Days of Awe

A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom
for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal
on the High Holy Days

Edited by S. Y. Agnon

Foreword by Arthur Green
Introduction by Judah Goldin

SCHOCKEN BOOKS NEW YORK

Foreword: Our Days of Awe— Some Thoughts on the Season

Jewish religious life is regulated by two cycles: that of the sacred year and that of the human life span. In modern times the yearly cycle has lost much of the hold it once had over Jews. Just go to one of our non-Orthodox synagogues on Sukkot or Shavuot and behold the emptiness that characterizes Jewish religious life in our time. But never despair. Go to that same synagogue on the following Shabbat and see the crowds flowing out into the street, relatives and friends having come to celebrate a child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. And the next day, a Sunday in springtime, watch the cleanup crew rush as it prepares for a large wedding in the synagogue. If the yearly cycle of holy times and festivals seems to be in trouble among Jews, the life cycle is alive and well. Most Jews want to celebrate their children's births and coming of age in the synagogue. Lots of Jews seem to want to be married in synagogues or by rabbis, even if they are marrying non-Jews, and an overwhelming number of Jews still want the benefit of Jewish clergy at their last rites, and burial in a Jewish cemetery. Jews who pay little attention to the cycle of the sacred year remain much attached to the Jewish echoes of the great moments in the cycle of their own and their families' lives.*

The phenomenon that does not seem to fit this all-too-familiar pattern of modern Jewish life is the packed synagogue on Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, the "Days of Awe"—*Yamim Noraim* in Hebrew—that form the subject and title of this book.

* I owe this insight to a conversation with my friend Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

The three-day-a-year (two if Reform) Jew is well-known to rabbis and synagogue officials throughout the Jewish world. Indeed, many Jews find themselves in the synagogue only at this season, feeling something like a stranger in a place where people are supposed to feel at home. For these worshipers, Agnon's book provides a much-needed guide and companion.

But wherein lies the survival secret of the Days of Awe? What do they know that Shavuot or Shemini Atzeret might do well to learn from them? Why should the synagogue be so full on these days and yet so empty when we commemorate nothing less than the Exodus from Egypt or the giving of the Torah? The answer is that the *Yamim Noraim* do not quite belong exclusively to the yearly cycle. They partake of the life cycle as well, and this is their secret. They are the Jew's annual confrontation with mortality, a time to pinch oneself and say, "Thank God I'm still alive!" The Days of Awe become a yearly time to contemplate our past, to wonder about the future, and to pray that we will still be here a year hence, to do the same thing all over again.

This sense of mortal confrontation in the Days of Awe affects the most sophisticated and learned Jew alongside the most simple. Many years ago I heard the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik present a lecture to the (mostly secularist) Yiddish Culture Club, in Boston. These elderly Jews, themselves products of the same shtetl world as the learned rabbi, understood him well when he said that "For me the entirety of Yom Kippur is included in the 'Amen' that one calls out following the *she-heheyanu* blessing after Kol Nidre." That prayer, thanking God for having "kept us in life and enabled us to reach this season," recited at that most dramatic of all moments in the yearly cycle, tells us where the heart of Yom Kippur lies. Those elderly, self-proclaimed nonbelievers, now facing their own old age and impending death, understood perfectly what he was saying. So did the elderly hazzan in my grandparents' synagogue, whose

voice always cracked into tears at the verse "Cast us not off in old age; as our strength fails, do not abandon us!"

If "in foxholes there are no atheists," the Days of Awe powerfully remind us that all of life is a sort of extended foxhole and that each of us will have our final moment. We are not a morose people, and through the year we consider healthy those who spend their time on something more constructive and cheerful than brooding on the inevitability of death. But we come together on the *Yamim Noraim*, skeptics and agnostics along with pious believers and earnest seekers, to gratefully acknowledge that we are still here, and to admit that our survival has not been all our own doing. We look around us at the community of Jews in whose midst we have come to celebrate that fact and see old and young, strong and weak, vigorous-looking and those of sickly-seeming pallor. Yet all of us have lived too long and seen too much to think we can know which of these faces we will see next year. We call out in U-Netaneh Tokef, probably the liturgical climax of all three daytime services:

On Rosh ha-Shanah it is written and on Yom Kippur sealed:
How many will pass away and how many will be created;
Who will live and who will die, who in due time and who not in due time;
Who by water and who by fire; who by sword and who by beast;
Who by tremor and who by plague...

This is the heart of the ritual, the recitation of our vulnerability. The prayer leads up to its final line:

But repentance, prayer, and righteous giving can avert the ill decree!

For many a contemporary worshiper, however, that line is

something of an afterthought, and one we need to struggle to believe or reinterpret. Far more consonant with the feeling of that moment, and indeed with the tale Agnon tells of this prayer's tragic origin (see page 83), are the ensuing lines, which contrast human frailty with the eternity of God:

Man comes from the dust and ends in the dust;
He risks his life to earn his daily bread.
He is like a broken potsherd, like dry grass,
Like a faded flower, a passing shadow, a wisp of cloud,
A blowing wind, scattered dust, a passing dream.
But You, O King, are a living God!

U-Netaneh Tokef is, of course, extending the metaphor of God's book, surely the best-known leitmotif of the prayers of this season. This theme, though mostly unknown in the Bible, is of great antiquity, probably predating Israel itself by many centuries. The Babylonian gods were known to have "tablets of destiny" on which the names and fates of all the living were inscribed. Lots were cast on the New Year to determine all those things later claimed by Israel to be in the hands of its God. Typically, of course, the Jews transformed the metaphor. No longer was it one that told, perhaps bitterly, of divine caprice or the arbitrariness of fate. Rather it bespoke that combination of stern moral responsibility and God's personal care and compassion for all His creatures. "The loving God seeks to give and extend life," is the sense we are given, "if only we will repent sufficiently to allow that gift to be consonant with God's commitment to moral right."

Occasionally a heavenly voyager of the ancient world was said to have caught a glimpse of those tablets. The Hebrew Book of Enoch, written probably in Babylonia shortly after the completion of the Talmud, refers to a pair of angels (supposedly seen by Rabbi Ishmael on his heavenly journey) known as *Shofariel YHWH memit* and *Shofariel YHWH mehayeh*, essentially the angels who trumpet life and death, the keepers of the divine books. The various pleas to "inscribe us in the book of life" scattered through the service, date to Talmudic times, the fifth or sixth century of the Common Era, and perhaps earlier. They are the reverse side of that blessing after Kol Nidre to which we referred earlier. While that formula thanked God for the gift of life until this moment, these are pleas that turn toward the future and call out a simple and impassioned "Let us live!"

Of course, there is a "higher" or more spiritual way to read this aspect of the tradition as well. The well-known Hasidic work, *Sefat Emet* (by Rabbi Judah Leib Alter of Gur, 1847-1904), says that the human heart is the tablet on which God writes. Each of us has the word *life* engraved in our hearts by God's own hand. Over the course of the year, that engraving comes to be covered with grit. Our sins, our neglect of prayer and Torah study, the very pace at which we live all conspire to blot out the *life* that still lies written deep within our hearts. On Rosh ha-Shanah we come before God, having cleansed ourselves as best we can, and ask Him to write that word once again, and to seal it up on Yom Kippur, so that the sensation of being truly alive that we experience in these great moments of prayer may not depart from us through the entire year. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810) used to say that prayers for "length of days" made sense insofar as they meant that every day of our lives should be a very long one, a day filled with *mitzvot* and deeds of kindness to give it "length."

These and other interpretations show an understanding of the rich texture of the life of prayer. Calling out to God for life is both elemental, touching our deepest fears, and highly refined, showing our understanding that the source of life within the One is ever-flowing, and that each renewal of life partakes again of that original wondrous gift.

The *renewal* of life is indeed the main spiritual theme of the

Days of Awe. Our return to God and to our truest selves—*teshuvah*—is possible because we see God not as an exacter of strict retribution but rather as one who wants to forgive, who supports our efforts at renewing and transforming our lives. The essential message of *teshuvah*, and thus the moral message of this season in its entirety, is that human change is really possible. In the face of all our cynicism, all the versions of determinism (genetic, Freudian, economic, and all the rest) that serve as excuses for us not to try to get our lives in gear, the *Yamim Noraim* come each year to remind us that it *is* possible to change our lives, and that such renewal partakes of the gift of life itself.

This message is expressed profoundly by the framing of the season's Scriptural readings, starting with Isaac's birth and drawing to a dramatic two-punch close in the afternoon reading of the Book of Jonah. The Isaac story (and that of Hannah and Samuel) represents the miracle of physical birth itself, the divine hand that is present in the very fact of our existence. But Jonah, having sought to flee from the Lord, is *reborn*, spit up from the belly of the whale beneath the sea, showing that rebirth and transformation can happen even when we ourselves conspire against them. And the people of Nineveh are also reborn as Jonah, God's cynic, has to accept the fact that their transformation is, in God's sight, a real one, not merely a donning of sackcloth and ashes. From the miracle of his own physical and symbolic rebirth, the prophet learns the lesson that others, even whole nations of sinners, can be reborn and begin life anew. However much or little each of us succeeds in transforming our lives over the course of a given year, we come back to hear this message again and again.

Yamim Noraim. Awesome days. These are the days when we confront the Fear of Heaven. Fear's twin, the Love of God, belongs to Shabbat, to Pesah, to Shavuot, the times when we read the Song of Songs and dream of such themes as the "extra" soul, mystical marriage, and sublime unity. The Days of Awe

are hardly about "uniting in secret Oneness" as the Sabbath is said to be. Here the confrontation is with God as other, as challenger to our complacency, as demanding voice who calls upon us, as He once did to our first ancestor in the very first of these seasons, and asks: "Where are you?" Our response comes amid trembling, not so much because we fear the Questioner as because we know the inadequacy of our answer. Our consolation lies in our faith that the question is addressed to us by God, the One who created us and loves us, and not by the accusing angel. God is today the awesome King, seated on the high and mighty throne in the vault of heaven. But that throne is also called, especially during the Days of Awe, the throne of mercy or compassion, for from that throne God shows His infinite compassion for humanity and understanding of their inadequacies. Indeed the inability to forgive (either ourselves or others) is a sign of smallmindedness, a malady with which our Creator is not said to be afflicted. Whenever we are ready to forgive ourselves, and thus to allow ourselves to begin life once again, God is ready for us. "His right hand is outstretched to receive those who return."

The theology of *Yamim Noraim* is a theology of kingship. There is no escaping that theme, repeated hundreds of times throughout the liturgy. On the face of it, God the King seems to be an image of remoteness. Who among us, even when we lived in kingdoms, ever got to see the king? If the male royal metaphor once made for awe and power, it also makes for distance, and in our day for both discomfort (particularly, though not exclusively, among women) and doubt. It is the God on that high and exalted throne whom moderns have ever sought to depose in order to claim our spiritual freedom and to establish our own moral order.

But here again we should recall that the King of our *Yamim Noraim* liturgy is unlike any king of flesh and blood, different in hundreds of ways as detailed by the rich and varied

Midrashic tradition. Most significantly, we are related to that King not only as subject but also as children. Each and every one of us is the King's own unique lost child, exiled by some terrible tragedy from our parents' home and alienated to the point where we ourselves no longer remember who we are. (On page 23 Agnon gives us R. Hayyim Zanser's version of this well-known tale.) Only God remembers; it is He who has sent us this season to arouse us from exile and awaken us to return to the nobility of spirit that is ours from birth as God's own child. Each of us is called to return to that place of our royal birth, not least, perhaps, because the King is aging and it seems that our help is urgently needed in the running of the kingdom. We—all of us humans—are being asked to come home and help out in the family business of *tikkun olam*, redeeming the world.

If the King, as loving and forgiving parent, is one way in which love manages to pierce the armor of these Days of Awe, the image of God as spouse is also not completely hidden, despite what we have said above. The month of Elul, Agnon reminds us (page 18), stands for "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." God and the soul—or the community of Israel—return to one another as lovers after a terrible trial, not only as parent and wayward child.

I refer here to the ancient understanding of *Yamim Noraim*, beginning with the month of Elul and concluding with Yom Kippur, as representing the forty days that Moses spent atop Mount Sinai arguing with God not to destroy Israel. The first tablets bearing the Ten Commandments were given on Shavuot, the sixth day of Sivan. Forty days later, when Moses had failed to come down from the mountain, Israel forced Aaron to make the golden calf. The next day, corresponding to the seventeenth of Tammuz, Moses came down, saw the calf, and smashed the tablets. On the new moon of Elul, he went back up the mountain. The struggle over whether Israel was still God's people,

over whether there was any way that their sin might be forgiven, again lasted forty days. Finally, on the tenth of Tishri or Yom Kippur, Moses wrested from God the formula of the Thirteen Attributes, through which God promised they would always be able to find forgiveness. That is why the repetition of these Attributes is so central to the pentitential prayers, especially on Yom Kippur itself. Once Israel had been forgiven, Moses was able to come down with the second set of tablets. (See page 184 for a slightly different version of all this.)

This means that the holiest day in the Jewish year commemorates a nearly forgotten event, the giving of the second tablets. What is the meaning of that association? I suggest that the second tablets represent a "renegotiated marriage" between God and Israel, and that this is what Yom Kippur is really all about. The first tablets, those given on Shavuot, were fashioned entirely by God. "The tablets were of God's workmanship and the writing was God's writing" (Exod. 32:16). Israel was overwhelmed by all this divinity and felt unable to live up to the standards of the covenant that had been imposed upon it. Hence the flight to the golden calf. We mere humans could not bear the intensity of demand implied by such a Torah. God's Torah called upon us to be godlike to a degree we could not stand. We had to seek out an idol, divinity in the form of our own making.

By the time of the second tablets, God had learned a lesson about dealing with these humans. "Carve yourself two tablets of stone," He said to Moses, "and I shall write upon them"(Exod. 34:1). This time the tablets were to be a joint divine-human project. Moses does the carving, God does the writing. Every Jew receives or fashions those second tablets on or around Yom Kippur. This is the season when each of us renegotiates our covenant with God. We carve our second tablets, remaking the infinite divine demand into one with which we are prepared to

live. This is the time when we decide what we will keep of the tradition and what we will set aside for the while (yes, all of us, even the most pious, make such decisions), what major charitable gifts we will give and which we will put off, what *mitzvot* we will do in the human realm, and whom we are ready to forgive of those who have done us wrong. It is not only God who makes major decisions in this season of the year. God may decide *whether* we will live, but we have to decide *how* we will live the life we are given.

The *Yamim Noraim* seemed at first to call for an admission of our powerlessness. As we confront mortality and human frailty, all our illusions of power and control fall away from us. But here we see a Yom Kippur that is about human power, our power to remake ourselves by renewing our lives and our covenant with the Eternal. "There is no king without a people" says an old Hebrew proverb, and that is true even if *king* (in English, of course) is to be spelled with a capital *K*. Our renegotiation and acceptance of the covenant is needed by God as well as by us. It is only our acceptance of God's kingdom that allows the eternal and unchanging One of the universe to be called by the epithet "King" (or "Ruler," if you prefer the neuter).

In fact, the royal imagery of the Days of Awe leaves room for this sense of mutuality of King and people. As we call out, again and again during the *piyyutim* of the morning service, "The Lord is King, the Lord was King, the Lord shall be King forever and ever," I am always reminded of the tribal chieftains gathered around Saul or David who called out, "Long live the king!" This proclamation of kingship is essentially a coronation rite. Both the crown and throne of God are depicted frequently in the poetry of the Days of Awe. These days are a season in which God's kingship is renewed, and Rosh ha-Shanah in particular has a strong sense about it of a coronation day. This is

the day when God completed Creation and ascended to the throne. This is the day (though really it happens every day as well) when the angels place upon God's head the crown woven of the prayers, hopes, and dreams of Israel and of all humanity.

But this is not the coronation day of a constitutional monarchy, in which the old finery is brought out but once a year and then the wholly profane business of government passes back to the diet or parliament, the ruler asked to do no more than smile benignly for the ensuing three hundred and sixty-four days. At least that is not what it is supposed to be, though I fear that for some of those who visit the synagogue only on these days it may take on that sense of meaningless pomp. We are involved here in a deadly serious business. We stand before Reality dressed in a white shroud-kittel—stripped of our protective this-worldly finery, and thus naked with our powerlessness and our fears. We know that for reasons utterly incomprehensible to us (and, we fear, for no reason at all), some of us will live this year and some of us will die. The cruelest part of fate is its absurdity, its seemingly impersonal or inhumane treatment of us all-too-human creatures. This we will not stand for; the One who gives and takes our lives *has* to have a human face. So we join with Moses in climbing up that mountain, with him we call out, "Show me Your glory!" and we draw forth once again the promise that the One whose face we cannot see is indeed

> *The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, long-suffering, of boundless grace and truth, keeping His grace for the thousands, bearing iniquity, transgression, and sin, cleansing...*(Exod. 34: 6–7)

And with that assurance we are willing to live in God's world and be His creatures for yet another year.

If the Days of Awe are a time for that direct encounter with divine power and with life's frailty, the tradition seems to have sensed that it is a season when we are in need of much protection. Tradition serves the dual function of shielding us from the intensity of that encounter with God at the same time that it ushers us toward it. And perhaps no other Jew in our century has as well understood these complex roles of ritual and tradition as S. Y. Agnon. Thoroughly at home in the many worlds of tradition, both from his childhood memories of pre–World War One Galicia and from an expert knowledge of Jewish religious literature throughout the centuries, Agnon records traditions with a love and delicacy that betray his awareness that all this is very nearly lost. As a modern writer who was also a scholar and collector of liturgical and folkloric traditions, Agnon saw himself as a link between generations, one of the few who could hand over to the new Hebrew (and now English) reader the richness of the Jewish past. When you read *Days of Awe*, at home or in the synagogue, think of Agnon as an old Jew from a world now vanished who happens to sit down next to you. As you open his book and begin to read, he leans over to you and says, in a Yiddish accent rarely heard anymore, "I remember..." or "Somewhere I saw it written..." and he begins to tell you a tale, an old preacher's parable, or a custom of onetime pious Jews that will open your heart to the splendor and richness, alongside the terror and awe with which Jews have crowned this season.

Arthur Green

Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts
March 1995

On the Fifth or Sixth or Seventh Rereading of Agnon's DAYS OF AWE—Maybe More

BY JUDAH GOLDIN

I

What is a classic? The question is probably as old as the first student of literature, but every student must ask it on his own over and over again, for in the answer he reveals not only something of the character of the specific literary work, but of the relation between his presence and a very large world, a treasury of experience and vocabulary, that he has appropriated. And so, to ask what is a classic, is to engage in literary criticism and self criticism, self examination and understanding, at the same time.

A work becomes a classic the minute I discover that my many moods, my perceptions, my spontaneous terms of reference, my recurring images are startlingly anticipated and given precise formulation by (and in) that work. It sharpens my eyesight, it cleans my mind of the fuzziness produced by my own lack of talent and laziness, it teaches me the words that I need for soliloquy and conversation. It is of course not strange nor solely a polite convention that so often when we speak of classics we refer to early, old compositions. For the masters of ancient pieces too saw clearly and spoke distinctly and with precision. The first to see and the first to record accurately continue to affect us ever after—this is the immortality of truth. And since no one exhausts reality, the classic is not only the ancient. Whoever correctly discovers and uses the right words reveals the world and my life to me, and ever after governs me. He teaches me also to recognize and speak the truth.