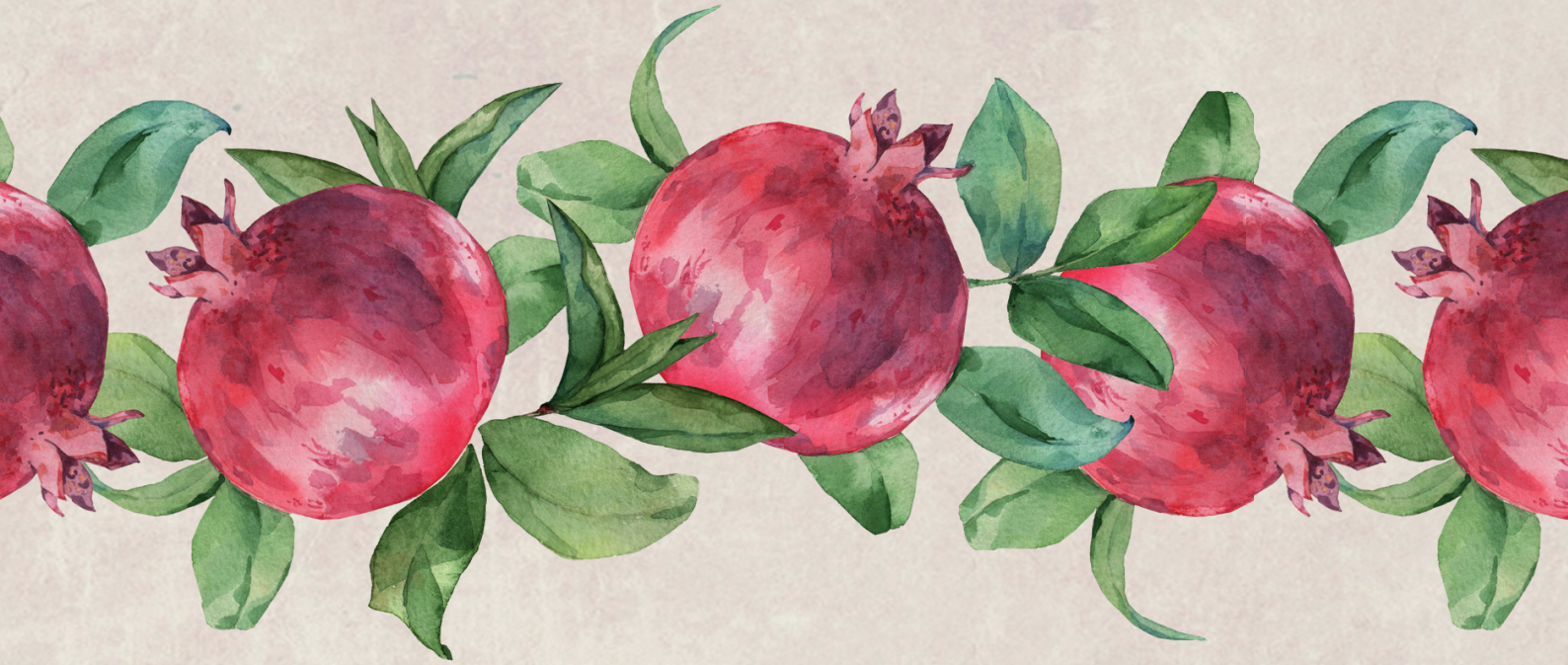

AWFUL DAYS & DAYS OF AWE

Marking the High Holy Days
One Year After October 7th

פרדס
PARDES

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INTRODUCTION

Faith Brigham Leener

We asked members of the Pardes faculty to help ground us in the upcoming high holiday season. In a year like no other, a year filled with an expanding canyon of collective grief, confusion, anger, disappointment, and sometimes even despair, what can our texts bring to bear that might offer us some guidance, some reassurance, some relief, or dare I say, some hope?

Unsurprisingly, these scholars found a way to look deep inside our texts and themselves to mine meaning that speaks to the profound teshuvah (turning) we must do in order to proudly enter a new Jewish year.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the creation of the world which was brought about through words, as it says:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר

And God said, let there be light, and there was light.

We also affirm daily in our morning liturgy that creation is ever unfolding, each day made anew:

בְּכָל יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית.

While it may feel like our world has been in never-ending chaos and darkness since last October, we cannot allow these ideas to remain abstract. We must partner with the ultimate creator in renewing each day with light, and we must take seriously the power of words – those we think, those we learn, and those we put out into the world, both in speech and in action.

As you read these offerings and the profound questions and insights they bring, I pray that these words begin to build a bridge in your own heart towards a new year; one rooted in collective healing, Jewish joy, and deepening resolve in our most sacred values: Torah, Service, and Acts of Lovingkindness. As we learn in Pirkei Avot, the world rests on these three things:

עַל שְׁלוֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד
עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוֹדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים.

ROSH HASHANAH: **REVIVING OUR HOPE AND FAITH**

Leon Morris

There is no story as rich, troubling, and complex as Akedat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac, the Torah reading for the second morning of Rosh Hashanah. It is an epic story precisely because it can be understood and interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. One of the least cited strains of interpretation is anchored in the notion that Isaac actually did die on Mount Moriah and was resurrected.

In his classic book, The Last Trial, Shalom Spiegel collects and analyzes various midrashim where Isaac is linked to the notion of resurrection. One midrash (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 31) connects Isaac to the third blessing of the Amidah regarding the resurrections of the departed:

כֵּיוָן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ חַרְבּוֹ עַל צַוָּארוֹ פָּרְחָה נַפְשׁוֹ שֶׁל יִצְחָק וְיָצְאָה לְהַחֲיוֹת. וּכְיוָן שֶׁשָּׁמַע קוֹלָהּ מִבֵּין הַכְּרוּבִים, אָמַר: בָּרוּךְ מְחַיֵּה הַמֵּתִים.

Rabbi Yehudah said: When the blade touched his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed, (but) when he heard His voice from between the two Cherubim, saying (to Abraham), "Do not lay your hand upon the lad" (Gen. 22:12), his soul returned to his body, and (Abraham) set him free, and Isaac stood upon his feet. And Isaac knew that in this manner the dead in the future will be resurrected. He opened (his mouth), and said: Blessed are You, Lord, who revives the dead.

There are even more fanciful and extreme interpretations that embellish the details of the text, such as in *Shibolei HaLeket*, which states that Isaac's ashes were revived through divine dew:

כשנעקד יצחק אבינו על גבי המזבח ונעשה דשן והי' אפרו מושלך על הר המוריה מיד הביא עליו הקב"ה טל והחיה אותו לפיכך אמר דוד כטל חרמון שיורד על הררי ציון וגו' כטל שהחיה בו יצחק אבינו מיד פתחו מלאכי השרת ואמרו בא"י מחיה המתים.

When our father Isaac was bound to the altar and reduced to ashes and his sacrificial dust was cast onto mount Moriah the Holy One Blessed Be He immediately brought upon him dew and revived him, that is why David, of blessed memory, said, "Like the dew of the Hermon that comes down from the mountains of Zion" (Psalms 133) -- for he is referring to the dew with which the Holy One of Blessing revived Isaac our father. Thereupon the ministering angels began to recite "Blessed are You, Lord, who revives the dead."

The midrash evokes our own greatest fear by asking the question we shy away from: what might have happened had Isaac indeed been sacrificed? Shalom Spiegel notes that in this midrash, the prayer "baruch mechayei hameitim" moves from being Isaac's own prayer (as in that earlier midrash) to being the prayer that the angels themselves recite.

Rosh Hashanah is all about resurrection and revival. It is a day of contemplating our death and rebirth, to begin our lives again and to be granted a second lease on life. This message also speaks to the enduring faith and civilization that is Jewish life. The Jewish people itself passed through a near-death experience of the Shoah, to then witness the hope of two millennia fulfilled in returning to the land of Israel.

This year, after October 7, we find ourselves in need of the most concrete expression of resurrection provided by Akeidat Yitzchak. As I write this, in addition to the 1,200 Israeli civilians and soldiers killed on October 7, 348 IDF soldiers have fallen.

Earlier this month we experienced the heart-wrenching deaths of six of the hostages, including Hersh Goldberg-Polin, part of our own extended Pardes family. Our limited human understanding of a just and compassionate God seems to require us to embrace the notion that those we have lost will live again, or live on in our lives and our memories.

May this new year bring us the capacity to renew our lives. May it resurrect a sense of responsibility and purpose for the Jewish people. And may "the dew of the Hermon that comes down from the mountains of Zion" (Psalms 133) revive our hopes and faith that for those who have been killed in this heartbreaking war, it is not their end, nor ours.

ROSH HASHANAH: **PRAYING THROUGH THE ANGER**

Zvi Hirschfield

In Tractate Eruvin 64a, we are told that R. Chanina would not pray on a day when he got angry. Rambam, in the Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 4:8, ruled that "one should not stand to pray in the midst of laughter or irreverent behavior, nor in the midst of a conversation, argument, or anger." This ruling is particularly challenging because this year, perhaps more than any other, I am filled with anger. I am angry at the world, at the enemies of the Jewish people, at failed leadership, and especially at God. Anger at God is painful at any time, but especially at a moment in the Jewish calendar where our liturgy and practice calls upon us to acknowledge God as King and supreme Judge, responsible for ruling a world of justice, righteousness, and chessed. I find myself trapped in the classic dilemma: if God is in charge, then how could these things be happening, and if He is not in charge, what use are my prayers? In the midst of this anger and sadness, I find myself turning to an approach of the Sages that offers me a pathway forward during this time. In Tractate Berachot 48a, we are taught that while the first three blessings of Birkat HaMazon are Biblically required, the fourth blessing, "The One Who Is Good and Does Good," was instituted by the Sages after the fall of Beitar. Beitar was a large city at that time and the central location for the army of Bar Cochva. Bar Cochva led a rebellion of Jews against the Roman empire in 133 C.E., a rebellion which ultimately failed and was brutally suppressed. The Sages explained that although the burial of the fallen was delayed by three years, God demonstrated his goodness by not allowing the bodies to decay and by ultimately bringing them to proper burial.

Moreover, the Talmud says this miracle took place on the 15th of Av (Tu B'Av), making it a day of particularly joyous celebration. In the Yerushalmi Tractate Taanit we are told that there were so many bodies that the Roman emperor used them as bricks to make a gigantic fortification wall. One can only wonder how anything connected to the tragic downfall and loss of life after the Bar Kochba rebellion could evoke a sense of gratitude and God's goodness. Yes, the bodies were granted a respectful burial, but what of the horrors that preceded it?

The Aruch HaShulchan explains that our gratitude is not blind to the horror and pain that came with the fall of Beitar. The miracle of the bodies remaining fresh and their ultimate burial were meant as a sign that God had not abandoned us. As Rav Kook explained in his commentary on

Tractate Berachot, the freshness of the bodies demonstrated that the unique spiritual force that animates and sustains the Jewish people still remains, even in the midst of Divine hiddenness and evil.

Our gratitude is not a denial of suffering; it is an affirmation of our belief that God has not abandoned us and that our mission continues. God's continued relationship with us, even during tragedy, is the goodness that we celebrate.

I will attempt to take this lesson of hope and resilience into this High Holiday season. The Netivot Shalom wrote that the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is not about the previous year. That is the work of Yom Kippur. It is about God's judgment, and ours, to continue the project of the world's creation and humanity's attempt to live according to God's will, in spite of past failures. It is announcing that we have all agreed, God and us, to not give up. This approach will not resolve my anger nor make me any wiser in terms of how God runs the world. It might help me transform my prayers into an expression of continued faith and gratitude for the mission of the Jewish people, and maintain hope for a better future.

May we all be blessed with a better New Year and be inscribed in the Book of Life.

ROSH HASHANAH: THE SOUND OF THIS YEAR'S SHOFAR

Aviva Lauer

Every year at Pardes, I teach students about the different sounds we might hear when the shofar is blown. I am not referring to the traditional notes played on the ram's horn on the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, though a discussion of that is naturally included! Rather, we focus on the varied messages the sounds of the shofar are meant to evoke in the conscious mind, and in some cases, the varied feelings and dispositions the shofar's blows are meant to summon within us.

The most familiar message behind the notes is one that not only reminds us of an alarm clock but is even depicted that way in classical Jewish text. In his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Teshuvah, Chapter 3), Maimonides tells us that the strident, "unsnoozed" sound of the shofar is meant to wake us up and call us to action: "Wake up, you sleepers, from your slumber, and you that are falling asleep, come awake," his personified shofar tells us, in order to activate us to do teshuvah — to return in repentance to being our better selves and embodying our positive attributes.

In this sense, the shofar acts as a teacher. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening. Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep…" This suggests that we can change. We can do better! We can open our eyes and animate a greater life.

Arguably, the most prominent role the shofar plays on Rosh Hashanah is that of trumpet, playing the pomp and circumstance as at a monarch's coronation. Can't you just hear those notes right now in your mind's ear? Try to imagine the priest Zadok taking a horn of holy oil, anointing Solomon, son of King David, on his forehead, blowing the shofar loud for all the people to hear, and then listen as they shout, "Long live King Solomon!" Similarly, we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah to recrown God our sovereign, the creator of our world, each and every year.

When I teach these ideas to our Pardes students, before we study the texts together, I prime them by playing recorded sounds to heighten their senses and to turn these ideas into a tangible reality. First, I play an annoying, grating alarm clock ring, followed by a coronation tune. I also play them the sound of a baby crying, to evoke the feeling raised in Tractate Rosh Hashanah, of the shofar as broken emotion, so that we may recognize and reactivate our connection to God as a parent who cares deeply about us and our fate.

What I will not be playing this year for the

students is the sound I used to play without much thought—a recorded air raid siren.

In the Book of Ezekiel (33:2-3), God tells the prophet to speak to the people and tell them:

When I bring the sword upon a land… when the sentry sees the sword coming to the land, he should blow the shofar, and warn the people.

In addition to the other roles the shofar plays, it is meant to trigger our fight or flight reflex. It is a warning that evil is coming, that we need to make and follow through with a plan right now. In a "regular" year, I understand the sword image allegorically, representing anything we need to not be complacent about in our lives. In that analogy, the shofar serves as a reminder to make a plan, to be smart, to look out for and avoid sin or putting oneself in a negative situation.

The air raid siren used to be an effective tool to get that idea across to my students. No longer. Perhaps never again. The trigger is too real. Evil came. The sword came. And we were not ready with a plan. We were not smart. We were complacent. We were let down.

So, without playing that recording, perhaps what we need to listen for most this year is that last sound—that last message—so we don't ever let ourselves get complacent again.

YOM KIPPUR: **TURNING AND RETURNING**

Yiscah Smith

The spiritual practice of teshuvah—turn and return—requires extra attention during the High Holiday season. Many experience its coaxing and even challenging nature in the air with a sense of urgency.

Teshuvah is a spiritual moment when one intentionally directs one's thoughts, speech, and deeds in a direction toward an encounter with the Shechinah—the Divine, and our internal spiritual center—our soul. This spiritual practice allows for each person's experience to be unique as it requires a return to one's essential self—the part in each of us created in the image of God. In a sense, we are reclaiming that which defines us as Godly. Because the Creator uniquely gifts each person a life imbued with the Divine Presence, one person's teshuvah cannot duplicate another's.

When engaging in this inner work, an important component to the process requires us to bridge the abyss between the logic of our minds and the center of emotion in our hearts. A person cannot experience the sense of being created in the image of the Creator if the mind and heart are not equally recognized and honored. One without the other leaves us incomplete.

In this moment of severe trauma, loss, anger, anxiety, and mistrust—we may sense the abyss between the intellect and emotions even more. Simultaneously, these feelings may stand in contrast to another set of emotions: feelings of gratitude, unity, commitment, pride, hope, and a strong Jewish identity. These feelings may run counterintuitive to how our minds understand our current events.

When our minds and hearts seem to be in a tug-of-war with each other, we need to pause and honor both. Both share the same Creator. They are simply different ways we experience the lives that our Creator has blessed us with. This teshuvah practice calls us to both understand and feel—and traverse back and forth between these two centers of consciousness. This is a form of teshuvah that brings with it inner quietude and harmony because it honors how God has created us. Might we even refer to this state as the Divine Paradox?

Teshuvah in this sense is both a turning and returning—turning our focus and intentions to our essence and returning to that part of us that is eternal. By identifying our essence as uniquely kadosh—sacred, as a part of God, we in effect are engaging in the teshuvah process, with all of its accompanying contradictions. This profoundly affects what we choose to think

about, what we decide to speak about, and how we decide to behave in the world.

This journey is by no means flat or linear. It possesses all the peaks and valleys that accompany any real voyage. Especially now, along this journey, we may sense distance from the Divine—a distance that causes pain, abandonment, and perhaps even loneliness. Might we sense that the Shechinah—the Divine Presence dwelling within our internal selves—is "hiding" from us?

This sense of concealment signals to us that there may be parts of ourselves that require more attention and healing as a condition to sense closeness with Her again.
At times like this, we must turn inward to seek help, guidance, and inspiration, so as not to fall into despair. Consider inviting the Shechinah into our space as well, to be close with each of us, as we seek to be close with Her. Even when She seems concealed and distant, we must trust the teshuvah process and have faith that the Shechinah is always nearby.

I hope that the spirit of this holiday season stirs in each one of us the desire to return home: to our genuine and full selves, to that spark within each of us that is pure and loving, to our soul, to the image of the Creator in whom we have been created.
The teshuvah journey enables one to experience those special sacred moments of closeness: closeness with the Shechinah, with oneself, with fellow Jews, with all humankind, and with all of creation.

May we welcome each other home, to be at home with oneself, and may we embrace each other's journeys with compassionate encouragement and open arms—even in the backdrop of the Divine Paradox!

YOM KIPPUR: **HOW GLORIOUS THEY WERE**

Aviva Lauer

Each year on Yom Kippur, the Seder HaAvodah—the section of the Mussaf prayer service that depicts in extensive detail the one-time-a-year service performed by the High Priest in the Temple in Jerusalem—is a physically and mentally tiring business. It's a long and meticulous account that not only includes intricate choreography (where all members of the congregation get down on our knees and bring our faces to the floor while participating in a call and response), but it is also a highly emotional piece. We read that the Kohen Gadol would first ask forgiveness for himself and his household, then for the whole priestly class, and then for the whole Jewish People. Imagining the responsibility he was carrying on his shoulders often feels too heavy to contemplate, for if he failed to carry out the service correctly, he wouldn't survive the day or exit the Holy of Holies.

The end of this Seder HaAvodah section only ramps up the emotional rollercoaster with the joyful, celebratory piyyut (liturgical poem) found in the Ashkenazi liturgy, known as Mar'eh Kohen (The Appearance of the Kohen).
This piyyut speaks to the relief at seeing the radiant countenance of the High Priest as he successfully completed the Yom Kippur service and rejoined the nation anxiously awaiting him in the Temple courtyard.

Its author unknown, the piyyut seems to be based on the penultimate chapter of the deuterocanonical Book of Ben Sira (also known as the Book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus), in which the 2nd-century Jewish sage Shimon ben Yehoshua ben Eliezer ben Sira described the High Priest Shimon ben Yochanan/Onias, whom he actually knew, as he left the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

In the acrostic rewritten version that is our poem, the priest's shining appearance is variously described as "lightning flashing from radiant heavenly beings," "the image of the rainbow amidst the clouds," "the wreath crowning the forehead of a king," "the graciousness of a bridegroom's face," and many more beautiful, fresh, and bright images. We sing and clap and stamp our feet because, ultimately, Yom Kippur is a joyous holiday. An optimistic holiday. We know that if we ask forgiveness properly, God will forgive. We know that if we do our part and commit to being good and doing good, we will be alright.

אֱמֶת מַה נֶּהְדָּר הָיָה כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל
בְּצֵאתוֹ מִבֵּית קָדְשֵׁי הַקָּדָשִׁים בְּשָׁלוֹם בְּלִי פֶגַע!

Truly, how glorious was the High Priest as he emerged from the Holy of Holies in peace and unscathed!

But this year, oh this year.

I cannot help but think of those boys who went in and didn't come out. Those beautiful, glorious boys.

Not that I am comparing the soldiers in my son's IDF company to the High Priest of old. But that is what most certainly comes up for me. They were so beautiful. They carried all of us on their shoulders. They went into battle, to war, to Gaza, to protect us, to save us, to redeem us. To carry back the hostages. To stop evil in its tracks. And not all of them returned in peace and unscathed.

Like the heavenly canopy stretched out over those who dwell above—
Such was Ariel Ohana of Battalion 890 of the Paratroopers Brigade.

Like the blue of the braid of the four corners of the garment—
Such was Yinon Tamir of Battalion 890 of the Paratroopers Brigade.

Like the rose rising in a treasured garden—
Such was Dvir Barazani of Battalion 890 of the Paratroopers Brigade.

Like the glory that clothed the first creations—
Such was Valentin Elie Ghnassia of Battalion 890 of the Paratroopers Brigade.

Like the morning star on the eastern border—
Such was Rotem Dushi of Battalion 890 of the Paratroopers Brigade.

This Yom Kippur, I ask: may their unending merit carry us safely through another year.

And for those still fighting on, some with injuries we can see and all with those we might not see: may we emerge from this day unscathed, in their great and glorious merit.

Amen.

SUKKOT:
THE BLESSINGS OF VULNERABILITY

Meesh Hammer-Kossoy

Sukkot, like this year's painful war, teaches us the profound connection between vulnerability and rejoicing in God's loving protection. In his closing song (Deuteronomy 32:10), Moses succinctly explains that vulnerability and Divine protection are inseparably intertwined in the desert, saying:

יִמְצָאֵהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְבָּר
וּבְתֹהוּ יְלֵל יְשִׁמֹן יְסֹבְבֶנְהוּ יְבוֹנְנֵהוּ
יִצְּרֶנְהוּ כְּאִישׁוֹן עֵינוֹ׃

[God] found him [Israel] in a wilderness land,
in chaos, a howling desert.
[God] surrounded him, [God] paid-him-attention,
[God] guarded him like the pupil of [God's] eye.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe emphasizes (Alei Shor 2:445) that the deep and doting love that God demonstrates towards the Israelites could never be experienced in a palace of riches and comfort. It is the vulnerability of the terrifying and threatening desert that makes it possible to experience God's loving protection. Indeed, Rashi explains that the affectionate, all-encompassing protection described in this verse as "God surrounded Israel" refers to the Clouds of Glory that surrounded the Israelites from every direction, eliminating the threat of snakes, serpents, scorpions, and foreign armies. In Tractate Sukkah 11b, Rabbi Eliezer explains these clouds are in fact what the Torah refers to as a Sukkah when it says, "in order that your generations may know that in Sukkot I had the Children of Israel stay when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 23:42-43).

The holiday of Sukkot simultaneously foregrounds vulnerability and protection. This is manifested physically and spiritually by dwelling in an unstable, makeshift Sukkah, as it states in Mishnah Sukkah 2:9:

יָרְדוּ גְשָׁמִים, מֵאֵימָתַי מֻתָּר לְפַנּוֹת, מִשֶּׁתִּסְרַח הַמִּקְפָּה. מָשְׁלוּ מָשָׁל, לְמָה הַדָּבָר דּוֹמֶה, לְעֶבֶד שֶׁבָּא לִמְזוֹג כּוֹס לְרַבּוֹ, וְשָׁפַךְ לוֹ קִיתּוֹן עַל פָּנָיו.

If rain fell, from when is it permitted to vacate [the Sukkah]? It is permitted from [the point that it is raining so hard] that the congealed dish will spoil. The Sages told a parable: To what is this matter comparable? To a servant who comes to pour wine for his master, and he pours a jug [kiton] of water in his face.

Rain is generally a sign of blessing, and even an essential component of the holiday of Sukkot. However, the Mishnah here recognizes that there is no blessing in sitting miserable in a rainy Sukkah. Rain on Sukkot is a punishment and a clear sign of Divine displeasure. In this way, the Mishnah illustrates the tension and overt challenges of being in a vulnerable state, as

well as its hidden blessings.
The often-unbearable trials of this past year have carved the messages of Sukkot into my heart. Never before have I felt that the daily blessing:

רוֹקַע הָאָרֶץ עַל הַמָּיִם

Spread the earth over the waters

gives us stable ground underfoot as a desperate plea rather than praise and gratitude. Having endured so much this year, we are deeply remiss if we do not leverage these tribulations, like a rebuked servant, as a spur to communal heshbon nefesh and reflection.

At the same time, as we prevail over suffering, my awareness of the blessings that I might take for granted in better times was magnified. These blessings are themselves like Clouds of Glory surrounding me to the left and right. These include the outpouring of support from portions of the world in general and world Jewry in particular, the solidarity and mutual support of the Pardes community both within and outside of the Beit Midrash. We are also blessed that unlike in previous persecutions, we have a strong army that can, in time, protect us, and a state from whom we can demand that they work to return our hostages to the arms of their loving families.

On a more profound level, we are reminded of the infinite value of every precious human, each a world to themselves, regardless of their identity. And we are reminded of the responsibility that each of us has to act as God's emissaries on a personal level, as protective and loving Clouds of Glory for one another. May the Merciful One spread the Divine Sukkah of Peace over us. And may God give us the strength and wisdom to be agents for the reestablishment of David's fallen Sukkah, speedily in our day.

SIMCHAT TORAH: A STORY WITH TWO ENDINGS

David Levin-Kruss

What happens after Moses dies? That's an easy one, no? Joshua leads the Jewish people to the land of Israel. That is the correct answer. But the rituals of Simchat Torah suggest an alternative ending. By following the reading of Simchat Torah, the end of the Torah in Devarim with the first lines of the Torah in Bereshit, we are offered another way the story can go.

וְלֹא־קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יְדָעוֹ יְהוָה פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים: לְכָל־הָאֹתוֹת וְהַמּוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלָחוֹ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפַרְעֹה וּלְכָל־עֲבָדָיו וּלְכָל־אַרְצוֹ: וּלְכֹל־הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכֹל־הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom God singled out, face to face, for the various signs and indications that God sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel.

With this closing, we are offered a beautiful description of the greatest leader the Jewish people ever had: one who held a personal and unique relationship with God and was thus able to perform miracles and lead the Israelites out of slavery. If one were to follow this story chronologically, it would ultimately continue with the Book of Joshua, with Joshua's taking over after Moses, and with the Israelites' conquest of their long-awaited land and formation of a society.

However, with the start of Sefer Bereshit, we are offered an alternative continuation of our story. Bereshit 1:1 famously reads:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ: וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם:

When God began to create heaven and earth —the earth being shapeless and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water.

We are back in a world of chaos and darkness. Instead of a successful society, the land has been destroyed. Instead of a leader who is in partnership with God, we are completely dependent on God alone. Entering the land is a gamble that can end up with the glory of a temple or reverting to chaos.

That sense of chaos suggested by the reading from Bereshit captures what it felt like for so many on October 7th—that the world had reverted to confusion and emptiness. However, with deep reflection, these verses offer guidance on how we might rise out of this terrible moment.

The first piece of guidance we glean from these texts is the importance of good leadership. Moses is a great leader because of his relationship with God. It is this connection that enables him to perform those wondrous miracles, as well as his own integrity and values that influence his leadership.

The second piece of guidance is on the complex nature of miracles. We have two kinds of miracles described in these passages: the extraordinary wonders performed by Moses in Egypt, and the miracle of creation where, in the words of Tractate Avoda Zara 54b:

עולם כמנהגו נוהג

The world follows its course.

Despite the chaos and rupture, the miracle here is that the rules of nature are consistent and do not change.
From its inception, both miracles have been part of the story of Zionism. The return to Israel, with an ancient people re-established in its land, defied natural expectations. Yet much of this was achieved through pragmatic decisions both in war and in peace that followed the advice of Rava in Pesachim 64b:

אין סומכין על הנס

One must not rely on miracles.

Accepting the world as it is and recognizing limitations is also part of Zionism.

Lastly, these verses teach us about the importance of humility. The Bible opens with one God and a big mess that only God can form into something that is fit for humanity. Only God is all-knowing and all-capable. Only God can create light. In this moment, as we yearn for a sense of control and stability, it is helpful to remember that not everything is in our power, but in the power of the Holy One.

Above all, reading the beginning of Bereshit as an alternative ending to the end of Devarim reminds us that we, as a people, can start over again. With every turn of the page or start of a new book, our story as a people begins anew. God willing, with the tools of our text in hand, we will indeed merit to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash in our lifetime.