

10 Awakenings for the Days of Awe

texts to awaken us to repentance in 5781

Day 1: Environmental Impact

וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם
וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעֲבֹדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

The LORD God took the man
and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.
Genesis 2:15

[Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev said:](#)

From the outset, God intended humans to be farmers, to work the soil, Thus they might learn that success depends both on their efforts and on the blessings of Heaven — that is, favorable weather.

Awakening Questions

Levi Yitzhak reminds us of our human limitations, which every farmer knows.

How can we reawaken in ourselves the common sense of the farmer, to protect the land, the water, and the air in our community?

What can we do this year so that our air will be clean next Rosh Hashanah?

How can we fulfill the purpose God gave to Adam: to till the land and to tend it?

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Day 2: Racism

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ: וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים
אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:26-27

The Mishnah teaches:

Therefore, Adam the first man was created alone: And this was done due to the importance of maintaining peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father is greater than your father. ... And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, since when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, since all humanity descends from one person, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me, as one person can be the source of all humanity, and recognize the significance of his actions.

[Sanhedrin 4:5](#)

Awakening Questions

Were you raised to believe that you or your people are superior to other people? Why? What role did that belief serve in your family, growing up? In your school? In your Jewish community? In your neighborhood? In your nation? In you?

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Day 3: Taking Care of ... Whom?

Hillel would say:

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי.
וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי.
וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתַי.

If I am not for myself, who is for me?
But if I am for my own self [only], what am I?
And if not now, when?

[Pirkei Avot 1:14](#)

Awakening Questions

Hillel believed it is not selfish to take care of yourself: it is necessary.

Yet, like everything else, taking care of yourself can go too far. When does taking care of yourself become selfish?

What does “what am I?” in the second question mean?

In the past year, how has your time been divided between taking care of yourself and taking care of other people?

What has changed since the coronavirus pandemic began?

Is the current balance of caring for yourself and others sustainable?

Hillel’s last question conveys urgency. Why?

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Day 4: The Duty to Act

וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַ בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֲנָה וַתִּדְלָנָה וַתִּמְלְאֲנָה
אֶת־הַרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן:
וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרָעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשְׁעֵן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־צֹאנָם:

Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock.

Exodus 2:16-17

Rabbi Shai Held said:

Why is it so important to the Torah to tell this story? The Torah wants us to know that Moses is not just offended by injustices perpetrated against his own people. Moses also defends foreigners and strangers, and “his passion for justice makes no distinctions between nations.” [J. Tigay in Berlin & Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, p.109]

It is not enough for a Jewish leader to display ethnic solidarity — ethnic solidarity is surely necessary, but it is just as surely not sufficient. In order to be worthy of leadership, one must rebel against wrongdoing, no matter who the victim is.

— from *The Heart of Torah*, Vol. 1 pp. 123-124

Awakening Questions

Describe a moment in the past when you acted to defend a just cause, or you watched someone else do so.

Was the action risky? Did it feel risky?

Did the action achieve the desired outcome?

Does the Bible expect all of us to take such risks, or only leaders?

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Day 5: Sensitive, Compassionate, Kind

וְהָיָה | עֲקֵב תִּשְׁמָעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה
וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְךָ
אֶת-הַבְּרִית וְאֶת-הַחֹסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּיךָ:

And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully,
the LORD your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant
that He made on oath with your fathers:

Deuteronomy 7:12

The Midrash in Deuteronomy Rabbah 3 says:

And what is meant by 'faithful to the covenant' [literally, 'the covenant and the kindness']? Rabbi Hiyya said: The people of Israel have three good ethical qualities, and they are: shamefacedness, compassion, and kindness to others. ... How do we know they show kindness to others? As it is written, "the LORD your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers" [Deuteronomy 7:12].

Awakening Questions

Deuteronomy 7:12 is quoted in Zichronot on Rosh Hashanah. In the above *midrash* which quotes the same verse, Rabbi Hiyya expresses the belief that Jews are sensitive (shamefaced), kind, and compassionate people. Another source adds that to be otherwise is un-Jewish. Is this what you learned as a child about Jewish identity? Do you believe that sensitivity, kindness, and compassion are essential to Jewish identity? What challenges must we overcome to meet that standard in our lives?

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Day 6: Conquering Anger

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a

מאי מצלי?
אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב
יה"ר מלפני
שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי
ויגולו רחמי על מדותי,
ואתנהג עם בני במדת רחמים,
ואכנס להם לפני משורת הדין.

What does God pray?

Rav Zutra, son of Tuvia, said in the name of Rav

“May it be My will before Me

That My mercy will conquer My anger,

and My compassion will engulf My other character traits,

and may I behave toward My children with the trait of compassion,

and may I enter with them beyond the strict letter of the law.”

Awakening Questions

What is the role of anger in your life?

Would the people closest to you agree with your answer?

What is served by holding on to anger?

In the *midrash*, when God prays to go beyond what the law requires, God finds a new focus for God’s own emotional energy. Can you imagine refocusing the energy of your anger into action this year? How?

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Day 7: Do Not Place Obstacles

לֹא־תִקְלַל חֵרֶשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֹר לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשָׁל וַיִּרְאֵתָ מֵאֶ-לֵהֵיךָ אֲנִי ה':

You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind

You shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:14

אָרוּר מִשְׁגָּה עֵוֹר בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְאָמַר כָּל־הָעָם אָמֵן:

Cursed be he who misdirects a blind person on his way

—And all the people shall say, Amen.

Deuteronomy 27:18

Sefer HaChinukh 232:1-2 teaches:

To not make an innocent one stumble on the way: Do not make the Children of Israel stumble, e.g., give them bad advice; but rather we direct them rightly when they ask advice, with that which we believe to be right and good advice, as it is stated (Leviticus 19:14), "and you shall not put a stumbling block in front of the blind." And the language of Sifra, Kedoshim, Section 2:14 [is] "In front of one who is blind about a thing and he takes advice from you, do not give him advice that is not appropriate for him."

Awakening Questions

The rabbinic tradition extends the Bible's prohibition against shaming persons with disabilities to prohibiting giving bad advice to all people. A disability or the need for advice does not imply a person's weakness, nor that they are to be mocked, nor taken advantage of.

How can we awaken within ourselves a commitment to be attentive to the needs of people with disabilities? What would this look like in our community this year?

How can we awaken within ourselves a commitment to offer pertinent, truthful, and sensitive advice to those who trust us enough to ask our advice? How can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to seek advice when we need it?

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Day 8: The Vulnerable

שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ חוּס וְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ וְקַבֵּל בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרָצוֹן אֶת תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ.
הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ ה' אֵלֶיךָ וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יִמֵּינוּ כְּקֶדֶם.
אֲמַרְנוּ הַאֲזִינָה ה' בִּינָה הַגִּיגָנוּ.
יְהִיו לְרָצוֹן אֲמַרֵי פִינוּ וְהִגִּיּוֹן לִבֵּנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ ה' צוּרֵנוּ וְגוֹאֲלֵנוּ.
אֵל תִּשְׁלִיכֵנוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ וְרוּחַ קִדְשְׁךָ אֵל תִּשָּׁח מִמֶּנּוּ.
אֵל תִּשְׁלִיכֵנוּ לַעַת זְקֵנָה כְּכֹלֹת פָּחֵנוּ אֵל תַּעֲזֹבֵנוּ.
אֵל תַּעֲזֹבֵנוּ ה' אֶ-לֵהֵינוּ אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנּוּ.
עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ אוֹת לְטוֹבָה וְיֵרְאוּ שׁוֹנְאֵינוּ וַיִּבְשׁוּ כִי אַתָּה ה' עֲזַרְתָּנוּ וְנִחַמְתָּנוּ.
כִּי לָךְ ה' הוֹחֵלֵנוּ אַתָּה תַעֲנֶה אֲדָנִי אֶ-לֵהֵינוּ.

Hear our voice, Adonai, our God; spare us and have compassion on us, and accept our prayers mercifully and willingly.
Lead us back to You, Adonai and we shall find the way back; renew our days as of old.
Give ear to our words, Adonai! Consider our meditations.
May the words of our mouths be acceptable — and the thoughts of our hearts—before You, Adonai, our Rock, and our Redeemer.
Cast us not away from Your Presence, and Your holy spirit take not from us.
Do not cast us off in time of old age, when our strength fails, do not forsake us.
Forsake us not, Adonai, our God, be not far removed from us.
Give us a sign of Your goodness that our enemies may see it and be ashamed;
for You, Adonai, have helped us and comforted us.
For You, Adonai, do we wait, You will answer us, our Master, our God.

Awakening Questions

In this poignant prayer on Yom Kippur, we ask God not to abandon us when our strength fails us in old age.
How are the elderly treated in our community? In our family? In national public policy?
What can we do this year that will help vulnerable people, including the elderly, during this pandemic?

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Day 9: The Poor

[Leviticus 25:35](#)

And if thy brother be waxen poor, and his means fail with thee; then thou shalt uphold him: as a stranger and a settler shall he live with thee.

[Maimonides comments, quoting the above verse:](#)

There are eight levels of charity, one above the other. The greatest level that has nothing above it is to strengthen the hand of a Jew who has become poor and give him a gift or loan or create a partnership with him or make up some work for him, so as strengthen his hand until he does not [any longer] need to ask others [for help]. And about this it is said (Leviticus 25:35), "and you shall strengthen the hand of a stranger and a resident and he shall live with you;" meaning, strengthen him until he no [longer] falls and becomes needy.

Mishneh Torah 10:7

[Deuteronomy 15:7](#)

If there be among you a poor man, one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God gives thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy poor brother.

[Deuteronomy 15:11](#)

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

Awakening Questions

Deut. 15:11 tackles the frustration we might feel about an intractable problem by requiring us to take the long view and be generous. Other Jewish texts on poverty offer a robust structure of personal and public duties.

What public policies and personal practices do we already practice that respond to poverty in our community? What more is needed now, in response to the pandemic? What has the pandemic revealed about the underlying causes of poverty in the U.S. which can be remedied?

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Day 10: Do Not Fear

Exodus 14:10

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the LORD.

Exodus 14:13-14

But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the LORD will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The LORD will battle for you; you hold your peace!”

Exodus 14:30-31

And Adonai redeemed the Israelites on that day from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt die on the shore of the sea. And Israel saw the great hand which God performed on Egypt, and the people feared/revered Adonai, and they had faith in Adonai, and in Moses, God’s servant.

As the Egyptians lie dead on the shore, *yir’ah* is now elevated from raw fear of the approaching Egyptian army to perception of God’s redemption. The entire people arrive at a new kind of *yir’ah* at one moment: fear of God mixed with awe, reverence, and faith. It is the first collective experience of *yeshu’ah* (redemption).

At the height of terror, Moses offered encouragement. As an act of leadership this was compassionate as well as courageous. The people respond with faith in God and in Moses.

Awakening Questions

This model of leadership is both compassionate and courageous. It aims to reduce fear of the enemy among the people, and to increase reverence for God. What models of compassionate and courageous leadership do you see in our world? If you are in a position of leadership, how can you model your actions on Moses this year?