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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted

by

Helaine Ettinger

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

# SACRED ART: APPRECIATING NE'ILAH AS LITERATURE AND RITUAL

In a famous essay entitled "Blurred Genres: the Refiguration of Social Thought," Clifford Geertz alerts us to a "culture shift" in which hitherto discrete and disparate disciplines lose their hermetic seal and merge together to illuminate each other. "Science discussions look like belles lettres morceaux... documentaries read like true confessions... parables pose as ethnographies.... One waits only for quantum theory in verse or biography in algebra."

In such a climate, it is hard to know what to do with liturgy any more. Once upon a time, one simply studied its layers and layers of texts so as to unpack its history. You knew a liturgist when you saw one. But no longer. In fact, you can hardly tell a text when you see one! From last century's discipline-fixated scholarship of German academia, we have returned to the Renaissance where general theories are again in vogue, and in order to know anything about something, you have to know something of everything. It is easy to write a technician's study of one more controlled experiment that proves once again what everyone knows anyway. It is vastly more difficult to look at a liturgical work and ask afresh, "Yes, but what is it?" More than a text, liturgy is a script for an acted-out something-or-other. But how can a renaissance mind bring to bear a blurring of genres to give us a model of just what that

something-or-other is?

Helaine Ettinger possesses the requisite renaissance mind for such an enquiry, and her rabbinic thesis is therefore sui generis in its topic. The title tells all: Sacred Art: Appreciating Ne'ilah as Literature and Ritual. Here is a fresh look at Yom Kippur's vintage Ne'ilah service, from both a literary and an anthropological perspective, with a healthy dose of psychology and even of music theory thrown in.

Ettinger begins by comparing Ne'ilah to a symphony. Selichot and Rosh hashanah develop the High Holy Day themes that will eventually be recapitulated in Ne'ilah, after some intermediary development in the "second ritual movement," Yom Kippur eve and day. She views the entire period of these days of awe from the perspective of the hermeneutic circle: we read the themes of Rosh hashanah prefiguring where they will go by Yom Kippur's conclusion, and we celebrate Ne'ilah by looking back and readjusting our early reading of just ten days before. Ne'ilah is thus continuous with what it sums up (or, "resolves," if we stay with the musical metaphor), even as it is its own thing in itself, a single discrete service that marks the end of the period in question. We thus find within it some elementary literary devices that direct our attention back to other services, while simultaneously putting us on notice that Ne'ilah is really different -- the motif of the shofar that is sounded once again, albeit differently, the abridged vidui, a Ne'ilah Kaddish, chatam substituted for katav in the Tefillah and in Avinu Malkenu, and so forth.

But this thesis is more than an exploration of literary devices. This is no return to the New Criticism of John Crowe Ransom or Cleanth Brooks. It is a study of text and reader, ritual

and ritualizer, all at once. It is a rich and creative exploration of the existential state conveyed by the rite's performative power upon those who choose to engage in it. To be sure, not every participant will recognize all the themes implicit in the sacred moment, just as not all readers get the metaphors implicit in The Wasteland, and not all listeners hear the themes come together in Schubert's Great C Major Symphony. But Ettinger takes the perspective of the hypothetical omniscient reader of this ritual text. She shows us the ramifications of the reams of things embedded in the ritual script and performance. Ne'ilah emerges as a grand cosmic drama in which we who pray it move "from rupture to repair, from alienation to reconciliation.... The messages and symbols accumulate as we move through the worship service, until, at last, we reach the secure conclusion that all is forgiven" (pp. 44-45).

At this point Ettinger moves us to yet another model, no longer literary but anthropological: Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's rite of passage. And why not? How could anyone have failed to miss the symbolic isomorphism of Ne'ilah's gates and the rite of passage's doors? The entire rite of passage emerges from the root metaphor of a door, leading from one state of being to another. We leave one room, tarry briefly and dangerously in the doorway, and are reborn to a new room, where a new destiny awaits us. So too on Yom Kippur we tarry briefly and dangerously in the doorway between last year and the next, frightened lest the covenant be ended, lest we die the death of sinners. Neophytes undergoing liminal waiting periods feign death, says van Gennep; so too do we, during Yom Kippur, Ettinger points out, ignoring bodily needs like food and drink, dressing in a kittel, denying social status that is

dependent on such elementary human acts as washing, and such elevated symbolic gestures as anointing. Ne'ilah is the rite of integration into a new year. It brings to an end what Kol Nidre began -- the cancellation of contracts, including the covenant itself, for a long day that moves us (to cite again the message of the literary devices) "from rupture to repair, from alienation to reconciliation."

I have given only a synopsis of what is one of the most suggestive theses I have ever encountered. It deserves careful reading by anyone intent on rescuing Jewish ritual from the clutches of those who would strangle it in the cords of its own history. More than a text, the ritual of Ne'ilah transforms us, and Ettinger shows us how and why.

We are indebted to Helaine Ettinger for a striking and creative analysis of this familiar rite. Brilliant in its novelty, well written and developed, compelling in its argument, and filled with examples, Helaine Ettinger's Sacred Art: Appreciating Ne'ilah as Literature and Ritual is required reading for anyone who has puzzled over Ne'ilah's magical power.

Respectfully submitted,

Lawrence A. Hoffman
Professor of Liturgy

# *Sacred Art: Appreciating Ne'ilah as Literature and Ritual*

**Helaine Ettinger**

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

March 1991/ Adar 5751
Referee: Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman

# DEDICATION

To my parents, with love and thanks.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of advantages to pursuing one's rabbinic education at three different campuses. It has been my privilege to study with three fine faculties. The Jerusalem faculty opened up new worlds to me by teaching me to read and to begin to interpret Hebrew texts. The faculty in Los Angeles inspired me with their passion for intellectual inquiry. They are engaged in what I characterize as a cross-disciplinary meta-conversation about the nature of interpretation, and its role in education. Students at the Los Angeles campus are invited to join in this meta-conversation that permeates the classrooms and the hallways and the committee meetings and the communal functions of the school. I spent two wonderfully personally nurturing, and intellectually enriching and stimulating years under the guidance of the Los Angeles faculty. And the New York faculty has added another two years of challenging study, of what I hope represents a certain initial polish to my Judaic education.

One of the disadvantages of this plan, however, is that one has three freshman years at HUC-JIR. I have been unusually fortunate that despite my dazed state, in both Los Angeles and New York, I found faculty advisors early on, who guided me in important and unexpected ways. To David Ellenson, I owe particular thanks, for teaching me that I was more capable than I knew. Larry Hoffman helped me, finally, to synthesize all of my interests through his approach to the study of liturgy. The seminar he led in 1989-1990 was the most exciting intellectual experience of my many years of formal education. Whatever merit this thesis possesses is due largely to his inspiration. Beyond their formal role as faculty advisors, however, both professors made themselves available as people. They have been warm, open, and very supportive. And I appreciate all of the time we have spent together in and out of the classroom.

Finally, my friends and family, on the West Coast and the East Coast (and a few in between) have kept me going through all of the ups and downs of five years of graduate school. They are very dear to me.

CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

## *HAYOM HARAT OLAM*

"Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention."[1] It is a way of drawing distinctions. Ritual allows us to celebrate people, places, and events. Through ritual we are able to set apart one moment from another. Ritual takes ordinary elements from life and creates a controlled environment in which they are so placed (or displaced) as to reveal or release their power. Jonathan Smith theorizes that, "A ritual object or action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way. From such a point of view, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones."[2] Smith does not believe that ritual is a response to some ideal or entity known as the Sacred, rather, he feels that through ritual, objects and people are made sacred. Terms such as sacred and profane, therefore, are relative categories; they help us to distinguish one experience from another, but they do not define the essence of an experience.

Ritual serves as a prism, a means of altering our perceptions to highlight the extraordinary qualities

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1. Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.103.

2. Smith, To Take Place, p.104.

inherent in ordinary activities. Ritual is neither blind, nor empty, nor arbitrary; it is imaginative and meaningful. Ritual has a deliberate, cognitive aspect. Ritual focuses our attention on the unusual. In ritual we consciously create a tension between the way things ought to be and the way things are. Ritual allows us to contrast the real and the ideal. "Ritual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about."[3] Through ritual we express our most cherished beliefs and convictions, although we remain aware that our ideals are largely unrealizable. Accordingly, ritual may be seen as an acting out of desired ends or feelings or ideas in a symbolic way.[4] Ritual is a dramatization of our hopes. And worship is, therefore, a particular category of ritual -- sacred drama. Worship is a form of collective religious artistic expression. In our worship we cast ourselves as God's co-creators. We posit new worlds and new ideals for humankind, in partnership with God.

Victor Turner has observed that, "myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems,and works of art," all play a similar role in the life of a society:

> These cultural forms provide men [and women] with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and humanity's relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications

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3. Smith, To Take Place, pp.109-110.

4. Smith, To Take Place, pp. 109-110.

> since they incite men [and women] to action as well as to thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psycho-biological levels simultaneously.5

The act of worship is both descriptive and performative. We pray for certain desired ends -- health, prosperity, forgiveness, understanding, peace. We pray in the hope that they will happen and we pray in order to make them happen. In our liturgy, for example, we re-enact significant moments in our history. Thus, each time we recite the Mi Khamokha, we both relive the paradigmatic instance of our past redemption and pray for our future redemption. Past, present, and future fold in on each other during worship. According to Mircea Eliade, in worship we step out of everyday, linear time and enter sacred time, which is circular.

> Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the actualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, "in the beginning." Religious participation in a festival implies emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythical time reactualized by the festival itself. Hence sacred time is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable... it neither changes nor is exhausted.6

With each chanting of the Mi Khamokha we recover the time of redemption. With each new year we recover the time of

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5. Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), pp.128-129.

6. Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (San Diego/ New York/ London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), pp.68-69.

Creation -- *"hayom harat olam"*. Thus do we formulate worlds and ideals through our worship.

At no other time in our liturgical year is the quest for a new year and renewed humanity more literal than at the High Holy Days. Rosh Hashanah marks the creation of the world as well as the new year, and Yom Kippur as the Day of Atonement is a day of purification and reconciliation. Each Rosh Hashanah we give birth to a new world. Each Yom Kippur we give birth to a new self. The sacred drama of our worship during the High Holy Days is the most elaborate and explicit of the liturgical year. Over the centuries this sacred drama has developed a script -- the liturgy of the Machzor; a score -- liturgical music and High Holy Day nusach; costumes -- the tallit, kippah, and kittel; staging -- the movements of the worshippers in their seats and of the service leaders before the Ark; props -- Shofarot, Machzorim, Sifrei Torah; scenery and sets -- the natural backdrop of autumn twilight, daylight or darkness, and the sanctuary itself.

To some, the term drama implies artificiality. This drama is deadly serious; ultimate concerns are its subject and our futures are at stake. The High Holy Day liturgy addresses the fate of the world and the value of human life. The words of the Machzor, in concert with all of the other aforementioned aspects of the worship service, create a richly textured aesthetic experience for the worshipers.

Like any work of art, the sacred drama of worship on the High Holy Days engages us and moves us. We feel that our souls hang in the balance, suspended between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, awaiting God's final judgment. The drama assumes sacred dimensions precisely because we are certain of God's participation. We formulate our prayers with divine response in mind and hear God speak in the silences between the words. Thus God is simultaneously a key player in the drama and the most important member of the audience.

Like a great work of art, the High Holy Day worship is also complex and open to interpretation. For, as I have shown, the text of the worship is more than the text of the Machzor. The text is the whole experience. The interpretation, therefore, may extend beyond objective historical considerations of the Machzor to a subjective, critical appraisal of the entire experience of worship. No single generation set out to write this drama. It is the work of multiple generations. Nor can any single generation claim to know its true meaning, for there is more than one possible "reading" to this text. Numerous meanings inhere in the layers contributed by various communities and different eras, and their combined effect may suggest other additional levels of meaning unimagined by any one contributor. From this perspective it is possible to see the text as ahistorical. Ultimately, the worshiper gives meaning to the text in the dynamic process of worshipping.

As an educated worshiper, I seek to present a particular interpretation of the High Holy Day experience. My central Hebrew text is the traditional Ashkenazic Machzor[7]. My approach to this text is synchronic and literary, rather than historic and scientific. My goal is to examine and critique the many facets of High Holy Day worship, as these facets draw to their conclusion in the service of Ne'ilah.

Ne'ilah is a unique service within the Jewish liturgical year. Although in the days of the Second Temple it was a daily service, and in the past it was a part of any public fast day, today Ne'ilah is conducted exclusively on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is therefore, the only day in the entire year on which we hold five separate services, the fifth and final of which is Ne'ilah. According to the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:1) the full name for the service is "*Ne'ilat She'arim*" -- the locking of the gates. R. Johanan and Abba disagree (Yer. Ta'anit 7c) as to whether this refers to the closing of the gates of the Temple or the closing of the gates of heaven. In either case, the name of the service conveys the finality of the moment. At Ne'ilah, the process of seeking forgiveness and renewal which began weeks earlier at Selichot, reaches its conclusion.

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7. Philip Birnbaum, trans., High Holyday Prayer Book, (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951) and Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., Machzor Leyamim Nora'im, (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, Inc., 1970).

Beyond completing this season, Ne'ilah actually encapsulates the entire High Holy Day period. Aspects of Selichot, Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, and Yom Kippur reappear in Ne'ilah and create new or altered impressions. In this way Ne'ilah comes to epitomize the entire High Holy Day period in the same way that the Mi Khamokha epitomizes the time of redemption. Ne'ilah is sacred time within sacred time. Ne'ilah simultaneously functions as an independent ritual within the High Holy Days, and as the reiteration of the entire High Holy Day period within the yearly liturgical cycle. How it incorporates these dimensions of sacred time and how these, in turn, reflect upon the broad themes of the High Holy Days are the subject of this study.

# CHAPTER ONE

## SACRED SYMPHONY

The metaphor of a sacred drama enables us to identify the different components that make up the High Holy Day worship and helps us to understand the active role we play as worshipers. Metaphors are as instructive in their imperfections as they are in their strengths, however.[1] The limitation of the symphony metaphor is that it does not illumine the connections between the various services that make up the High Holy Day worship, other than to state that they are all part of a single larger drama. To gain insight into these inter-service relationships, it is advantageous to employ another metaphor drawn from the world of art--the metaphor of the classical symphony.

In a standard three-movement symphony, a primary musical theme is stated in the first movement, developed through modulations and variations in the second, then recapitulated and resolved in a new key in the third. An educated listener thus anticipates the basic structure of the composition. Indeed, part of the listener's enjoyment derives from identifying the theme and following its journey through the piece. The music deliberately draws attention to itself by restating the entire theme, or one of the

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[1]. I am indebted to my friend Randy Melick for pointing this out to me.

related motifs, in a new key, or through a different set of instruments, or with some slight inversion or modification. New harmonies create new impressions and inspire a range of emotions in the listeners. Yet each change relating to the main theme or to one of the motifs ultimately ties the entire piece together. Accordingly, the seemingly complex work is discovered to be a single, relatively simple and integrated composition.

The numerous services of the High Holy Day worship are similarly tied together by a central theme and attendant motifs. By and large, this theme and these motifs are first articulated during Selichot or Rosh Hashanah, then developed on Yom Kippur, and finally recapitulated and resolved at Ne'ilah. Ne'ilah is the climax of the High Holy Day symphony.

The structure of the Ne'ilah service is fairly elementary. Ne'ilah is basically a Shabbat or Festival Amidah (i.e. a *Tefillah* of seven blessings) with augmentations. It begins with introductory prayers: *Ashrei* (Psalm 145), *U'va letsion go'el* (*Kedushah Desidra*), and the *Chatzi Kaddish*. Next, follows the silent Amidah, which concludes with *Viddui* (including only the short confession). The Reader's Repetition of the Amidah is expanded by the *Kerovah*[2], and by special *selichot piyyutim* and *Viddui* (again

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2. *Kerovah* is the name for a set of *piyyutim* woven into the text of the first three blessings of the Amidah. The closing section is known as the *Silluk* (finale). The

including only the short confession) all of which are integrated into the *Kedushat Hayom*. The service concludes with *Avinu Malkeinu*, a set of three declaratory statements known as the *Shemot*, and the sound of the shofar.

This seeming clarity belies the complex interplay of language and ritual which connects Ne'ilah to the other services of the High Holy Days. Indeed, the modesty of the composition makes it all the easier to identify those elements of the Ne'ilah service which are borrowed from other services, those elements which are substitutions from other services, those elements which are omitted from other services, and those elements which are unique to the Ne'ilah service. Such borrowings, substitutions, eliminations, and additions to the body of liturgy and ritual, are liturgical devices equivalent to the musical variations found within a symphony. These devices alter or highlight the theme and motifs of the High Holy Days in ways that cause us to hear them anew.

Like the final movement of a symphony, the "text" of Ne'ilah succeeds in drawing our attention to itself, making us aware of the ways in which it reviews and concludes the

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subject matter of the *piyyutim* relate to the holy day, and may derive from the pertinent Torah or Haftarah portions, or from the theme of the festival itself.

Max Arzt, Justice and Mercy, (New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1963), pp.83-85.

Abraham Meir Habermann, "Kerovah," Encyclopedia Judaica, vol.10, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1972), p.920.

High Holy Day period. We are meant to recognize and recall other services. We are meant to notice and consider changes. In sum, we are meant to contrast and compare what occurs in Ne'ilah with all that has preceded it.

BORROWINGS

The introductory prayers to Ne'ilah, *Ashrei* and *U'va letsion go'el* are customarily found at the start of the Shabbat and Festival Minchah service. According to Machzor Vitry, their placement here at the start of Ne'ilah serves to make a clear separation between Minchah and Ne'ilah. The Torah reading already separates Shacharit from Musaf and, likewise, Musaf from Minchah. However, Ne'ilah follows Minchah without interruption so that *Ashrei* and *U'va letsion go'el* are inserted before Ne'ilah to make a clear distinction between the two services.[3] However, *Ashrei* and *U'va letsion go'el* serve as more than a separation, they serve also as a cue that we are beginning the last service of the festive day -- on Shabbat and Festivals they lead, therefore, into Minchah, and on Yom Kippur they lead into Ne'ilah. The *Kedushah Desidra* also appears in the liturgy for *Motza'ei Shabbat*, as part of the transition back from holy to profane time, and as a hopeful note anticipating the messianic era. Yom Kippur is *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the Sabbath

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3. B.S. Jacobson, Yamim Noraim/Days of Awe, trans. Avner Tomaschoff (Tel Aviv: "Sinai" Publishing, 1978), p.122.

of Sabbaths, the holiest day of the year; it is therefore not surprising that at the end of Yom Kippur, another time of transition from holy to profane, we strike a similar note of messianic anticipation. In these ways, the "borrowed" introductory prayers to Ne'ilah function as devices that both remind us of the parallels between Shabbat and Yom Kippur and indicate the close of a holy day.

The *Kedushat HaShem* of the Reader's Repetition is also borrowed from the standard Shabbat liturgy. It is nearly identical to the Shabbat Musaf Kedushah, as Sar Shalom Gaon noted in the ninth century.[4] This in itself is another reminder that Yom Kippur is *Shabbat Shabbaton*. However, there are two minor differences between the Kedushah of Ne'ilah and that of Shabbat Musaf. First, although the vocabulary in both are similar, the opening formula at Ne'ilah is in the second person, "*U'vahem to'orats v'tukdash,*" instead of the first person plural, "*Na'aritskha v'nakdishkha,*" -- we are therefore addressing God directly. This may indicate the urgency with which we approach our prayers at Ne'ilah, or it may indicate the intimacy with which we approach God at the end of this full day of prayer. Second, two verses of Scripture are inserted after "*Ani adonai eloheikhem*", Psalm 8:10 "*Adonai Adoneinu, ma adir shimkha bekhol ha'arets,*" and Zekhariah 14:9 "*v'haya Adonai*

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4. *Lawrence A. Hoffman, The Canonization of the Synagogue Service, (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp.81-82.*

*lemelekh al kol ha'arets, bayom hahu yihiyey Adonai echad u'shemo echad*". We recognize the latter verse as the concluding line to *Aleinu*. These same insertions occur in the Kedushah of the Reader's Repetition in the Rosh Hashanah Musaf, Yom Kippur Shacharit, Musaf, and Minchah services. The link to *Aleinu* suggests a number of possible allusions. *Aleinu* was composed as an introduction to the Rosh Hashanah shofar service and therefore speaks of God's eventual sovereignty in the messianic era. By the 14th century it came to be included in the concluding prayers of every service.[5] It is sobering to repeat these words declaring God's role as sovereign throughout the day on Yom Kippur, as each person stands hoping to receive divine pardon. The appearance of *Aleinu* here in the Ne'ilah Kedushah thus anticipates the shofar at the end of the service, connects us back to Rosh Hashanah and to each of the services of Yom Kippur, and hints at the conclusion of the Day of Atonement.

Other elements, as well, within the Ne'ilah service, hearken back to the time of Selichot and Rosh Hashanah. These liturgical and non-liturgical elements are perfect examples of the symphonic character of High Holy Day worship. For example, *Viddui* is recited at each Selichot service and at each service on Yom Kippur. However, the abridged version of *Viddui*, with only the short form of the

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5. Lawrence A. Hoffman, Gates of Understanding 2, (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 5744/1984), p.42.

confession, is found exclusively in the Selichot and Ne'ilah services. Thus we establish a "motif" of confession at Selichot, develop it into a more elaborate confession during Yom Kippur, and restate the original, condensed "motif" at Ne'ilah. The "variations" introduced throughout the day on Yom Kippur thus serve to intensify our confessions, elongating them through additional prayers. Similar poignancy is achieved at Ne'ilah by the return to the initial, simplified confession. However, at Ne'ilah, the last opportunity for penitential prayer, we recollect the original hopes with which we began to prepare for the period of repentance -- a reminder that is likely to be both encouraging and humbling.

The "motif" of the shofar sounds first at the end of Shacharit during the month of Elul. Every morning during Elul, except for the morning of Erev Rosh Hashanah, we hear a single, haunting *Tekiah*. Then, on Rosh Hashanah, during Musaf, that single blast multiplies into a cascade of long and short sounds, 100 blasts in all. The restrained urgency of the shofar during Elul converts to a sense of direct confrontation on Rosh Hashanah. <u>Now</u> is the time for repentance, it seems to cry. And then, as though spent, its voice subsides again until the very end of Yom Kippur. Finally, at Ne'ilah, we hear again the same single, haunting *Tekiah* we heard during Elul. It is the missing *Tekiah* from the morning of Erev Rosh Hashanah, the last one needed to

complete the sequence. When it returns here, at the end of Ne'ilah, the voice of the shofar is no longer urgent or restrained, it is triumphant. It is the sound of release. It is a cry of hope. Nevertheless, when we hear the shofar, we recall the days of Elul and the struggle to confront our failings throughout the High Holy Days, and temper our triumph with humility. Beginning with a simple motif stated in Elul, the sound of the shofar develops into an elaborate set of variations on Rosh Hashanah, and finally returns to restate its simple motif at Ne'ilah. When the sound of the shofar recurs at Ne'ilah, however, it resounds with the powerful echo of all of the associations developed throughout the High Holy Days.

An example of much more direct borrowing from preceding High Holy Day liturgy is the *piyyut* "*Enkat misaldekhah*" found in the *selichot* section of Ne'ilah. This four-stanza poem is in fact a composite of stanzas from four different piyyutim. Each of these four liturgical poems originally appears in its entirety during the days of Selichot.[6]

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6. According to Lithuanian tradition, *Enkat misaldekhah* is part of the Selichot service of Erev Rosh Hashanah; *Yisrael nosha badonai* is recited on the third day of Selichot; and *Yashmienu salachti* on the fifth day. According to the Central European tradition, *Yachbienu tsel yado* is recited on the fifth day of Selichot.

Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., Seder haSelichot (according to the custom of Lithuania and the Prussian congregations of Eretz Yisrael), (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5725/1965).

Rev. Abraham Rosenfeld, trans., The Authorised Selichot for the Whole Year (according to the rite in use among Hebrew Congregations in the Commonwealth and in Central Europe), (London: I. Labworth & Co., 5722/1962).

Again, what was anticipatory and preparatory during Selichot, becomes conclusive and resolute at Ne'ilah. We start out distant from God, seeking rapprochement. Consequently, at Selichot, when we first utter these pleas to God -- to heed Israel's prayers, to save, to shelter, and to forgive -- they are full of longing, whereas by Ne'ilah we have a sense of reconciliation and they are full of gratitude. The literary device of repetition enables us to make use of poetic signposts to chart the spiritual distance we have travelled.

Another such signpost is the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu* found at the end of the Reader's Repetition of the Amidah. *Avinu Malkeinu* makes its first appearance in the morning service of Rosh Hashanah. It is always recited before the open Ark. Thereafter, *Avinu Malkeinu* is recited daily during the Ten Days of Repentance, except for Shabbat.[7] It is said on each of the intermediate days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur following the Amidah at Shacharit and Minchah, with one exception. *Avinu Malkeinu* is not recited at Shacharit of Erev Yom Kippur. It is also recited

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7. Several reasons are offered for this Shabbat exclusion: Rabbi Akiva is said originally to have recited *Avinu Malkeinu* on a fast day and fasting is not permitted on Shabbat; it is not permitted to make personal requests on Shabbat; some say that *Avinu Malkeinu* corresponds to the benedictions of the weekday Amidah which are not recited on Shabbat; others say that *Avinu Malkeinu* corresponds to *Tachanun* which likewise is omitted on Shabbat.

Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979), p.186.

at each of the services on Yom Kippur, except for Minchah. *Avinu Malkeinu* is as conspicuous in its absence as it is in its presence during the High Holy Days. The one time that it is permissible to recite *Avinu Malkeinu* on Shabbat is at the end of Ne'ilah. According to the Shulchan Arukh (623:9) of Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1747-1812), this exception is necessary in order that we may enter a final plea for mercy at the final moment of judgment.

Each time we omit the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu*, (on Shabbat, at Shacharit on Erev Yom Kippur, at Yom Kippur Minchah), we draw attention to a significant moment in the High Holy Day period. These omissions serve to heighten our awareness of transitional moments taking place within the High Holy Days -- the shift to the Sabbath, or to the start of the Day of Atonement, or to Ne'ilah, the end of the Day of Atonement, which is itself a service of transition. From an aesthetic point of view, the final recitation of *Avinu Malkeinu* at Ne'ilah fulfills the progression begun on Rosh Hashanah; like the repetition of the *piyyutim*, and the renewed voice of the shofar, it completes the pattern.

One last borrowed section deserves mention. In the weekday Amidah, the third of the intermediate benedictions is a petition for divine forgiveness. The opening phrase from this benediction, "*Selach lanu avinu, ki chatanu, mechal lanu malkeinu, ki fashanu,*" is woven into the recitation of the thirteen divine attributes during the High

Holy Days. Thus at every Selichot service and in every *selichot* section of every High Holy Day service, we hear the echo of the weekday Amidah and likewise, in every weekday Amidah during the High Holy Day period, we hear the echo of Selichot and the thirteen divine attributes. In other words, a familiar prayer which we might recite automatically or take for granted as part of the weekday Amidah, jumps out of the worship with new force during the High Holy Days when its message is most penetrating. And a prayer whose message we might hear in relation only to the High Holy Day period, contains within it a reminder that God's forgiveness is extended to us at all times.

SUBSTITUTIONS AND DELETIONS

At Ne'ilah our fates are literally sealed. At Ne'ilah every reference to God's writing us in the Book of Life ("*katav*") changes to a reference to God's sealing us in the Book of Life ("*chatam*"). The primary liturgical source for this image of the Book of Life is the prayer *Unetaneh tokef* which is introduced in the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service and repeated in the Yom Kippur Musaf. *Unetaneh tokef* depicts God in the role of a judge, reviewing our past year's deeds and writing us provisionally into the Book of Life on Rosh Hashanah, then sealing us permanently into the Book of Life on Yom Kippur...if we are found worthy. According to *Unetaneh tokef*, although a range of positive and negative

fortunes may befall anyone, "Repentance, prayer, and charity cancel the stern decree."[8] In other words, every person possesses the means to ensure his or her own positive outcome. Despite the severe tone of *Unetaneh tokef*, its message is nonetheless heartening. So too, the numerous references in Ne'ilah to God sealing us in the Book of Life create a hopeful mood. In our concluding prayers we anticipate that God will, once again, seal us in the Book of Life for another year.

The changes from "*katav*" to "*chatam*" occur in places that are particularly noticeable. The special High Holy Day insertion to the *Avot*, "Remember us to life, O King,..." includes the plea "and write us in the Book of Life". The *Avot* is expanded in this way at every single service from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur until Ne'ilah, where the plea is changed to "and seal us in the Book of Life". Since the Amidah occurs at the very start of Ne'ilah and since the *Avot* is the first prayer of the Amidah, this alteration in the liturgy immediately confronts the worshipers. It announces that the thrust of the worship on Ne'ilah is going to be different. It informs the worshipers that they should pay attention to other, similar changes in the otherwise familiar flow of the prayers. Thus the worshipers are alert to the changes they find at the end of the Amidah in the *Hoda'ah* and the *Birkat Kohanim*, whose liturgical insertions

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[8]. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.362.

have the identical substitution found in the *Avot*. The Reader's Repetition of the Amidah echoes and reinforces these same changes.

Finally, toward the end of Ne'ilah, the litany of requests which make up *Avinu Malkeinu*, feature a series of five statements which highlight this same lexical switch:

> Our Father, our King, **seal us** in the book of a happy [good] life.
>
> Our Father, our King, **seal us** in the book of redemption and salvation.
>
> Our Father, our King, **seal us** in the book of maintenance and sustenance.
>
> Our Father, our King, **seal us** in the book of merit.
>
> Our Father, our King, **seal us** in the book of pardon and forgiveness.[9]

The rhythmic repetition of "Seal us, seal us, seal us, seal us, seal us" intensifies the awareness that the moment of judgment is imminent. Simultaneously, the expanded metaphor of the book expresses the worshipers' increased desire for a positive resolution of their fate. Overall, these changes to *Avinu Malkeinu* add nuances that communicate a greater sense of hope and immediacy suitable to the end of the Day of Atonement.

The full *Viddui* is recited for the first time during

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9. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.1014.

the silent Amidah at Minchah on Erev Yom Kippur. Thereafter, the full *Viddui* is said twice at each of the next four services on Yom Kippur: at the end of the silent Amidah and during the middle blessing of the Reader's Repetition of the Amidah. A shorter form of the *Viddui*, however, is recited during Ne'ilah. As early as the Geonic period, it was the custom to drop the long confession at Ne'ilah, and to choose in its place two other prayers.[10] The first, *Atah noten yad laposhim*, imparts the lesson that God is open to all who return, that God will even meet the repentant sinner halfway. This message is very encouraging at the end of Yom Kippur when, despite sincere efforts, worshipers can never feel they have achieved perfect repentance. In place of a lengthy confession of failings, then, we find a prayer that conveys God's acceptance of our failings. This prayer, in turn, leads into *Atah hivdalta enosh merosh* which speaks of humanity's unique status within the hierarchy of creation. Humankind is clearly set apart and above all other living creatures, yet humankind is imperfect and ignorant. Therefore, "Thou, Lord our God, didst graciously grant us this Day of Atonement, ending in the complete forgiveness of all our iniquities."[11] This prayer, too, speaks of the relationship between humanity and divinity, emphasizing God's willingness to forgive human

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10. Goldschmidt, Machzor, vol.II, pp.xi-xii.

11. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.972.

deficiency. Again, in place of a litany of errors we find a confirmation of pardon. Accordingly, at Ne'ilah, where we are accustomed to a detailed confession of sins, we substitute the shorter formula for confession and close with the reassurance of God's forgiveness. The crisis we have been anticipating throughout Yom Kippur -- the possibility that the day would end without forgiveness, is thus seemingly averted. For even as we recite the alphabet of our iniquity, we note that divine amnesty exceeds human frailty.

IDIOSYNCRASIES

In every service of Yom Kippur there is a distinctive *Kerovah* and a different set of *piyyutim* which make up the *selichot* section. Many of the services include *Kerovot* or *selichot piyyutim* with similar themes. At Ne'ilah the *Kerovah* focuses on the lives of the Patriarchs and their loyalty to the covenant, while the *selichot* highlight the metaphor of the gates, which is the distinguishing image of Ne'ilah. We shall return to these topics in the next chapter.

The unusual custom of concluding the Ne'ilah service with *Shemot* (*Shema Yisrael, Barukh shem kevod,* and *Adonai hu ha-elohim*) was a French innovation. It is not recorded in the works of the Geonim, Rambam, or the Masters of the Halakhah in Germany until the 14th century. The extant

writings from Rashi's *Beit Midrash*[12] note that at the end of Ne'ilah after the Kaddish, the congregation answers *Adonai hu ha-elohim* seven times, but they do not explain why. An account by R. Chayim Paltiel (13th-14th centuries) corroborates the French custom of saying *Adonai hu ha-elohim* seven times and adds that *Shema Yisrael* is also recited once. He further records that in some Ashkenazic communities they would say *Shema Yisrael* three times, *Barukh shem kevod* three times, and *Adonai hu ha-elohim* three times. R. Paltiel comments that the former custom is preferable since we silence anyone who impugns God's exclusive divinity by saying *Shema Shema*, (see Berachot 33b). For this reason, eventually it became fixed Ashkenazic practice to recite *Shema Yisrael* once, *Barukh shem kevod* three times, and *Adonai hu ha-elohim* seven times, following the Kaddish.[13] It is also Ashkenazic practice to blow the shofar immediately after the *Shemot*.[14]

Ne'ilah thus concludes with a unique doxology composed of biblical and liturgical declarations, such that the whole of Yom Kippur and the entire High Holy Day period end on a note of affirmation. Ostensibly we affirm God's unity, sovereignty, and exclusivity. Indirectly we affirm our own

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12. מחזור ויטרי סי' שנ"ו . סדור רש"י סי' רנ"ג

13. Goldschmidt, Machzor, vol.II, p.xxxii, footnote 32.

14. It is the Sefardic custom to blow the shofar in the middle of the *Kaddish Shalem* before the word "*Titkabel*". Hoffman, Gates of Understanding 2, p.154.

successful renewal. Despite the threat of extinction which increases throughout the holidays should God deny us forgiveness, we conclude every Yom Kippur with a sense of God's benevolence. We could not declare our faith in God with such mounting force (one, then three, then seven), were it not for an unstated belief that our atonement has been accepted. The *Shemot* with their singular terseness and repetitiveness resound with an impact equal to that of the shofar. They communicate a certainty that is either lacking or muted during the High Holy Days. They draw the worship to a close on a note of exhilaration that releases us from the austerity of Yom Kippur and enables us to resume our usual activities with confidence.

# CHAPTER TWO

## THEME AND VARIATIONS

A single major theme dominates every great symphony. That major theme is, in turn, composed of a number of smaller musical motifs. In some parts of the symphony the entire theme reappears, in other places, only the associated motifs. However, since the parts are symbolic of the whole, whenever we hear one of the motifs, we recall the larger theme of which it is a part. So it is with worship; there are major themes and attendant motifs. A motif may be composed of biblical allusions within the liturgy, or recurring images within the prayers, as well as ritual objects, or choreography. Sometimes the entire theme is explicitly stated within the worship, at other times, it is implicit in the motifs. The principal theme within Ne'ilah is never explicitly stated. Rather, it must be inferred from the six prominent motifs that weave in and out of the service. We have already touched on some of the motifs found in Ne'ilah in the preceding discussion on liturgical devices. We have analyzed the ways in which liturgical devices alter these motifs, creating new liturgical messages and tying together the various High Holy Day services. It is now appropriate to examine the Ne'ilah motifs themselves and the larger theme of which they are a part.

The major theme of Yom Kippur is atonement. But what is atonement? It is a process, a process of reconciliation or repair. For that process to begin, in order for there to be a need for atonement, there must first be some experience of estrangement or rift. The awareness of alienation creates the need for atonement. Our worship on the High Holy Days expresses both the rupture and the repair, the initiation and the resolution of the process of atonement. The experience of worship thus mirrors both our need and our appreciation for successful atonement.

Ne'ilah is the climax of this process of atonement. As the final service of Yom Kippur, it is the focal point for our reconciliation or repair. Its motifs, as we shall see, reiterate and reinforce this pattern of disruption and restoration.

In his analysis of the Ne'ilah *piyyut*, *U'mi ya'amod chayt*, Benjamin Scolnic has outlined four stages in the process of atonement.[1] These four stages may be termed sin, punishment, repentance, and forgiveness. They are distinguished by the relative position of the human and the divine face. Harmony in the divine-human relationship is characterized by humanity and divinity facing one another. Sin is characterized by Israel turning her face away from

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1. Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, "A Piyyut of Neilah," Conservative Judaism, 35, No. 4 (1982), pp.24-32.

God. As a result, God turns the divine face away from Israel, effecting punishment. This stage is one of complete alienation. Israel then initiates reconciliation by turning back toward God in repentance. And God communicates divine forgiveness by turning back toward Israel. S. Y. Agnon shares a similar insight regarding the reciprocal nature of the divine and human efforts necessary to achieve atonement:

> The Ten Days of Teshuvah are a process wherein we draw ourselves upward from earth to heaven. On Yom Kippur, God draws down from heaven to be nearer to us on earth.[2]

Scolnic draws his model from the prophets, particularly Second Isaiah, whose passionate pleas both to Israel and to God make frequent use of these images of the divine and human countenance.[3] He notes that the Book of Jeremiah, for example, concludes with a description of a new covenant that will establish a better face to face relationship between God and humanity (Jer. 50:4-5).[4] This same prophetic language permeates the *piyyut, U'mi ya'amod chayt*. Metaphors of physicality communicate an awareness of alienation from God and, likewise, the desire for reconciliation.

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2. Samuel ben Abraham of Sochaczow, Pietrokov, 1932, as cited in S.Y. Agnon, Days of Awe, (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p.189.

3. Scolnic, "A Piyyut of Neilah," p.26.

4. Scolnic, "A Piyyut of Neilah," p.32, n.12.

*U'mi ya'amod chayt* is a conflation of two *piyyutim*. It opens with the last five stanzas of a *piyyut* by R. Solomon ben Judah ha-Bavli (10th century), and continues with six stanzas from the second half of a *piyyut* by the French Tosafist, R. Joseph ben Isaac of Orleans (12th century).[5] The first stanza of the *piyyut* introduces the connection between physicality, sin, and forgiveness:

> If You record sin, who can stand?
> If You execute judgment, who can survive?
> Forgiveness is Yours, it is Yours to say, "I forgive,"
> Yours also is the quality of tender compassion.[6]

Survival is equated with the physical ability to stand before God. In a related fashion, the sight of God's face, in stanza 5, symbolizes God's mercy and salvation: "Raise us up in the light of Your face when settling the account;/ Find ransom to save us from the grave." The sense of human unworthiness is expressed in stanza 8 by the idea of facelessness -- "*Ayn lanu panim*." Through sin the people have lost their faces, and thus the ability to come before God, face to face. Instead, they approach God through their own prayers and the prayers of those worthy to stand before God:

> We do not have faces with which to seek Your face;
> We have sinned, rebelled, and have lost the way.

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5. Birnbaum, Machzor, pp.989-990. Scolnic, "A Piyyut of Neilah," pp.24-25.

6. All references to the translation of *U'mi ya'amod chayt* are taken from Scolnic, "A Piyyut of Neilah," p.25. The underlining is mine.

Righteousness, which is Yours, we seek in orders
of prayers
Of those who stand in the House of God at night.

God, seeing that fitting intercessors have ceased,
Receive my words like a great offering....

In a final appeal for forgiveness (stanza 11), the people call upon God to turn physically, and allow them to see the divine countenance.

Extend Your hand and receive my repentance in my
presence.
Forgive the evil, please, of my deed,
Turn and grant good to those who seek Your face.
God, You are my shield about me.

Through his analysis, Scolnic adds a new dimension to the concept of *Teshuvah*, -- turning in repentance. Not only must humankind turn toward God to achieve repentance, but God must turn toward humankind in order to signal acceptance. Additionally, when people are unable to turn and face God, they can send their prayers before God's face -- *Yehi ratzon milfanecha*, to stand in their place. These insights permit us to read the liturgy of Ne'ilah with new sensitivity to metaphors involving the face or physical turning.

The section of the *Kerovah* woven into the *Gevurot* (the *Mechayeh*) invokes the memory of the Patriarch Isaac, praising him for turning away from evil, and for entreating God through prayer. For this righteous behavior he was rewarded with an abundant harvest. At Ne'ilah, Isaac serves as an example to the worshipers of one who propitiated God through prayer and turning, and to whom God then turned, in

order to bestow blessings upon him.

The *Kedushat HaYom* of Ne'ilah speaks of turning our eyes (our face) to God, and asks God to remove our misdeeds from before the divine eyes. Reinforcing these statements are two biblical citations in which God urges Israel to return (Isaiah 44:22) and in which Yom Kippur is described as the day on which, "atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; from all your sins shall you be clean before (*Lifnay* -- in the face of) God." (Levit.16:30) Each of these remarks emphasizes the human side of the equation. People must first turn to God, they must face God, before God can forgive them.

In a complementary fashion, the next prayer of the Amidah, the *Avodah*, highlights the divine side of the equation. "May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy. Praised are You, O God, who return Your presence to Zion." Although the text is identical with that read at the daily service, on Yom Kippur, particularly at Ne'ilah, we may resonate to the words very differently. At the end of a day of turning toward God, we look upon the symbols of the messianic era as signs that God has turned toward us.

The Ne'ilah *Viddui* further expands these metaphors of physicality. The paragraphs on either side of *Ashamnu* rely heavily on the image of coming before God's face-- "*Lifanecha*": "May our prayers come before You"; "We are not so proud as to say before You"; "What can we say before

You?"; "What can we recount before You?". The special Ne'ilah insert, *Atah noten yad laposhim*, employs a similar vocabulary to express the message that God's mercy extends to all who would turn towards the divine. The next paragraph, another Ne'ilah insertion, begins with the statement, "From the first You singled out humanity and saw us as worthy to stand before You." This statement seems to imply that divine recognition is necessary in order to achieve a position of distinction. The philosopher Hermann Cohen, however, has argued that it is through the act of standing before God, a technical term for worship, that people set <u>themselves</u> apart from all other creatures. Indeed, in our concluding confession, we neither prostrate ourselves nor bow, actions fitting adoration. Rather, we stand upright, expressing our worthiness for redemption from sin, thus distinguishing ourselves, albeit humbly, in our relationship with God. In just such a way, Cohen adds, did our people once distinguish themselves by standing before God at Sinai (Deut.4:10).[7] This same paragraph continues with a series of quotations from the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, all but one of which, call upon Israel to turn to God. During the silent Amidah, the final paragraph of the *Viddui* is drawn from R. Hamnuna's personal confession as found in Yoma 87b. Here, too, there are repeated references

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7. From <u>The Religion of Reason</u> (pp.219-220), as discussed in B. S. Jacobson, <u>Yamim Noraim</u>, pp.123-124.

to standing before God. The entire confession, therefore, is punctuated by images of coming before God's face and of standing before God. These metaphoric punctuations support Hermann Cohen's observation that it is in the act of standing before God that "the individual accomplishes his [or her] self-purification."[8] The words of the *Viddui* teach us that the spiritual process of atonement is reflected in our posture before God.

Ne'ilah concludes on a historical note, recalling in the *Shemot* important national moments of turning. Each of the three lines that make up the *Shemot* capture unique mountain-top encounters with God: the first atop Mount Sinai, the second on the Temple Mount, and the third on Mount Carmel. The *Shema*, in its biblical setting, is part of Moses' admonition to the people to be loyal to the one true God, and not to turn to other gods. The phrase, "*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le'olam va'ed,*" originates in the Yom Kippur liturgy from the days of the Temple. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest would offer three confessions and within each confession he would pronounce God's name as it appears in the Tetragrammaton. Upon hearing God's name, the people would prostrate themselves and respond, "Blessed be the name of God's glorious realm for ever and ever."[9] The

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8. Jacobson, Yamim Noraim, p.124.

9. Jacob Millgram, Jewish Worship, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), p.74.

words "*Adonai hu ha-elohim*" were spoken by the people Israel on Mount Carmel, after Elijah the prophet demonstrated God's omnipotence by vanquishing the prophets of Baal. As B. S. Jacobson has written, "One of the most gripping scenes of Biblical narrative is hereby conjured up before our eyes. It is the success story of an emissary of God, of a man whose names signifies 'My God is the true God' -- *Eliyahu*, whose actions led the people to a recognition of the god of Israel."[10] As the worshipers recite these words from I Kings over and over, they both recall and re-enact the moment on Mount Carmel when the people turned back from their sin, and turned toward God. Ne'ilah ends, therefore, with the entire congregation standing to face God in repentance and pledging their continued loyalty to the God of Israel.

The image of the Book of Life which pervades the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the days in between, can be seen as a record of the rupture and repair that culminates in atonement. In it, God writes all of our deeds, worthy and unworthy, to determine whether we deserve forgiveness and another year of life. Again there is a sense that our efforts to atone prompt God to take reciprocal actions on our behalf. The wholly righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. The wholly

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10. Jacobson, Yamim Noraim, p.131.

wicked are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death. The rest of us, neither wholly righteous nor wholly wicked, are granted the period from Rosh Hashanah to the end of Yom Kippur to merit sealing in the Book of Life. Like the gates which dominate the Ne'ilah service, the Book of Life has been left open for the express purpose of allowing our successful atonement. As the Day of Atonement draws to its close, therefore, so too must the gates and the Book.

As noted above, all references to the Book of Life at Ne'ilah describe God sealing our names permanently, rather than writing them temporarily, in the Book. These references pepper the service, cropping up in the Amidah in the *Avot, Hoda'ah, and Birkat Kohanim*, in the *piyyut, U'mi ya'amod chayt*, and in the above-mentioned sequence of five verses *from Avinu Malkeinu*. As a motif in the High Holy Day worship, the image of the Book of Life presented in *Unetaneh tokef* arouses tremendous feelings of insecurity. At each of the Musaf services on Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, we have prayed to be among those written and sealed into the Book, to be among those who live, rather than those who die. Despite these fearful associations from earlier services, at Ne'ilah this same image inspires great confidence. In the penultimate stanza of the *piyyut, U'mi ya'amod chayt*, we pray for God to "Inscribe us for life and benefit us with sealing [in the Book of Life]". For God to seal us in the Book of Life is another way we measure God's response to our

repentance. In this respect, asking God to seal us in the Book of Life is equivalent to asking God to turn and face us. It is another way we measure and mark divine forgiveness. Hence, when the Book is closed at the end of Ne'ilah, with each worshiper's name sealed inside it, we are sure that, once again, we are reconciled in our relationship with God.

The most important revelation of the mutual relationship between God and humanity in general, and between God and Israel in particular, is the covenant. Any rupture in God's covenant with the people Israel, threatens Israel's very survival. During the High Holy Days, therefore, our worship reflects an ongoing concern for the preservation of the covenant. Our liturgy communicates this preoccupation with the covenant through repeated references to the Patriarchs. As the first individuals to enter into covenant with God on behalf of the Jewish people, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, provide paradigms of successful covenantal relationships. Consequently, in our worship we call upon God to remember the merits of the Patriarchs and to maintain the covenant with us for their sake. Underneath the praise for the Patriarchs and the references to the continuity of the covenant, however, there lurks a deep anxiety about that covenant. At the High Holy Days, especially on Yom Kippur, we confront God with all of our weaknesses, all of our sins.

We confess all of the ways that we have failed to live up to our part of the covenant. It is an uncertain undertaking, for we worry that God will not forgive us and that the covenant will be discontinued. In the *Hoda'ah*, for example, we insert the petition, "O seal all thy people of the covenant for a happy [good] life".[11] The High Holy Day insertion to *Birkat Kohanim*, requests that we be both "remembered [for our covenant] and sealed." Effective atonement, then, ideally leads the individual to feel secure within the covenant again. Ne'ilah portrays the growing sense of security we feel in the covenantal relationship with God at the close of the Day of Atonement.

The covenant motif is introduced immediately within the introductory prayers to Ne'ilah. The "displaced" *Kedushah Desidra*, which we might have expected to find at Minchah, assaults us with new force at Ne'ilah. Its first words, taken from Isaiah 59:20-21, resound with the promise of God's covenant:

> A redeemer shall come to Zion and to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord. As for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: My spirit it is which shall be upon you; and my words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, henceforth and forever.[12]

Within the same prayer, we later address God as "Lord God of

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11. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.970.

12. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.960.

Abraham, Isaac, and Israel our fathers" (I Chron. 29:18). Note, we do not use the usual Patriarchal formula: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead, we use the name Israel, the name linked to our corporate identity and the one which recalls Jacob's most secure connection to God's covenant. Thus we open the service on a positive note, with sure promises and certain ties.

The vocabulary of the *Avot* is similar to that of the *Kedushah Desidra*. The prayer alludes to the merits of the Patriarchs and the worshipers' desire to be remembered for their sake. This idea is enhanced through the *Kerovah* in the Reader's Repetition of the Amidah. Each of its three sub-sections, known as the *Magen*, the *Mechayeh*, and the *Meshalesh*, focuses on a different Patriarch. Within the *Avot*, the *Magen* praises Abraham. Inserted in the *Gevurot*, the *Mechayeh* highlights Isaac. Embedded in the *Kedushat HaShem*, the *Meshalesh* features Jacob. All three *piyyutim* draw their portraits from both the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis and from Rabbinic Midrash and Aggadot. Abraham is praised for his sustained faith through the ten trials and for entreating God "to let his descendants enter through this gate."[13] In other words, Abraham is praised for bringing his descendants safely to Ne'ilah. The second line of the *Meshalesh*, "Faithful Jacob saw the awe-inspiring place in a vision; when he woke up, he was filled with awe

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13. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.978.

because of the vision he had seen,"[14] is an allusion to Gen. 28:16-17. These Biblical verses conclude with Jacob's declaration:

> How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.[15]

This oblique reference to the gate of heaven, connects Jacob's experience with that of the worshipers at Ne'ilah. All are filled with awe at the awareness of standing in God's house, looking toward the gate of heaven. The *piyyutim* of the *Kerovah*, then, illumine new connections between the worshipers and the Patriarchs. In so doing, the *Kerovah* serves to reassure the worshipers that they, like the Patriarchs, will preserve their covenant with God.

It is noteworthy that in the *Kerovah*, as well as further on in the *Kedushat HaYom*, and in the *selichot*, the portrait of Isaac centers on the story of his near-sacrifice. He is frequently cited as "*Ha-ne'ekad*", the bound-one. Isaac's sacrifice in that episode threatened to end the line of Abraham and with it the covenant. His eventual redemption, then, completes the process of covenantal rupture and repair appropriate to the High Holy Days. The Rosh Hashanah Torah portion, Genesis 22,

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14. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.980.

15. The Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, ed., The Soncino Chumash, based on the old Jewish Publication Society of America English text of the Torah, (London/Jerusalem/New York: The Soncino Press, 1983).

emphasizes the near-destruction of the covenant; the Ne'ilah service emphasizes its successful reestablishment, closing with the sound of the shofar, a symbol of the ram that was sacrificed in Isaac's stead.

The *selichah, Zekhor brit Avraham*, in the Reader's Repetition of the Amidah, juxtaposes images of disruption with the ideal of the Patriarchs and the covenant. The opening stanza reads:

> Remember the covenant of Abraham
> And the self-sacrifice of Isaac;
> Restore the peaceful homes of Jacob,
> And deliver us for thy own name's sake.16

These are the images of covenantal accord. In contrast to this, we read of humanity's powerlessness, of Israel's sense of diminution, and of Jerusalem's ruin, images of covenantal disruption. The *piyyut* does not end on a sad note, however. Rather, the opening line, which speaks of restoring the peaceful homes of Jacob, is repeated. In keeping with the thrust of Ne'ilah, the *piyyut* concludes with a sign of Israel's deliverance.

Even the *Shemot* at the end of Ne'ilah have an underlying connection to the Patriarchs and the covenant. A Talmudic Aggadah (Pes. 56a) tells of Jacob on his deathbed, wishing to reveal the end of days to his sons (Gen. 49:1), but fearing they are unworthy to receive such information. Sensing their father's discomfort, his sons assure him,

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16. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.996.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Just as there is One in your heart, so there is in our heart only One." In response to his sons, Jacob exclaims, "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever." This Aggadah portrays Jacob's worries concerning the future of the covenant and the people Israel. Jacob fears that the covenant will die with him. But his sons apparently understand their obligation to God and are able to reassure him that they will maintain the covenant with God. The recitation of the *Shemot*, then, can be seen as a dramatization of this deathbed scene between the Patriarch and his sons. From this perspective, the *Shemot* at the end of Ne'ilah, allow us to reaffirm the covenant in both explicit and implicit ways.

In Jewish history the event most symbolic of rupture is the destruction of the Temple. From a religious viewpoint, no greater calamity has befallen the people Israel than the loss of the Temple and the related exile from Jerusalem. The lack of a central physical location for worship and sacrifice has been equated with a certain alienation from God. Deprived of what has been viewed as our most intimate relationship with God, Jews have developed other forms of worship. But the longing for the former intimacy has never ceased. Consequently, within our worship are repeated references to the future restoration of the Temple and to

the end of the exile, symbols of God's return to sovereignty on earth. All of this, in turn, is part of a larger eschatological vision involving the final day of judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the coming of the Messiah.

The Ne'ilah service has a strong eschatological motif running through it. Yom Kippur is, after all, a scaled-down version of the final day of judgment. The symbols of the messianic era that thread through the worship service, therefore, serve as indices of our successful atonement and God's attendant forgiveness.

The central idea of the *Kedushah Desidra* points toward the coming of the Messiah. The opening quotation from Isaiah 59:20-21 records God's promise to send a redeemer to Zion if the people repent. The Targum to "*kadosh, kadosh, kadosh,...*" (Isaiah 6:3), found in the *Kedushah Desidra*, provides a more explicit description of God's holy nature. The Aramaic paraphrase describes God as, "Holy in the highest heavens, his divine abode; holy upon earth, his work of might; holy <u>forever and ever to all eternity</u>..."[17] The Targum turns Isaiah's vision into an eschatological depiction of the divine. The concluding paragraph of the same prayer dwells on God's many kindnesses to Israel, signs of divine protection, and on our corollary obligation to be worthy of God's trust. "May it be thy will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that we keep thy laws in this world,

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17. Birnbaum, <u>Machzor</u>, p.960. The underlining is mine.

and thus be worthy to live to see and share the happiness and blessing in the Messianic days and in the life of the world to come."[18] The prominence of this eschatological message led later Sages to omit these opening verses from the prayer on *Motza'ei Shabbat*. According to the Rabbis, the messianic era will not be ushered in at night, hence it is inappropriate to begin the *Kedushah Desidra* on *Motza'ei Shabbat* with Isaiah's message. At Ne'ilah, however, it is entirely appropriate to begin with such a message.

The eschatological tone struck in the introductory section intensifies during the Amidah. The paragraph, *Ya'aleh v'yavo* found in the *Kedushat HaYom*, speaks of God bringing salvation to Jerusalem, the holy city, through the Messiah, the son of David. The *Avodah* explores the return of God's presence to Zion and the restoration of the Temple sacrifice ("*Avodah*"). But it is in the High Holy Day addition to the *Kedushat HaShem*, known as the *U'vekhen*, that we find the most dramatic and comprehensive presentation of the eschatological motif.

Rabbi Aaron ben Jacob hakohen of Lunel highlights this motif in a commentary to the *U'vekhen* in his Orchot Chayim. He draws a parallel between the three paragraphs of the *U'vekhen* and the three sections of the shofar service during the Rosh Hashanah Musaf. The first paragraph reflects the *Malkhuyot* section since it speaks of a world united under

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18. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.962.

God's rule. The second paragraph corresponds to the *Zikhronot* section in describing the joy that will come when God remembers the people and the land. And the third paragraph, like the *Shofarot* section, describes a time when the kingdom of our enemies will end, heralded by the shofar.[19] Each time we recite these three paragraphs, then, we rehearse the Rosh Hashanah Musaf with all of its messianic hopes. In the final service of Yom Kippur, this association with the earlier shofar service carries additional significance because we anticipate the shofar at the end of Ne'ilah.

The *final selichah of Ne'ilah, Ezkerah Elohim,* expresses the anxious side of Yom Kippur. The ruined city of Jerusalem is compared with other cities in other lands that have been rebuilt after their devastation. But the *selichah* also introduces one of the sources of hope and restoration: the recitation of God's thirteen attributes.

The thirteen divine attributes are recited in between various *selichot* in all of the worship services of the High Holy Days. They are embedded within a conglomeration of biblical quotes known as *El Melekh Yoshev*, because of its opening words. An interpretation of Exodus 34:16 in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) explains that God showed Moses the order of prayer, saying to him, "Whenever the people of Israel sin, let them carry out this service before me [that

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19. Arzt, Justice and Mercy, pp.100-103.

is, read the passage from the Torah containing the thirteen divine attributes] and I will forgive them."[20] The efficacy of this order of prayer is demonstrated in Numbers 14 where Moses pleads with God on behalf of the malcontented children of Israel by reciting the thirteen divine attributes. Numbers 14:19-20, which records the end of the exchange between Moses and God, has been incorporated into the liturgy surrounding the recitation of the thirteen divine attributes:

> "O pardon the sin of this people, according to they abundant kindness, as thou hast forgiven this people ever since they left Egypt."
>
> The Lord said: "I pardon them as you have asked."[21]

The purpose of *El Melekh Yoshev* within our worship, is to allow us, similarly, to render this service before God by reciting the thirteen divine attributes. By extension, we can see that the *selichah, Ezkerah Elohim*, ultimately highlights the efficacy of our prayers, in the face of competing signs of God's displeasure.

Numerous reasons are offered by the Sages for the final shofar blast on Yom Kippur. R. Hai Gaon equates the shofar blast with the announcement of the jubilee year. Tosafot to Shabbat 114b rejects the jubilee explanation and suggests that the sound of the shofar is meant to inform mothers that

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20. Birnbaum, Machzor, notes to pp.1001-1002.

21. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.989.

they may begin to cook the evening meal for their children. Louis Ginzberg regards the blowing of the shofar as another example of the tendency within our current worship, to retain practices from the Temple cult.[22] While all of these may be part of the explanation, it seems most compelling to look upon the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur as a symbol of messianic hope. We end Ne'ilah on a literal note of triumph, prefiguring the coming of the Messiah and the ingathering of the exile. What other expression of God's forgiveness and supreme benevolence could transmit greater reassurance at the end of the Day of Atonement, than the shofar? What could communicate a stronger sense of reconciliation than to enact the moment when we shall greet the return of God's reign on earth?

The sound of the ram's horn is associated again and again in the Torah and Rabbinic literature with moments of God's presence, the confirmation of which is precisely what we seek at Ne'ilah. We wish to know that God has, indeed, turned back toward us; that God has sealed us in the Book of Life; that God has remembered and maintained the covenant; and that God will fulfill the messianic promise. Therefore, before the blowing of the shofar at Ne'ilah, we declare "*Adonai Hu Ha-Elohim*" seven times corresponding to the seven

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22. Arzt, Justice and Mercy, p.273.

heavens through which the *Shekhinah* ascends.[23]

Sacred time is paradoxical. On the one hand, as Mircea Eliade has noted, sacred time is circular and unchanging.[24] On the other hand, sacred time represents a break in the customary linear time, and therefore, creates a profound change from what comes before and after.

Ne'ilah is situated at the end of a sacred day, which is itself the end of a sacred period of ten days. It sits on the border between sacred and secular time. One indicator of this unusual position, is that Havdalah, the ceremony of separation, follows immediately after the Ne'ilah service. The purpose of Havdalah is to divide sacred from secular time. In this case, Havdalah separates Ne'ilah, the last service of the High Holy Days, from Ma'ariv, the first service of the regular week.

Within Ne'ilah itself, however, there threads the motif of time reaching an end point, a point of separation. Supporting this motif are references to other non-

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23. Agnon, Days of Awe, p.80, citing Rabbi Jacob ben Moses ha-Levi, (MAHARIL). Goldschmidt, Machzor, vol.II, p. xxxii, citing R. Moses of Coucy.

Agnon further notes that some congregations have a parallel practice of reciting Psalm 47 seven times, beginning "O clap your hands, all ye peoples; shout unto God with the voice of triumph," before the first blast of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Agnon explains that the seven repetitions of the psalm correspond to the seven firmaments created by God (pp.78-79).

24. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, pp.68-70. See also the Introduction above.

chronological ways in which Israel is set apart. This motif of separation is a paradoxical strand of the rupture and repair theme. The sacred time of the High Holy Days is, as already mentioned, a time of renewal for the world and the individual. *Avinu Malkeinu*, for instance, calls upon God to "renew us for a good year." In one respect, then, sacred time is a time of repair. But sacred time exists within a rupture. We can only recognize sacred time in contrast to the secular time which surrounds it and into which it has broken. Sacred time, therefore, creates a break in time in order to accomplish renewal. At the same time, there would be no need for repair, were there not already some sense of disrepair.

Israel, too, as a nation set apart, receives additional blessing and additional misfortune. Israel's special relationship with God makes her different from the other nations of the world. However, the very fact of being separate from the other nations creates a need for a compensatory special relationship with God. A sense of this dual bind is communicated in the *Kedushah Desidra*. The words of the prayer concurrently thank God for setting us apart, and ask for extra divine assistance against calamity:

> Blessed be our God who has created us for his glory, and has separated us from those who go astray; who has given us the Torah of truth and planted eternal life in our midst. May he open our heart to his Torah; may he set in our heart love and reverence for him to do his will and serve him with a perfect heart, so that we shall not labor in vain, nor rear children for

disaster.[25]

Similarly, *Atah hivdalta enosh merosh*, opens with a statement that views humanity as set apart from all other creatures by the privilege of being worthy to stand in God's presence. Nonetheless, a set of Job-like questions follow this initial comment and ultimately acknowledge humanity's total dependance on God.

The awareness of sacred time drawing to a close appears first in the *Kerovah*. The phrase, *Ki fanah yom*, "the day has declined," recurs several times within the liturgy. It is always paired with a request that God help us in some way. In the *Magen* we ask God to shield us, "now that the day has declined." In the *Silluk*, the final *piyyut* of the *Kerovah*, we ask God to hear us and forgive us, "now that the day has declined." These phrases convey the sense that these are the last remaining moments for our atonement.

A stronger sense of urgency can be found in the introduction to the *selichot*, following the *Kedushat HaYom*: "Open for us a gate, even at the closing of the gates, for the day has declined. The day has declined, the sun has arisen and declined, let us enter your gates." Space and time are joined in these two lines. The gates, which mark the limits of a physical space, are going to close, just as the day, which marks the limits of a particular time, is drawing to its close. Together these metaphors portray the

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25. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.962. The underlining is mine.

unique opportunity to atone on Yom Kippur. The gates suggest a special means of access to God, while the day suggests a special period of God's full and undivided attention. And despite the urgent tone of the prayer, its words propose a way to allay our fears. We ask God to open another gate for us, even as this prominent gate is closing. We cannot turn back the clock, but we can find another means of access to the divine. By fusing the two symbols, we moderate the sense of loss at having to relinquish sacred time and return to secular time.

The gates are the outstanding emblem of Ne'ilah. They are connected primarily with the gates of the Temple and the gates of heaven. These two main associations are expanded through the *piyyutim* into a myriad of other gates. A Sefardic *piyyut* from Ne'ilah, for example, presents an exhaustive alphabetical list of 64 gates.[26] Beyond specific associations, however, the gates convey a general sense of closure and finality at the end of Yom Kippur. As noted above, they define the limits of atonement.

If the gates close at Ne'ilah, we should expect to find an earlier point in the worship where they open. The *piyyut*

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26. The *piyyut*, known as "*Te'anu Vete'ateru*" is found at the end of Ne'ilah. It has subsequently been incorporated into the liturgy of *Motza'ei Shabbat*, another "border area" between Shabbat and the start of the week.
Chaim Stern, "Notes to Gates of Repentance," in Hoffman, Gates of Understanding 2, p.228, note 786.

immediately following the Amidah on Erev Kol Nidre, *Ya'aleh*, is composed of eight stanzas of three lines each. The first line of each stanza ends "at evening." The second line ends, "at morning." And the last line ends, "until evening." Taken together, the three lines define a 24-hour period from sunset to sunset. This is the Day of Atonement.

The reading immediately following *Ya'aleh* consists of a string of biblical verses on the subject of humankind coming to God's holy places to praise and serve God. The fifth verse in the series, Psalm 100:4 states, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, enter his courts with praise."[27] From the liturgy we may infer that it is on Erev Yom Kippur that we first enter the gates. Thus, the gates open at sunset on Erev Yom Kippur and they close at sunset 24 hours later, at Ne'ilah. It is customary to open the ark for the Reader's Repetition of the Amidah during Ne'ilah and to leave it open until the end of the service. Then, once the service has ended, we close the doors of the ark to dramatize the closing of the gates.

In the *piyyutim* of the *Kerovah* there are references (see above) to Abraham establishing a gateway to God through which his descendants might enter, and to Jacob's vision of the gate of heaven. Interestingly, the last *piyyut* of the *Kerovah* is devoted entirely to the topic of gates opening. Each stanza asks God to open a different gate for Israel,

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27. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.524.

and offers evidence for why Israel is worthy of these privileges. The introductory lines to the *selichot* section of the worship offer a message similar to that in the *Kerovah* discussed above: "Open for us a gate, even at the time of the closing of the gates." Whereas the Kerovah refers to specific gates and provides specific justifications for God to open them, the initial *selichah* offers a more general plea that God provide another gate to replace the one that is closing. From these two examples we see that the paradox of praising God for opening gates at the time of the closing of the gates, in fact makes great sense. It is too disconcerting to conclude the Day of Atonement with a sense of being shut out or shut away from God. Therefore, within the Ne'ilah service, we transform the gates from symbols of refusal, to symbols of access. The transitional reading at the end of the *selichot*, in between the final *piyyut* and the last recitation of *El melekh yoshev*, reads, "Open thou the gates of heaven; open thy goodly treasure for us; help us, and rebuke us not; help us thou, our saving God."[28] In this way we make the gates into symbols of God's forgiveness, and the sense of termination which they express initially, is converted to a sense of redemption.

All of the motifs of Ne'ilah, thus lead us from rupture

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28. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.1002. The underlining is mine.

to repair, from alienation to reconciliation, from brokenness to renewal. They do so in a gradual way. The messages and symbols accumulate as we move through the worship service until, at last, we reach the secure conclusion that all is forgiven. Then, certain that we have received a new lease on life, we shout out praises to God, blow the shofar triumphantly, and exclaim confidently, "Next year in Jerusalem."

## CHAPTER THREE

## THE BIG PICTURE

Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, poses the following rhetorical questions to his suffering friend, Job:

> If you sin, what do you do to Him?
> If your transgressions are many,
> How do you affect Him?
> If you are righteous,
> What do you give Him;
> What does He receive from your hand?[1]

Elihu's words reappear at Ne'ilah in *Atah hivdalta enosh merosh*: "Even though a person be righteous, what can that person give thee [God]?". According to B. S. Jacobson, both of these passages express the notion that our actions are not for God's sake. Since God is wholly righteous, our actions do not affect God. Rather, repentance is for <u>our</u> sake. And thus, he concludes, "The profound message of *Yom Kippur* teaches us that it is we who are transformed, we whose sensations and perceptions are chastened upon experience of the Divine."[2] The purpose of this chapter is to extend Jacobson's insight and examine the ways in which Yom Kippur transforms us. To do so, we shall borrow an anthropological model of transformation: the rite of passage.

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[1]. Job 35:6-7, The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text, (Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5748/1988).

[2]. Jacobson, <u>Yamim Noraim</u>, p.125.

Arnold Van Gennep (1960) first articulated the characteristics of a rite of passage, which he defined as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age."[3] They are marked by three phases:

1) **Separation** -- This phase involves behavior symbolic of an individual or a group's detachment from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, or from a set of cultural conditions, or both.

2) **Margin** or **Limen** -- This phase can be characterized as a state suspended between that which has come before and that which will come after, with few or none of the attributes of either. During this phase, "the characteristics of the ritual subject [the person or group] are ambiguous."[4]

3) **Reincorporation** -- In this phase the ritual subject moves to a relatively stable state. Having completed the passage or journey, the individual or group must, once again, behave according to certain customary standards that typify the social position to which they adhere, i.e. they have a defined role in relation to others in the society.[5]

In short, the purpose of a rite of passage is to enable the individual to move successfully from one defined position in society to another. These ceremonies,

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3. Quoted in Victor W. Turner, The Ritual Process, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), p.94.

4. Turner, The Ritual Process, p.94.

5. Turner, The Ritual Process, pp.94-95.

therefore, surround such major life events as birth, marriage, pregnancy, and death. They may also accompany entry into a position of higher social status through club membership, political office, or ordination. Societies also possess calendrical or seasonal rites of passage. These rites may mark a point in the agricultural cycle from scarcity to plenty or vice-versa. Rites of passage may accompany any collective change from one state to another (e.g. when a society goes to war, or wishes to reverse the effects of famine, drought, or plague).

"The universe itself," wrote Van Gennep, "is governed by a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity."[6] The correlation between the cycles of human life and of nature led Van Gennep to study the rites surrounding celebrations of new moons, new seasons, and new years. Transitional periods from old year to new year, he found, for example, vary in length from a day to a week to a month. These events, too, he discovered, shared the characteristics of rites of passage.

The three phases of the rite of passage are not always equally important or equally fully developed in every rite. One phase may tend to be prominent in certain rites, reduced in others. Funerals tend to be rites of separation;

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6. Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, trans. Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p.3.

marriages emphasize incorporation; pregnancy or initiation rites stress transition.

In summarizing his findings, Van Gennep made three observations. First, the pattern of rites of passage recurs again and again in individual and communal life ceremonies. The pattern may differ in form, it may be implicit or explicit, but it is always there. Second, the transitional or liminal periods sometimes acquire a certain autonomy. Finally, the passage from one social position to another is frequently identified with passage from one territory to another, in symbolic, metaphoric, or actual terms.[7] This last observation led Van Gennep to develop a second set of terms for the three phases of a rite of passage: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal. These terms delineate movement through physical space (or time), as the first set of terms define movement from one culturally defined state or status to another.

> The door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world....Consequently, I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal* (or threshold) *rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *postliminal rites*."[8]

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7. Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, pp.191-192.

8. Quoted in Juha Pentikainen, "The Symbolism of Liminality," Religious Symbols and their Functions, Haralds Beizais, ed., (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International,

Sacredness, according to Van Gennep's analysis, is a relative quality. In different situations an individual possesses a different relationship to the holy. What may be profane in one circumstance may be holy in another. Thus we are always "pivoting the sacred."[9] Van Gennep perceived human life as a series of "magic circles" which pivot around the sacred, shifting as a person moves from one state or status in society to another. Since these sorts of changes can be threatening or disruptive to the individual or the group, rites of passage are conceived to reduce their harmful effects. In particular, the liminal stage of a rite of passage is designed to ease the transition from the sacred to the profane. "So great is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds, that a man [or woman] cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate stage."[10]

Van Gennep examined rites and customs related to actual boundaries between one location and another to gain insight into rites of passage. He discovered that in Europe, it was at one time the practice to establish neutral zones that created a buffer strip between one territory and another. The buffer strip prevented a person from passing directly from one territory into another. Instead, for a short time,

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1979), p.155.

9. Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, p.12.

10. Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, p.1.

the person wavered between the two worlds, in the so-called "no man's land," before passing into the new territory. The liminal stage is the buffer zone within a rite of passage. The liminal stage is neither in one world nor the other; it is a paradoxical location in between the two. Over time, moreover, the neutral zones shrank until they were often no more than a stone, a beam, or a threshold. Transitions from one territory to another, then, occurred much more rapidly.

Victor Turner has noted that in most cultures, stages of transition bring people in close touch with beliefs in the protective and punitive powers of divine beings or powers.[11] Not surprisingly, in some cultures, the threshold itself is seen as the seat of a particular deity, to whom prayers and sacrifices are addressed for permission to pass through. "In order to understand rites pertaining to the threshold," wrote Van Gennep, " one should always remember that the threshold is only a part of the door and that most of these rites should be understood as direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure -- that is, as rites of passage."[12] Thus we see how customs of spatial passage often became rites of spiritual passage as well.

The image of the gates in the Ne'ilah service represent a metaphoric threshold to God's holy places -- the Temple

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11. Turner, The Ritual Process, pp.105-106.

12. Quoted in Pentikainen, Religious Symbols, p.156.

and the heavens. The gates are also the final threshold of the Day of Atonement. Ne'ilah is the service of reincorporation that allows us to make the transition from the holy back to the profane. Once the shofar is blown, we return to our daily routines, symbolically represented by the weekday Ma'ariv service which immediately follows Ne'ilah. This is our destination. But what is the journey and where does it begin?

"The Holy Blessed One said to Israel: Remake yourselves by repentance during the ten days between New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement, and on the Day of Atonement I will hold you guiltless, regarding you as a newly made creature."[13] As this text from the Midrash illustrates, our task during the High Holy Days is to make ourselves anew. Preparation for this renewal begins during Elul, intensifies on Rosh Hashanah, continues through the intermediate days of repentance, and culminates on Yom Kippur at Ne'ilah. We have already seen in Chapter One how the liturgy and other aspects of the worship build to a climax at Ne'ilah. Our New Year's celebration, in fact, begins before New Year's Day and extends beyond it for an additional ten days. There is even a tradition that claims God withholds final judgment all the way until Hoshanah Rabba. Interestingly, the concluding liturgy of Hoshanah Rabba incorporates *piyyutim*

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13. Pesikta Rabbati 40:5, quoted in Philip Goodman, The Yom Kippur Anthology, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 5731/1971), p.25.

and *nusach* from Ne'ilah. And in Chapter Two we have studied the varieties of rupture and repair motifs that play through the Ne'ilah service. The theme of rupture and repair embodies the experience of the worshiper. As Victor Turner has pointed out, in rites of passage, speech is more than communication; it is power and wisdom -- that is, our words become performative. We act out the things we pray. Speech "has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte," [or in our case, the worshiper].[14] On Yom Kippur we complete a rite of passage from old to new self. And Yom Kippur itself, is the transitional stage, the buffer zone, between the old self and the new.

Individuals in the liminal or transitional stage of a rite of passage are often represented as possessing no distinguishing characteristics. Turner's studies indicate that their identity is homogenized so as to eliminate any distinctions of rank or status among those who are in a similar liminal position. Clothing, for example, which normally conveys a great deal about a person's rank, status, role, or kinship position, is often eliminated altogether or reduced to a mere strip. On Yom Kippur, every adult male wears a white kittel and a tallis. All dress exactly alike, so that their clothing conveys none of the usual marks of differentiation.

Furthermore, in the liminal stage, the behavior of the

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[14]. Turner, The Ritual Process, p.103.

liminal person or group is typically passive or humble. "They must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life."[15] On Yom Kippur, our behavior is decidedly humble and passive. Although we have no human authority figure instructing us in how to behave, we do have a heavenly figure with whom we comply absolutely. We spend the entire day in penitent prayer. And, in addition, we practice self-denial through the five proscribed "afflictions". We do not eat or drink. We do not wash. We do not anoint ourselves. We do not engage in sexual relations. And we do not wear leather shoes or sandals. In sum, for those 24 hours we act as if we are dead.

Michael Strassfeld has commented, "On Yom Kippur we are meant to feel the touch of death, for death cuts through all the defenses and illusions we have carefully created around our own mortality. The whole world is suspended in judgment on Yom Kippur -- who shall live and who shall die. Over and over, the liturgy stresses our frailty, our failings, our worthlessness."[16] What could be a more fitting expression

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15. Turner, The Ritual Process, p.95.

16. Michael Strassfeld, The Jewish Holidays, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p.121.

of liminality, of suspension between two worlds, than for living people to imitate death? What could be a more poignant enactment of rupture and repair, than death and rebirth?

Our dress and our behavior obliterate distinguishing traits and allow us to feign death. The pure, white kittel, for example, is suggestive of a burial shroud. The tallis, another burial garment, is worn the entire Day of Atonement because of the unusual custom of donning a tallis at night for Kol Nidre. The five afflictions add to this lifeless impression. Like the dead, we have no need to sustain ourselves with food or drink. We return to our most basic state by not washing -- dust to dust. Without shoes we have no mobility, no volition. The act of anointing is a way of conferring status on an individual. In death all are equal, and thus there is no need for such a gesture of status. Discontinuance of sexual relations is another way in which people become undifferentiated, or anonymous. To prohibit all sexual relations is to sever our most intimate social bonds. The resumption of sexual relations, like the lifting of the other prohibitions, then, marks our reintegration to normative, structured society.[17]

> The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. The

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[17]. On the role of sexual relations in rites of passage see Turner, The Ritual Process, p.104.

> ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physical character, to which neophytes are submitted, represent partly a destruction of previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them...18

We have already seen how our dress and behavior reduce our distinctiveness and erase many of our individual characteristics. The liturgy, as well, plays a role in rendering each of us a *tabula rasa*.

We recite *Viddui*, the confession, ten times on Yom Kippur. The entire *Viddui* is written in the first person plural. Our confession is neither private nor personal. We speak only in the collective voice, for as the *tabula rasa* required by our liminal state, we have no individual voice on Yom Kippur. The only other time *Viddui* is recited, is when someone is about to die. To confess one's sins is to clear one's slate in this world before passing on to the next. Chaim Joseph David Azulai (Midbar Kedemot, 18th century) wrote, "Our rabbis, of blessed memory, said that the Holy Blessed One makes a new creature of the person who repents (Pesikta Rabbati, see above), and the result is that his [or her] speech of confession is the cause of a powerful and great act of creation."19 Over and over again,

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18. Turner, The Ritual Process, p.103.

19. Agnon, Days of Awe, p.217.

therefore, we confess our failings, expressing our general sense of worthlessness and giving ourselves over to the act of being created anew. This fundamental sense of insignificance, characteristic of the liminal state, builds to a climax in the confession at Ne'ilah. The unique addition to the *Viddui*, *Atah noten yad laposhim*, stresses again and again that human life is empty vanity:

> What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What is our virtue? What our help? What our strength? What our might? What can we say to thee, Lord our God and God of our fathers? Indeed, all the heroes are as nothing in thy sight, the men of renown as though they never existed, the wise as though they were without knowledge, the intelligent as though they lacked insight; most of their actions are worthless in thy sight, their entire life is a fleeting breath. Man is not far above beast, for all is vanity.[20]

And the additional small paragraph at the end of the silent confession, *Elohai, ad shelo notsarti*, makes the connection between confession, death, and recreation abundantly clear:

> My God, before I was formed I was of no worth, and now that I have been formed it is as if I had not been formed. Dust I am in life, and all the more so in death. In thy sight, I am like an object filled with shame and disgrace. May it be thy will, Lord my God and God of my fathers, that I sin no more. In thy abundant mercy, cleanse the sins I have committed against thee, but not through severe sufferings.[21]

As Turner observed, we regard ourselves as dust on Yom Kippur, in order to allow God to regenerate us.

The Kol Nidre service initiates this transformation to

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20. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.1006.

21. Birnbaum, Machzor, p.974.

a death-like state. In anthropological terms, Kol Nidre is the point at which we complete our separation from our former selves and enter into a liminal state. The service begins at dusk, just before sunset, a transitional time of day. We wear a tallis on top of our kittel, as though preparing for burial. Kol Nidre is the only evening service where it is permissible to wear a tallis. And after a brief introductory paragraph, we arrive at the Kol Nidre prayer itself.

The Kol Nidre prayer has a long and troubled history within our liturgy. Numerous generations have sought to expunge it from the service. And as many times as the leaders have tried to remove it, the people have demanded its replacement. Theodor Reik describes Kol Nidre as a riddle with three component parts. First, the prayer is really a formula that declares certain categories of vows to be invalid. This pronouncement is in direct contradiction to the high value placed on obligations (whether assumed on oath or otherwise) in biblical and Talmudic Judaism. Second, (at least in Ashkenazic tradition), the melody accompanying this "bare almost juridical formula," is deeply affecting and seemingly out of character with the text it accompanies.[22] Finally, this unpoetic declaration has an

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[22] In Sefardic tradition, while the melody to Kol Nidre is not outstanding, the dramatic choreography surrounding the recitation of Kol Nidre creates a heightened emotional atmosphere equal to that of the Ashkenazic rite. Shlomo Deshen, "The Kol Nidre Enigma: An Anthropological

uncanny power to move people and release all sorts of strong emotions.[23]

Reik then reviews the various arguments offered in defense of the Kol Nidre prayer: general, exegetical, and historical. Finding them all flawed and unconvincing, he offers an alternative psychological explanation for the prayer. For Reik, the Day of Atonement begins with a blasphemous cancelling of vows, that is, of the covenant with God. From his psychoanalytic point of view, the covenant with God functions in the role of the superego. Like the superego, the covenant ensures a measure of restraint on our impulses. This repression would be unbearable, were it not for the fact that we know the covenant may be broken at certain times. Not that an individual would dare act alone to sever the covenant. Rather, through ritual, the whole community shares the responsibility for dissolving the covenant once a year, and renewing it 24 hours later, thus providing a brief opportunity to satisfy the id's rebellious impulses.[24]

Reik's explanation, while sound from a psychoanalytical

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View of the Day of Atonement Liturgy," Ethnology, April 1979, vol.XVIII, no.2, p.122.

23. Theodor Reik, Ritual: Psychoanalytic Studies, trans. Douglas Bryan, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1958), pp.169-170.

24. Reik, Ritual, p.218. For a more extensive analysis of the psychoanalytical aspects of ritual, see Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, trans. James Strachey, (New York/ London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1950).

perspective, is flawed and unconvincing from a theological perspective. Yom Kippur is not a day characterized by the unleashing of rebellious impulses directed against God and the covenant. Quite the contrary, it is the most restrained and submissive day of the entire Jewish year. Nonetheless, Reik's intuition about the connection between Kol Nidre and the covenant with God is worth exploring further from a non-Freudian point of view.

Kol Nidre invalidates all the oaths, and pledges, and promises of the past year. Kol Nidre cancels all of our social contracts, forcing us to reaffirm our commitments for the year ahead. It does not specify whether these commitments are between one person and another, or between a person and God. The introductory prayer, *Biyeshiva shel malah*, however, places each of the worshipers before both the heavenly and the earthly tribunals. The implication of this dual seat of judgment, is that all of our vows to other people and all of our vows to God are under review. No pledge to God is more important than the covenant. The covenant gives Israel its identity, without the covenant Israel is just like any other nation -- undifferentiated and anonymous with respect to God. Without the covenant, then, Israel is lifeless. By cancelling all of our social contracts, Kol Nidre cancels our obligation to the covenant as well, and enters us into a liminal state.

This moment is so fraught with significance that we

actually act out a court scene as we recite the Kol Nidre. One person chants the introductory paragraph and the Kol Nidre prayer while two others stand alongside the reader, each one holding a *Sefer Torah*, thus forming a *Beit Din* of three individuals. The ark remains open throughout the entire recitation, so that we are able to see the unoccupied spots where the scrolls usually stand. By bringing the Torah into the *Beit Din*, we symbolically bring God into our courtroom. By leaving the ark open and vacant, we symbolically indicate God's removal and the suspension of the covenant. Once the *Sifrei Torah* are returned to the ark and the *Beit Din* has been dissolved, we are fully entered into the liminal stage of Yom Kippur; we are in between life and death, in between the old covenant and the new.

It is not until Ne'ilah that we reestablish the covenant. Again, the transition service back from death to life, takes place at dusk, just as the sun is setting. Again we face the open ark. It is the custom in many congregations to open the ark for the Reader's Repetition of the Amidah and to leave it open through the end of the service. This time, however, all of the *Sifrei Torah* are in their places, the ark is full. At Ne'ilah the open ark symbolizes God's return. We have already noted how the liturgy highlights and resolves various motifs of rupture and repair at Ne'ilah, including a motif of covenantal fracture and mending. And just as the first prayers of Kol

Nidre brought us into the liminal, death-like stage, so the last prayers of Ne'ilah bring us all the way out of this stage.

Dr. Karl Abraham has written, "Reik's idea of the bond-destroying significance of the Kol Nidre is confirmed by the conclusion of the liturgy of the Day of Atonement which merits our special attention. The solemn concluding prayer ends in a confession [of faith]."[25] The *Shemot* at the end of Ne'ilah are an "emphatic announcement of God's uniqueness and power."[26] Jacobson similarly characterizes the function of the *Shemot*; he writes, "They denote recognition of and confession to God."[27] The *Shema* expresses Israel's faith in the One God. The triple repetition of *Barukh shem kevod*, is taken as an allusion to the saying, "God reigns, has reigned, and will reign forever." And according to Max Arzt, the seven repetitions of *Adonai hu ha-elohim*, affirm God's universal sovereignty since God's abode is "beyond the seven heavens."[28]

Jacob Millgram notes that the words of the *Shema* are the last words a Jew utters before going to sleep, before death, and before martyrdom. Perhaps, then, the *Shemot* serve a double purpose. On the one hand they are a loud and

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25. Reik, Ritual, p.218

26. Reik, Ritual, p.218.

27. Jacobson, Yamim Noraim, p.125.

28. Arzt, Justice and Mercy, p.285-286.

clear proclamation of our faith in God and in the covenant. On the other hand, they symbolize the dying breath of our old self and the rebirth of our new self, as we begin the new year and the new covenant.

After this crescendoing affirmation, we sound a final *Tekiah* with the shofar and exclaim, "Next year in Jerusalem." We end on a note of messianic expectation. We close the day looking forward to the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant. Michael Strassfeld captures these sentiments in the following manner, "The shofar, which is the central symbol of the High Holidays, marks the definitive end to the day and to the whole period. It evokes the feeling of a successful passage from sin to repentance, from death to life."[29] Despite the frightening potential symbolized by the liminal stage, when that stage comes to an end we invariably find ourselves restored at the end of Neʿilah. For safe passage is guaranteed in this and all rites of passage. A rite, after all, is designed by us to carry us through difficult transitions, precisely to avoid the possibility of utter failure. Arnold Van Gennep concludes, "For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to

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29. Strassfeld, The Jewish Holidays, p.117.

cross."[30]

The gates close every Ne'ilah, but we are never completely locked out. There is always another gate opened for us. The Book of Life closes every Ne'ilah but we are always securely inscribed before the shofar's last blast. There is always another year in store for us. Every Ne'ilah we turn fearfully toward God seeking forgiveness, and every year we meet with divine reassurance. Every Ne'ilah the sun sets, we find the *Sifrei Torah* firmly posed in the ark, and the shofar calls out our exultation at having come through another Yom Kippur whole and renewed.

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30. Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, p.189.

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