

Over this past year, T'ruah has been publishing Torah 20/20, where each week a different author reflects on what the Torah portion teaches us about democracy. For the High Holidays, we offer these excerpts. As you read, ask yourself what these holidays say to you about the world you want to live in. Find more Torah 20/20 and sign up to receive the last of the series at www.truah.org/Torah2020.



ROSH HASHANAH



Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world.

BERESHIT, BY RABBI DANIA RUTTENBERG (October 23, 2019)

It is a brand new year. A time for new beginnings, for fresh starts. A time to create the world, anew...

This moment, on the precipice of what could prove to be a turning point for both [the US and Israel], is a good one for remembering one of the foundational texts of human rights work.

"And God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God God created it." (Genesis 1:27)...

As we begin a new chapter of the Torah cycle, and perhaps a new chapter in our public life, we must ask ourselves: What do each of us—bringing our own, divinely-created capacities and passions to the work—need to do to begin to undertake the task at hand? And how can we all join together to create powerful, lasting transformation? As Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, wrote, “Everyone must know that within them burns a candle—and that no one’s candle is identical with the candle of another, and that there is no human being without a candle. One is obligated to work hard to reveal the light of one’s candle in the public realm for the benefit of the many. One needs to ignite one’s candle and make of it a great torch to enlighten the whole world.”

Rabbi Ruttenberg is the award-winning author of seven books.



On the second morning of Rosh Hashanah, we traditionally read the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac.

CHAYEI SARAH, BY RABBI LAUREN TUCHMAN (November 18, 2019)

The Piaseczna Rebbe, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, also known as the *Esh Kodesh* (Holy Fire) after his famous book of teachings written in the Warsaw Ghetto from 1939-1942, addresses the question of theodicy in his poignantly beautiful teaching on *Parashat Chayei Sarah* in 1939...The Piaseczna points out the importance of the juxtaposition in the Torah of the Binding of Isaac and Sarah's death. Sarah's death is an anguished cry to God: Why has this unfathomable suffering occurred?...

The Piaseczna is here offering a powerful antidote to the numbness that can overtake us at times of great personal or collective destabilization...[His] powerful rejoinder to this impulse demands much of us, because he knows—and we know—that to feel is to remain hopeful, to believe in the possibility of a future that is better than our challenging present. Our culture does not think kindly of those who spend time with their emotions in all of their rawness and vulnerability. The Piaseczna encourages us to do this as the foundation of an authentic spiritual practice, out of an understanding that emotions that are not felt and worked with and through will emerge in unhealthy ways down the line.

Rabbi Tuchman works for Avodah in Washington, DC.



On Rosh Hashanah, we envision the future we want for the coming year.

PESACH, BY FRANKIE SANDMEL AND DR. ABDUL EL-SAYED (April 7, 2020)

As we wrestle with the COVID-19 pandemic...it's important that we recognize its larger context.

For the past several decades, we in the US have been suffering a far slower moving and harder to discern epidemic—the epidemic of insecurity... If everybody approaches the crisis and tackles it and then goes back to normal, it simply puts us back in the position of being vulnerable to these kinds of crises again. And this will certainly not be the last global pandemic. We don't want to go back to a normal where people live on the ragged edge of our society, clinging on for dear life—in fact, there's no going "back" about it; we want to go forward to a new normal where people are fully fortified and invested in. The hard part of crises like this is that we're a lot closer to the normal we were in than the normal we want to build. Embracing the fact that the future will look different allows us the space to articulate what the different future ought to look like.

Student Rabbi Sandmel was T'ruah's Rabbinic Organizing Intern in Spring 2020.

Dr. El-Sayed is a nationally-known epidemiologist and public servant, hailing from Michigan.

YOM KIPPUR



This Yom Kippur, let us consider teshuvah not just as individuals but collectively and nationally.
BO, BY RABBI ARI LEV FORNARI (January 27, 2020)

In [the Movement for Black Lives' definition] I see an essential aspect of the nature of reparations. Those who have profited are responsible for the process of repair. In Jewish tradition, we would call this *teshuva*—a process of reparations and restorative justice. However, what we see in [Bo] is the Israelites reclaiming—some might even say stealing back—wealth they feel was due to them. While this might have allowed them to leave Egypt with something of value, it did nothing to actually restore the humanity of the slaves or slave owners...

Teshuvah is an essential element of democracy. It honors that democracies are made up of human beings who miss the mark, often in egregious, violent ways. According to Maimonides, the first step in *teshuva* is to stop causing harm. This is actually where we find ourselves as a democracy.

Rabbi Fornari leads Kol Tzedek, a synagogue in West Philadelphia.



The traditional Yom Kippur morning Torah reading describes the High Priest's animal sacrifices on Yom Kippur.

TZAV, BY RUBY NAMDAR (March 31, 2020)

It was a crisp, early morning, on the eve of *Yom Kippur*. I was led by my father to the old market in Jerusalem for my first *Kapparot*, the ritual slaughter of chickens evoking the early days of our faith and the animal sacrifice that was at the center of religious life in ancient Israel. What surprises me most is that in spite of it being horrific, it is also a very fond memory. I never felt so alive as I did in those dreamlike moments. The horror was there, very vivid and present—but somehow, I could not take my eyes off of it...

Sacrifice is a way for us, humans, to gain a sense of agency. It is a tool for intervention, a way for us to do our share in restoring the cosmic balance. The Torah relays to us the existence of a hidden cycle of life, blood, and vitality. Every spilled drop of blood is accounted for in the hermetically-moral universe of scripture. The *Kohen*, the priest, preserves this tight economy of life and blood by offering parts of the sacrifice up high, sending others (namely the blood) to the depths of the earth, where it returns to its original source, and feeding the rest to the community, including the homeless, the poor, and the stranger who has no land or property of their own. Sacrifice is the embodiment of mindfulness, food justice, and social responsibility.

Mr. Namdar is an Israeli-born Iranian-Jewish novelist.



Clean and unclean is one of the central metaphors of the Yom Kippur liturgy.

CHUKAT-BALAK, BY PROFESSOR LILA CORWIN BERMAN (June 30, 2020)

While we tried to cleanse our bodies and everything that entered our home [last spring], my white Jewish family and I read about Breonna Taylor... [and] Ahmaud Arbery... [and] George Floyd... And at some point, I looked down at my hands and my children's hands, spotless from washing, no dirt under our nails, and I thought about the historical chain of racist violence and state-sanctioned brutality that our hands grasped... We are all unclean, no matter how much we may have washed.

...Uncleanliness [is] a systemic problem that exists beyond the individual... Step into the system, even to bring healing or purity, and one cannot avoid being “unclean until evening.” This is how systems work, weaving individuals into logics beyond their own making... My students search for the bright line between clean and unclean, and yet our [Torah], as much as history, reminds us that systems act as multipliers of the inequities, injustices, sorrows, and pain that individuals feel or enact...

The Torah tells us that, come evening, we will become clean. Some may see this as permission to sit around and wait for time to do its thing. But history tells us that evening never just comes, that the sun can dip and our eyes can get heavy, but there's no real rest until we have rolled up our sleeves together and scrubbed hard, first to see and only then perhaps to remove the sick systems of our day.

Professor Corwin Berman teaches American Jewish history at Temple University.

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