among the Hasidim and distinguished men. Lovely were those days in which I lived in town and prayed with the Hasidim and distinguished men! This suburb that I live in now is good and I love it, but the suburbs of Jerusalem are not like Jerusalem itself.

Out of love for Jerusalem I stood recounting all that had occurred to me there. I examined all the things that occurred to me and bundled them together with everything they inspired.

I measured out everything that had happened and everything that should happen. I weighed it in my mind like a pharmacist who measures out medicines for a patient and then is informed the patient has already died.

I shook off all the thoughts of the moment and stared straight ahead. The walls of my house grew dark and the windows shadowy. I saw that it was too late to walk to town, for the time to pass the verdict had arrived. I told myself that I’d return to the neighborhood synagogue before the gates closed.

I stretched forth my hand and thought, whichever *tallit* I grab first, that’s the one I’ll take. Since the *tallitot* were wound together, I separated them and took whichever one I took. Meanwhile the day had passed, the sun set,

and the whole world fell silent. I held my breath and didn't move a muscle, so as to not to disturb the silence at the moment of judgment, when the multitudes above and below are awaiting their verdict, whether for life or for death. Suddenly I heard the shofar blast following Yom Kippur, and I knew that Yom Kippur had passed.

Yom Kippur passed, but I did not budge from my place. I was neither hungry nor thirsty, nor did I wish to eat or drink, even though I had been fasting since the preceding day.

The room filled with darkness, and I couldn't even see a few feet ahead, except for the white switch to turn on the light. Even though Yom Kippur was over I feared to touch it.

I told myself that downstairs in the dining room was a candle that had been burning since the eve of Yom Kippur. I would go down and enjoy its light. Yet I felt ashamed to be seen by its light and stayed where I was.

At that moment my room was illuminated by the moonlight, and I knew that all of Israel was standing to recite the blessing on the new moon. I raised my voice and called out, "Shalom Aleikhem!" but no one answered, "Aleikhem Shalom," and I knew that I stood alone and so was prevented from fulfilling that mitzvah.

14.

And since I stood alone and undisturbed I thought of the day of mercy gone by, in which the whole world was blessed except for me. One thought brings another. I recalled having heard of Hasidim and distinguished men who observe Yom Kippur for two days

I went to my books and took out the *Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim* to check what to do about prayer and *havdalah*. The moon disappeared behind the clouds. While the Jewish people needed the moonlight to enable them to perform one more mitzvah, the moon shone forth. Having fulfilled the mitzvah for them, the moon hid, and my room filled with darkness. I took the book and went downstairs. The candle was about to go out, yet it still gave forth light. I leaned the book toward the light and read about two days of Yom Kippur

"The Dead Sea glittered like a barrel of oil, sparks of light shot out from it illuminating the mountainsides, and among the mountains bonfires appeared."

and learned that those who are stringent in observing two days of Yom Kippur must take care to avoid all forms of prohibited labor, as well as all the Yom Kippur restrictions. They do recite the weekday prayers, etc., but are allowed to say the special poems and penitential prayers, etc.

I didn't overly celebrate, for those words were written only for those who act with special piety, and not one who was negligent about Yom Kippur itself. When I saw it written, "And it is not proper for one to observe two days because of the danger" I rejoiced at my own failure, like one who sees his enemy exert himself to no avail.

15.

While the candle still burned I stood reciting the special poems and penitential prayers; when the candle went out I sat and recited by heart. When I finished saying whatever I knew by heart I went out onto my rooftop, as I had done the night before.

The moonlight returned and brightened. The Dead Sea glittered like a barrel of oil, sparks of light shot out from it illuminating the mountainsides, and among the mountains bonfires appeared. Because I was sad, I thought of things that make one even sadder.

16.

When I finished the morning prayers I went back to reciting more of the Yom Kippur poems and petitionary prayers. I remembered that I needed to build a sukkah for the upcoming holiday. I put down my *machzor* and went to the window. The sun shone on the place for my sukkah, as if to check whether a sukkah was being built there.

That year Yom Kippur was on a Thursday, and my second day of Yom Kippur came out on *erev* Shabbat, and I didn't do my work with alacrity, but was rather slow-footed and had not yet even hammered a single nail to build my sukkah.

In order to calm my mind I stood looking at the trees in the garden. A wind blew, asking the trees if a mitzvah had yet been performed with them. I opened my window to say, "Right after Shabbat I will take their branches to cover my sukkah!" The wind blew in my mouth and sprinkled me with dust. I went back to my *machzor*, reciting the poems and prayers until the darkness of *erev* Shabbat arrived. I didn't know what to do about lighting candles. In the meantime Shabbat began.

I greeted Shabbat and set the table with the food that had been prepared for after Yom Kippur. After Yom Kippur a heavenly voice proclaims, "Go eat your bread with joy, for God approves all your deeds." Happy is he whose deeds are approved by God and who eats his bread with joy. I did not merit such happiness.

17.

Many years have passed since that Yom Kippur. Some like this, some like that. I neither complain nor am annoyed. God knows whether for good or for better.

Many years have passed since that Yom Kippur, and each year I leave early to get to town so that my prayers may be included with those of the God-fearing. Some years I return home on Yom Kippur night and arise for synagogue before dawn; some years I remain in synagogue throughout the whole night and day. Last year I was honored with the lifting of the Torah scroll, even though there were others present who were more worthy,

in whose place I am not fit to stand. And yet, I am still restless because of that missing Yom Kippur that passed me by empty-handed.

A person lacks many things. As time passes, so do the things he lacks. But you cannot compare that to someone who is missing a day, and how much more so when the day is Yom Kippur. If only I hadn't delayed and had taken one of the two *tallitot*, perhaps I wouldn't be in this state of deficit.

Nevertheless, I love my two *tallitot*, the one that came with the Torah scroll and the one I bought in the Land

of Israel. How beloved are they to me? Once I saw a poor man wearing a sheet with *tzitzit*, because he couldn't afford a *tallit*. I said that I would give him a *tallit*. When he came, I gave him money to buy a *tallit* instead of giving him one of my own; so beloved were they that I couldn't part with either one. Maybe I am saving my *tallit* like that old man in Germany, to be buried in it. But I live in Jerusalem where the dead aren't buried in a *tallit*, and even if they were, I have two *tallitot*.

If a person has two of the same thing, while taking one he thinks of the other, while taking the other he thinks of

the first, and his heart is split and his mind confused. But I, in His blessed mercy, when I wrap myself in one *tallit*, my mind is at peace. But sometimes it seems as if I am standing on Yom Kippur at nightfall, as the gates are closing and the day's soul is about to depart, and a day that passes cannot be returned.

The End, but not of Heaven's mercies!

■ נשלם ולא נשלמו רחמי שמים

This article was originally published on October 03, 2014.

Translated from Hebrew by Jeffrey Saks.

ARTS & LETTERS

Yizkor, Book

On Yom Kippur, offering a blessing for the life and death of books

BY JOSHUA COHEN

Yizkor, meaning “remembrance,” is a prayer said four times a year: on Yom Kippur and Shmini Atzeret, and on the final days of Pesach and Shavuot. On Yom Kippur you ask forgiveness of sin; on Shmini Atzeret you close indoors the New Year's reflection, asking for a greater outdoors to come, for good rain ensuring good harvest; on Pesach—commemorating the Exodus—you celebrate freedom from enslavement; on Shavuot—commemorating the giving/receiving of the law—you celebrate the culmination of that freedom in a more positive indenture—to the commandments. After which, on all four days, you remember.

It's a telling textualization of Judaism that it's not a sacrifice or magical act but the embalmed formality of Yizkor—“May God remember the soul of my father/mother, who has gone on to his/her

reward”—that has become the primary communication between a living person and his or her deceased. Talmud tells us that the soul, though eternal, is subject to conditions that can be bettered—death cannot be worsened—through two responsibilities undertaken by a surviving heir: charity and righteous deeds. Yizkor enacts one—prayer as deed—while promising the other: “I shall give charity on my father's/mother's behalf.”

Zealous in our memory, we should be equally zealous with regard to our memorious technologies. By which I mean we mourners assembled to pronounce this rare prayer should be more charitable toward the fate of the book from which we read it (the word for that book is Mahzor, meaning “cycle”). The quasicyclical scroll was cut for the supersessionary codex, or book, whose materials have been sliced free, into omnimateriality, for screens

(whose ancestor, the parochet or “veil,” screened the offerings of Judaism's first worship). For modern Judaism, however, the codex—which began mass production in the late 1400s, the period of Europe's most extensive Jewish expulsions—must be the terminant technology, unless electronic tablets, on which all information is egalitarianly accessible and divinely transitive, are to be raised above the congregation.

Keeping faith with the consolations of cycles, of recurrence (Mahzor's root is *chzr*, meaning “return”), is the last ritual practice of a Judaism that has abandoned the Sabbath and dietary strictures, God and afterlife, etc. Such a belief, solely in the regulating merit of belief, is embodied not only in the Jewish books—read septennially, annually, monthly, weekly, daily—but also in books in general, if they are read not as commodities, rather as enduring resources (that timeless calendar, the canon).

Only last week, avoiding shul for Rosh Hashanah, I reread Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, Buber's letters, read the Internet. What did I find? The Death of Books! The End of Books! Today—if you read what is written today—all books seem to be “memory

books” (“yizkor buch,” which is Yiddish, indicates a volume memorializing the dead of a particular shtetl or region ravaged by the Holocaust, e.g., the *Sefer Marmarosh*, which catalogs the names of my cousins in an area including Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine, or the *Sárosptak Book*, which lists the names of closer relatives from Hungary).

Remembrance, at every instance, threatens an ultimate recursion: We remember so regularly until we’re only remembering we’re remembering. It’s not just the Internet. Recent print media seem to consist entirely of pieties about the death of print media and the inevitable ascension of the digital. Just as our prayerbooks seem to consist entirely of prayers that—though they’re said to be, should be, dedicated to saving our and our relations’ souls—spend the preponderance of their sentences and stanzas mortifying man and praising God. Unwilling to praise or mortify, incapable of salvation, following Rosh Hashanah I wrote the following Yizkor for bookery. Epigraphs as epitaphs, they comprise a page to print and slip between the relevant pages of your Mahzor—for when memory becomes too painful because too rote, or too remote from Yizkor’s words (just as all contemporary words have become too remote from their inscribing).

May there never come a future in which a secret can be hidden in a book.

May there never come a future when a child will have to search for what a book is on the computer. For what a book *was*.

Once books go and with them, covers, may we still find meaning in the words *binding* and *bound*.

May we still find comfort in *the margin*.

Consider the archaic English: *boke*. As in Chaucer, at the conclusion of *Canterbury Tales*, disavowing “the boke of Troilus, the boke also of Fame, the boke of the five and twenty Ladies, the boke of the Duchesse, the boke of Saint Valentines day of the Parlement

“Reading a page, you always know there’s a page you’re not reading just on the other side.”

of briddes.” It’s like *book*, only in past tense.

Blessed is the page, for it is more fraught than the screen. Reading a page, you always know there’s a page you’re not reading just on the other side.

Blessed are the bookmarks: (personal) envelopes, pencils and pens, an ermine’s baculum, my father’s/mother’s expired driver’s license, a scrap of a dead neighbor’s ex libris on which I scribbled the word *bibliothanos*, (historical) Mao had bookmarks produced featuring his sayings, “Be serious, be active,” bamboo bookmarks from Nepal, cornhusks from Czechoslovakia, American bookmarks manufactured as advertisements for Heinz in the warty shapes of pickles. Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) first popularized *bookmarks*. The term now characterizes a computer function that holds a webpage detailing the life of Elizabeth.

Consider *Revelation*, the last book of the New Testament. Leave it to the goyim to end with Apocalypse. Moses and YHVH—our earliest professional writers of fiction—and even the deity’s amateur “son,” who only wrote once, one illegible word dug into sand (John 8)—would never have allowed it.

Reward with a girlfriend my friend H., a junior librarian from a fine family of Los Angeles. His recent email

mentions his databasing nearly 30 books called “The Last Book,” or a variation on that title.

Grant the justice/splendor of the smell of books, which is merely the smell of dust. This, like all sameness, instructs in mortality. After the book is composed, it decomposes. That (and other reasons) is why there are multiple copies.

Grant the meek/radiant feel of books (*haptics* is the current term): the texture, the heft in hand. Note for posterity that if you closed your eyes and ran your fingers over a page you could tell which parts of that page were blank and which held ink. Words were palpable, words felt palpable, until the advent of recycling and digital printing (blot forever the 1990s).

Find repose among the taste of books. Find peace from, in a singularly impractical coinage, their “mannaism.” It’s said that monks poisoned the pagetips of forbidden books to punish their readers. It’s said that rabbis placed honey there at the tips to encourage students to lick and go forward. To lick and proceed. *Consider* however that when the lesson was finished and the book was shut, the honeyed pages would stick together. *Consider* however that such slavish adherence to factuality would be our own destruction. *Woe to the generation that cannot tell stories. Woe to the generation that cannot be told stories.* ■

This article was originally published on October 6, 2011

NEWS

Everything you need to know at tabletmag.com/sections/news

BELIEF

Spirituality, ritual, and more at tabletmag.com/sections/belief

During Kol Nidre, a Shocking Reminder of My Mortality

As we recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer on Yom Kippur, we remember that life is finite. For me, that realization came with a jolt of electricity.

BY REBECCA STANFEL

Electricity coursed through me during Kol Nidre services last year. The caused me to convulse, cry out, and slam my head into the wall behind me. Although I wish I could have avoided the 36 joules that ran through me in an instant, I've come to realize there was no better time or place to be pierced out of my complacency.

My defibrillator shocked me just as we finished reciting the *Unetaneh Tokef*, the liturgical poem (*pikkyut*) we say four times during High Holidays services.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how
many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die...*

For centuries, Jews on this night have recited the particularities of how we might die in the coming year:

*Who shall perish by water and who
by fire...
Who by earthquake and who
by plague,
Who by strangulation and who
by stoning...*

I have become something of an expert in living with the possibility of death hanging over me. Not that I anticipate “strangulation or stoning” in the coming months. I have a rare and potentially fatal disease called sarcoidosis. I've been

sick since I was 33 and my son Andrew was three months old.

For the past 19 years, I could write my own verses.

*Who by sarcoidosis,
Who by cancers caused by chemother-
apies to treat sarcoidosis*

My lines certainly don't soar with the lyricism of the *Unetaneh Tokef*. But I believed I had reached some level of acceptance of my mortality.

Until last Kol Nidre, I was usually alone or just with my husband when the universe reminded me of my impermanence. The scenes of these *memento mori* were bland and cramped examination rooms in some hospital or medical office.

Some verdicts were starker than others.

“You could drop dead at any moment,” one doctor told me, keeping his back to my husband Jay and me, as he scrolled through MRI images of my heart. Our son was just learning to walk. I felt like the beige hospital walls would close over and suffocate me. I was alone when another doctor told me I wouldn't live to see my son graduate from high school.

I believed all this practice—with just me and my mortality eyeing each other—made me more accepting of my inevitable death than an average 51-year-old. I also thought my experiences with a never-ending illness caused me to be more empathetic.

But I was not alone during last year's Kol Nidre services, when my defibrillator shocked me senseless. My small Montana synagogue was full beyond capacity. Even with the chairs crammed together with only a couple of inches between them, we ran out of seats. People were *davening* in the kitchen behind the sanctuary and squeezed into the hallway next to the bathrooms. I found a seat in the back row, tucked between two women I didn't know.

My defibrillator gave me no warning before firing. I didn't feel light-headed, or as if my pulse was racing. I only felt a little overheated beneath my *tallis*. And then, between one breath and the next, a soundless explosion went off within me. Like forgotten ordnance igniting, the detonation sucked my breath out. My world went black, for how long I don't know. Was there oxygen in the crowded synagogue? My knees buckled. Everything in me curled and convulsed after the bite of electricity.

“Are you all right?” the woman sitting to my left asked, after I'd made whatever sound the force of the surge caused me to make, and my head hit the wall behind me. She kept holding on to me, as my inner tremor worked its way out into my arms and legs, and I could not stop shaking. As I leaned into her, she guided me back to breathing. Someone else asked if they should get help. I shook my head, no. Services continued around our drama. I did not hear the words. But I felt them around me, merged with the warmth of the people keeping me upright.

I learned the next day, after my doctor downloaded the data from the chunk of metal and wires in my chest, that my pulse had soared to over 280 beats per minute in a frenzy of ventricular tachycardia. “You would have died without the defibrillator,” he told me.

Rationally, I should have felt fortunate to have the defibrillator, grateful that its shock saved me from a massive heart attack brought on by sarcoidosis.

But looking back at death—even if you dodged it this time—is never rational.

Before Kol Nidre, I would get the requisite gooseflesh contemplating “Who shall live and who shall die.” But I

thought my medical experiences were more “real” than the shofar’s blasts, ancient prayers, or the Ten Days of Awe could ever be.

I was not only wrong. I completely missed the point.

It was only when I was talking to my rabbi weeks later that I realized the power of what had happened. I tried to make a joke out of it.

“Well, if there’s one place and one time to be physically reminded of your own mortality, it must be after reciting the *Unetaneh Tokef* during Kol Nidre,” I said.

He smiled but didn’t laugh. “I would have to agree.”

The next few days were the usual flurry of busyness that follows a medical “event”—multiple doctor’s appointments, testing, waiting to know what the results mean and what that will bring. And then waiting for the next “event.”

In this liminal space, I felt more grounded through all this uncertainty than during previous crises—when a doctor’s offhand remarks could flatten me for months. In the past, I hardened myself against the fear that crept in every night. I’d whisper to Jay, sometimes cry into his shoulder in the dark, but then would force the fear into a back corner of my mind the next day. I had always thought of these experiences as *my* lesson, *my* understanding, *mine* to deal with and hopefully grow from. I grew a carapace.

But this time was different. I was not alone in the doctor’s exam room. I was in a sacred space, surrounded by dozens of others. All of us were letting in the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef*. The *pikkyut* is intended to jolt us from our complacency, providing enough emotional space for the fear to seep its way past our usual defenses. Together. Mine just happened to be a literal jolt.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
And the seal of each person is there.*

We’re not sure who wrote this *pikkyut* or when. Although, traditionally the

“I have been afraid
for my life before,
but never mid-
prayer, and never
when the warm
hands of another
were ready to
catch me.”

Unetaneh Tokef is attributed to Rabbi Ammon of Mainz, it’s much more likely the author’s name has been lost to the sweep of time. A fragment of the prayer was found in the Cairo *Geniza*, so some scholars date it to the 8th century. But most think it was written in the 11th century.

For me, the author’s anonymity—and his being unmoored in history—only adds to the power of his words.

“The origin of man is dust; his end is dust. He earns his bread by exertion and is like a broken shard, like dry grass, a withered flower, like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that blows away and dust that scatters, like a dream that flies away.”

In the time since my defibrillator shocked me, I’ve thought of all the Jews who have been reciting the poetry of the *Unetaneh Tokef* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Centuries of us, crowded together in rooms or synagogues, facing together what every human wants to forget. Centuries of rabbis parsing the Hebrew to deliver their *drash* to congregants huddled together. Centuries of Jews, each one of us grappling with these words. I close my eyes and picture rows of us standing, reciting, engaging with

this text. Our number recedes beyond the horizon my limited imagination can conjure.

I have been afraid for my life before, but never mid-prayer, and never when the warm hands of another were ready to catch me. Never while in community, with each of us anchored together by ritual, anchored together by a text that connects us, anchored to our ancestors and to the unresolved forms of our descendants.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* can feel like a sharp reminder that life is short. This is its beautiful power. As we stand shoulder to shoulder, together we grasp our mortality.

It doesn’t matter who you are in the multitude of Jews contemplating “Who by earthquake and who by plague.” It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, healthy or sick, young or old. What matters is that we will die.

This is the great equalizer none of us wants to remember. We have families, jobs, love, hate, happiness, challenges, dreams. We have a million undone tasks that are essential. We do not want to think of the death that awaits us all. We do not want to imagine our end in “dust.”

By forcing us to confront this—together—the *Unetaneh Tokef* connects us to one another on this deepest level. It is the one thing we all share. It can be the root of empathy, of seeing each other clearly, in our pain, human to human. It can propel us to work in community toward other Jewish values.

This is the power I felt on *Kol Nidre*. This is the connection that has sustained me in my ongoing unknowing about my health. It’s not easy. It’s not as if mumbling a few words had some magical power, and I’m no longer scared.

But I feel more rooted—though I know this will not prevent me from future shocks, literal or emotional. I am part of that unimaginably large group of Jews reciting the *Unetaneh Tokef* across time. I feel our shared humanity. And that sustains me. ■

This article was originally published on September 22, 2023.

How to Have Fun Breaking the Fast

Cookbook author Jake Cohen offers advice on how to whip up a memorable post-Yom Kippur meal. But first, don't forget the coffee.

BY JAMIE BETESH CARTER

Jake Cohen wants you to have fun with cooking—and yes, that goes for the first meal after fasting on Yom Kippur as well. Cohen, whose second book, *I Could Nosh: Classic Jewi-ish Recipes Revamped for Every Day*, was recently published, wants readers to reclaim everyday Jewish hospitality. Which to him means putting the joy back into Jewish cooking, and simply having fun with it—as evidenced by the book's chapter titles, such as: “Challah Back,” “I Only Have Time for a Quickie,” and “Who Doesn't Serve Cake After a Meal?”

In years past, Cohen was usually a guest at family members' holiday meals. “Yom Kippur was always a big to-do because everyone would be so angry,” said Cohen. “We would break the fast at my aunt's house, and she'd have all the spreads, and while she had everything we needed, nothing was that great. But we ate it because everyone was just so grumpy.” Years later, after Cohen got married, he and his husband found themselves attending three break-fast meals in one day so they could each be with family. After getting frustrated with the traveling, and multiple mediocre meals, he took over and now hosts the break the fast meal for family, friends, and anyone who needs a place at the table.

Cohen grew up eating the quintessential Ashkenazi foods, while his husband is Persian Iraqi with a much different palette. With such different food cultures, I asked Cohen how his husband's family has come to terms with him taking over the hosting, and cooking for break-fast. “So many of his

family members have married Ashkenazi spouses, that it's easier for them just to accept bagels and lox,” he said. “Yom Kippur is one they've actually conceded to the [Ashkenazim].”

Cohen says a fun and delicious break-fast needs to have four key things: coffee, quality ingredients, something homemade, and something sweet. But definitely coffee first.

“Every year, my guests say, ‘I don't need my bagel yet, do you have some coffee?’” said Cohen. He wants to make sure his guests feel some relief from the grumpiness and dehydration fasting can cause, so he makes sure he can quench their thirst. “Get a nice pot of coffee going, and have lots of beverages ready for your guests.”

For a meal like a break-fast, where many of his guests are hangry (hungry + angry), his M.O. is to buy the best of what's available, and supplement with quick, easy to make dishes that he can prepare ahead of time. “I'm not telling you that you should be *making* your own bagels. What I am telling you is that you should be *getting* great bagels,” said Cohen, who prefers PopUp Bagels, and lox from Acme Smoked Fish. “Now you have most of it done, so what can you do to zhuzh it up a little? Make some quick pickled onions, put out some capers, and make a couple of schmears.”

Cohen's schmears are all things you can prepare in the days before the holiday. “These are a really easy way to step up your table,” he said. “People are going to be wowed. And it's something that's still so familiar to guests, but there's just a little bit of novelty to it.” *I Could*

Nosh features 10 schmears, all requiring 15 minutes of cooking time or less. Cohen always likes to provide a variety of tastes, so there's a brown butter schmear, a hot honey schmear, a pickled everything schmear, and more. He even includes a za'atar and tahini schmear as a nod to the influence Middle Eastern cuisine has had on his cooking.

After the coffee, bagels, lox, and schmears have been served, Cohen makes sure to seal the meal with something sweet. “You must serve something sweet—but something good, none of that crappy stuff.” While baking right before a fasting holiday may not be top of mind for many hosts, Cohen has many easy-to-make (and freeze) recipes for sweets to top off every break-fast meal (rather than get tossed for being too dry). “Too often people go for the basic dry coffee cake,” he said. “Desserts are a big part of the book. There are sweets that you can make in advance to just have out on the counter.”

Cohen aims to get people talking about, and making, Jewish food. By doing that, he also hopes to inspire ritual and tradition. “Food is this medium for ritual,” he said. “I always say Jewish food is nothing without the ritual it's attached to. So these are opportunities to really dive deeper into our identity through these beautiful foods and recipes that we've inherited. And also not take it too seriously, because at the end of the day, it's about fun.” ■

This article was originally published on September 22, 2023

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

 twitter.com/tabletmag

 [instagram.com/tabletmag](https://www.instagram.com/tabletmag)

 [facebook.com/tabletmag](https://www.facebook.com/tabletmag)

Lox & Seeds Schmear

BY JAKE COHEN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 (8-ounce) package full-fat cream cheese, at room temperature
- 4 ounces Nova lox
- 2 tablespoons everything bagel seasoning
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

PREPARATION

In a mini food processor, combine the cream cheese, lox, and everything bagel seasoning. Pulse until well incorporated. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Yield: 1 ¼ cup

Time: 10 minutes

Hundreds of recipes at
tabletmag.com/recipes



Pickled Everything Schmear

BY JAKE COHEN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 (8-ounce) package full-fat cream cheese, at room temperature**
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped dill pickles**
- ¼ cup fresh dill fronds**
- 2 tablespoons drained pepperoncini**
- 1 tablespoon drained capers**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**

PREPARATION

In a mini food processor, combine the cream cheese, pickles, dill, pepperoncini, and capers. Pulse until well incorporated. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Yield: 1 cup

Time: 10 minutes

Za'atar and Tahini Schmear

BY JAKE COHEN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 (8-ounce) package full-fat cream cheese, at room temperature**
- ¼ cup tahini**
- 2 tablespoons za'atar**
- 1 garlic clove, smashed and peeled**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**

PREPARATION

In a mini food processor, combine the cream cheese, tahini, za'atar, and garlic. Pulse until well incorporated. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Yield: 1 ¼ cup

Time: 10 minutes