

This "Libretto for the High Holydays" was originally attached as a small booklet to the rear cover of the Silverman Machzor used at Congregation Beth El, Fairfield CT, where I served as rabbi during the 1960's. Written in Spanish, apparently for the use of the Seminario Rabbinico in Buenos Aires it may have originally been delivered as a speech there. Having heard of its existence and wanting to increase my congregants' appreciation of the Machzor. I asked good friend and congregant, Phyllis Feld, who knew Spanish to undertake the translation. She did a superb job!. The Libretto is presented here as it was translated prior to the spread of gender neutral language. The original printing of the booklet was funded by and presented to Congregation Beth El in loving memory of our dear brother, Dr. J. Milton Stark, by Selma Perry and Joseph Stark. I hope you find it useful.

Jack H Bloom

Libretto

FOR THE

High Holydays

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What reflects the soul of a people? Its language, its customs, its history - yes! But even more, Holidays reflect the soul and essence of a people. Are the holidays anniversaries of battles, birthdays of generals, memorials to conquests? If so, then we know that the basic outlook of that people celebrates power and force. Are the holidays celebrated with drunken orgies, immorality and wild parties? Then that people is basically attracted by those things which make us forget the meaning of life. One need only consider the different ways the Jewish New Year and the secular New Year are observed to gain insight into the soul of the Jewish people. We do not celebrate the beginning of our New Year by drunkenness, levity and parties. For us life is too earnest, our responsibilities too great, our obligations too serious to begin a New Year in such a way. Our New Year, as we all know, begins with prayer, study, reflection and "cheshbon hanefesh"- a preoccupation with the state of our soul, in which we consider our lives. It begins with the serious thought that life is, after all, a gift which is given to us, a gift which will not always be with us a gift for which we are responsible.

The heart of every Jew beats with a stronger beat during these days. The appearance of the Jewish people during this time is one of seriousness, sanctity and dedication. We are helped in this by the prayers we recite. They are old prayers, but one of the Chassidic teachers said that the verse; "Do not forsake us in old age was the prayers prayer. The prayer book says; "Just because I am old. do not forget me, do not neglect me."

The Machzor which is, as we all know, the prayerbook of the High Holydays, bears this name because it is a book containing prayers for the whole yearly cycle. There are many kinds of Machzorim. One scholar estimated that there are at least fifty different Minhagim. However, what is astonishing is that although there are Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Polish and other minhagim, there is a common core of prayers found in all of them.

These standard prayers are studded with Piyyutim, which are special poetic compositions expressing the meaning and significance of the day. These Piyyutim were composed during many centuries, in all lands. They are not only poetry but also instruction. They contain explanations of the Torah reading of the day, the laws of the Holyday and so forth.

Thus, in the Jewish prayerbook, we see reflected the centuries old career of the Jewish people. We find traces of all the Exiles (Babylonia, Africa, Europe). Also reflected is the Jewish idea that prayer without study is like a soul without a body – both the head and the heart must be involved.

There is a unifying factor-the standard prayers, and, at the same time, room for differentiation, regional nuances and experimentation. Thus, the Jewish prayerbook reflects the Jewish combination of unity and variety, standardization and experimentation.

It is through the Machzor that we can learn the significance of the High Holydays, for the prayerbook must be understood as well as prayed.

What is it that we see reflected in the prayerbook? Certainly we cannot absorb it all at once. The subject is too vast. Like a plane flying over a large mountain range, we can see only some of the peaks.

I should like to suggest that the High Holydays are like a great and profound opera, combining many themes but resulting in great unity.

The overture to the opera begins before Rosh Hashanah. It is "Selichot." (Incidentally, it is not true that "Jewish Time" means "later than the announced hour." On the contrary, it means "beginning before the prescribed time." For example, we do not say the blessing for the candles after Shabbat but at least fifteen minutes before sunset. The same is true of the High Holydays.

We begin their observance several days before Rosh Hashanah.) Actually the Selichot are the oldest of the Piyyutim—the special prayers for the High Holyday season. Originally, they were said only on Yom Kippur but around the 7th century they were recited every morning from Rosh Chodesh Elul. This is still the custom among Sephardic Jews. Ashkenazim, however, begin reciting Selichot the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah, unless Rosh Hashanah falls on Monday. In that case the Selichot are said one week earlier. What is the content of the Selichot? Just as the overture usually states the themes that we will hear later in the opera, so does the Selichot service. state the leading ideas of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur service.

**"Righteousness is Yours, a Lord; Shame faced embarrassment ours.
What can we say to You? How can we word our defense?
We shall examine our ways, probe our deeds,
Return to You, for You welcome the penitent.
We possess neither good deeds nor virtues;
We come as paupers to knock at Your door.
We knock: at your door, O merciful God.
Please do not turn us away empty handed.
Turn us not away unanswered, O Lord,
For You, O King, do listen to prayer."**

What are the themes?

- 1. When we see ourselves as we really are, compared to the standards of righteousness and good conduct we ought to follow, we are all guilty. Generally, when a man appears in court, he tries to convince the Judge that he is innocent. Here we appear before Judgment as those who recognize their guilt.**
- 2. We throw ourselves upon the mercy of the Court--our hope being that the Judge before whom we appear will treat us with goodness and consideration even though we are guilty.**
- 3. We are sorry for our misdeeds-only a broken heart is whole. If we are truly regretful then we know that we will emerge favorably from the judgment. Repentance is the key that opens all locks.**

These themes are repeated in one way or another throughout the Selichot service and they are the overture before the grand and awesome opera of the High Holydays, in which these themes will be developed, restated and amplified.

The first act of the opera., of course, is Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah has two names _ Rosh Hashanah and Yom Hazikaron: New Year and Day of Remembrance. In this way the two

aspects of the day are expressed. It is a day on which we look back-the Day of Remembrance and we look forward-a New Year. Like a man who rows a boat, we have to look backward in order to go forward.

The theme of looking to the past is expressed in the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah. It tells the story of Akedat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac. It is the ancient story of how Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At the last minute an angel tells him not to use his son as a "korban" and, instead, he sacrifices the Ram he finds nearby. This story, of course symbolizes the readiness of the Jew to sacrifice his most precious possessions for his ideals and beliefs. It is for this reason that Abraham is often considered the Knight of the Faith - the Model Jew.

A ram was sacrificed. The Shofar comes from the ram's horn and the Torah reading leads naturally into the grand aria of Rosh Hashanah, "The Sounding of the Shofar." Actually, Rosh Hashanah is designated in the Bible as Yom Teruah - the day of the sounding of the Shofar. We know from archeologists and anthropologists that among pagans the celebration of a new year was marked by deafening shrieks and screams, whose purpose was to frighten the evil spirits and demons. For us, the sound of the Shofar is not meant to frighten off evil spirits. Rather it is meant to call us to repentance, to self-examination.

The Bible mentions two Shofar sounds, Tekiah and Teruah. Tekiah is a long blast, Teruah is called Yevavah or a wavering sound. During Talmudic times, there was doubt about the exact meaning of Teruah. Some said it was a moaning sound, others said it was an outcry. The first explanation requires a Shevarim, a broken sound. The second requires what we call Teruah, a tremolo of nine staccato notes. Since there is some doubt, we sound all of these: Tekiah, Teruah and Shevarim.

We also learn from the Talmud that the Romans suspected that the early morning Shofar blast was a call to rebellion. When the enemy noted however, that first the Jews read the Shema, then recited the Amidah, then read the Torah and then sounded the Shofar, they realized that it was a religious rite. Therefore, we sound the Shofar at two points in the Service.

What is the significance of the Shofar? What theme is being stated? Professor Saul Lieberman calls the Shofar "a prayer without words". Maimonides gives the following explanation for the Shofar:

"Awaken sleepers from your slumber. Scrutinize your actions and turn to repentance. Remember your Creator, you who forget eternal truths in the banalities of the hour."

Like small children who wander off from their mother's side in a crowded store to look at some toy or admire a candy, so we abandon our Heavenly Father to run after trifles, foolish

pleasures. The Shofar is a cry that calls us back. The Tekiah is also a battle cry, a battle against Shevarim-Teruah, the brokenness of life, the sorrows of existence. But the Tekiah Gedolah with which we conclude the Shofar Service reminds us that there is hope of triumph, hope for Redemption. Therefore, according to tradition, Tekiah Gedolah will be sounded on the day the Messiah comes, the day of the realization of all the hopes of mankind.

Thus the first great themes of our opera are heard. The Torah Reading, the theme of sacrifice, the sounding of the Shofar, the theme of repentance, return and renewal.

In the Musaph service the most famous Piyyut is "U' netaneh Tokef."

"Let us declare the utter sanctity of this day... You open the book of records from which man's destiny is read; each man's acts are in that book."

The main theme of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy is stated here. This is the great Yom Ha-din. We are judged. The records are opened. What we have done and what we have not done, all is written. We cannot evade the Judge. For he is not like a Judge of flesh and blood who can be deceived. He knows all our secrets, all our thoughts, and all our misdeeds. But the prayer concludes with a hopeful note; "Repentance, prayer and good deeds can annul the evil decree." Man is not in a hopeless position. Through repentance, which is a break with the past, through prayer, which is establishing a relationship with the Almighty, and through good deeds, we can change our lives and our destinies. Here in the U'netaneh Tokef, we have the theme of Judgment, scrutiny of our acts, and, what is perhaps more important, the Jewish emphasis on improving this world. For, ultimately, it is the good deeds' actual and practical achievements that determine our destiny.

In the Rosh Hashanah Musaph Service we find the oldest part of the liturgy of the High Holydays, mentioned in the Mishnah as being part of the Rosh Hashanah Service in the Temple of Jerusalem. These are the Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot. In the first we stress the Kingship of God. Malchuyot is introduced by the Aleynu prayer, the marvelous hope of contemplating the Glory of God's Power when the world will be perfected under the Kingdom of the Almighty." Each of the verses of the Malchuyot speaks of God's sovereignty on earth. The final verse is "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." In Malchuyot we emphasize the principal theme of the liturgy. God is King in the world. We do not live in a universe that is devoid of authority and sovereignty. We are not the victims of a natural process that pays no attention to us. We live in a world which is the domain of God. History has meaning and we are responsible for our actions.

The second part of the Musaph Service is called the Zichronot, which means remembrance. God remembers and we, also, must remember. We are part of a great tradition. Man cannot live as if he had amnesia. He is part of a great history. The greatest sin a Jew can commit is to forget who

he is. He is the son of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of the people who gave religion to the world and who taught decency and morality to the sons of men.

The third part of the Musaph Service is called Shofarot and concerns the meaning and significance of the Shofar. Shofarot speaks of the revelation on Mt. Sinai and the Great Shofar of the Messiah, which will be heard on the great day of Redemption.

Thus, the Musaph service introduces three themes, which are of utmost importance.

Malchuyot-The sovereignty of God and responsibility of man.

Zichronot-The importance of history in the life of man.

Shofarot-A code of life has been revealed to us; we are "prisoners" of hope. We cannot forget the promise of the Almighty that the world will not always remain in the grip of evil. Evil will be overcome and good will triumph.

And, with this, the first act of our opera concludes. The themes of Rosh Hashanah have been stated.

The Entr'acte (the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) has special prayers and meditations. and is a time when man should think of repentance. "Look for the Lord while he can be found." That is to say-between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is the period of self-examination and resolution to do better-a time of Teshuvah.

Then comes the next great scene of the drama of our High Holydays. The holiest day of the Jewish calendar-Yom Kippur-Day of Atonement, approaches.

What themes do we hear during this day?

1. The consciousness of sin. Each person must recognize his shortcomings. One of the Chassidic teachers said, "There is nothing so ugly as a man who is satisfied with himself." We cannot improve unless we recognize our defects and failures. The Bible says; "there isn't a righteous man on earth who does good and does not sin."

2. Confession.. To make it easier to recall sins, the Yom Kippur liturgy has many occasions for confession. There are the great confessionals, Ashamnu and Al Chet. The confessional has two interesting characteristics: First, it is in alphabetical order, and second, it is in the plural. This is explained as follows: If we were to recount all our sins we would never complete the list. Therefore, we use the alphabetical form. The alphabet has a beginning and an end. The confessional is in plural because all Jews are responsible for all other Jews. This is comparable to a situation in which three men are seated in a boat. One

begins to drill a hole under his seat. The others ask; "What are you doing?" He answers; "It is no concern of yours, I am not bothering you. I am drilling a hole under my own seat." The others say; "Fool, don't you know that if water comes through the hole, we will all drown?" In the same way, if a man sins. the rest of us are also responsible.

3. The cure for sin is repentance. We do not have to remain the "same type of person we were before. We have the opportunity to repent. If we come broken hearted we can be whole again. The Rabbis explain this with a beautiful proverb: "Human beings use only utensils that are whole. God uses only broken utensils. as it is written." The lord is close to the broken hearted."

4. The Talmud tells us that repentance can atone only for sins between man and God. For sins between man and man, the only repentance is restitution. That is, restoring to a person I have wronged, what I took from him.

5. All of this is facilitated by self-denial. fasting and other abstentions. They are classified in the Mishnah: "On the Day of Pardon, it is forbidden to eat, drink, bathe, anoint, wear sandals and to have marital relations." Thereby we are able, throughout our devotions, to concentrate on dedicating ourselves completely to our spiritual unrest. It is a symbol of our readiness to control ourselves in the service of the "Good" and the "Holy".

These, then, are the five themes we find in the Yom Kippur prayers. Let us take a closer look at some of the great compositions, which make up the second act of our High Holyday drama.

The act begins with a composition which is not part of the liturgy-"Kol Nidre." The origin of Kol Nidre is found in the Jewish idea that a person should be scrupulous in respect to the promises he makes. The words that we utter are not unimportant. They are not words that we can forget whenever it is convenient. If for some reason, we cannot comply with our vows, we can annul them before three Judges. If they recognize that the vow was made in haste, they can annul the vow. It is still not clear why the formula in our Machzorim came to be so popular that the entire Yom Kippur evening service is called Kol Nidre. No theory seems to be completely satisfactory. Some say it was the melody that captured the imagination of the Jews. Others say it had its origins among the secret Jews who wished to renounce the faith they had been forced to adopt. Whatever it was, the Kol Nidre theme stresses the difference between our resolutions, our great decisions and our low level of realization. Often we decide to do something important and when the moment for action comes we hang back, failures. This is the theme Kol Nidre stresses.

The morning Yom Kippur Service contains many great ideas. As we mentioned, we have confession and resolution to do better. However, we should mention two or three high points in the liturgy.

First, there is the Avodah. This is a long poem which describes the Yom Kippur ritual that took place in the Temple of Jerusalem. In this ritual there were two goats. One was sacrificed on the altar and one was sent to Azazel, the wilderness. This goat symbolically carried all the sins of the Congregation of Israel. This is the origin of the term "scape goat." This great ritual taught the idea that on Yom Kippur the sins of the Children of Israel are destroyed and banished to the wilderness.

The second great moment of the service is Yizkor. Memorial prayers were originally recited only on Yom Kippur and later they were introduced into the service of the concluding days of the other festivals as well, Yizkor arose after the period of the first Crusade (1096) when the practice of reading the names of the martyred dead from the record books of the community was established. Yizkor is said only in Ashkenazic communities. Sephardic synagogues do not say it. It is especially important that we remember on Yom Kippur those who preceded us, that we follow their example and be true to their ideals. There is nothing more tragic than to see a family fall apart because they are forgetting the traditions of their ancestors.

One of the high points of the service is the moment we recite the story of the Asarah Harugey Malchut. In Eleh Ezkarah we are transported back 18 centuries to a painful memory. We read about the great scholars and Rabbis who were brutally murdered by the Romans. They died "Al Kidush Hashem", to sanctify God's name. Their deaths are graphically described. When we read about these martyrs we think of all the martyrs of Israel, especially those of the recent past, the six million innocents who were slaughtered. The remembrance is particularly important on the High Holydays, for we are all responsible for the destiny of our people. We hold in trust the heritage acquired at the cost of so much suffering and pain. We cannot forget that those teachings and traditions that are ours did not come easily to us. Each Jew is responsible for the destiny of Judaism. Each one of us is responsible for keeping alive that for which they died.

So the first scene of the second act closes. But Jews usually do not leave the synagogue after Musaph. It is traditional to remain in the synagogue the entire day. The majority begin the Mincha service. The central part of this scene is one of the greatest and yet strangest books of the Bible - the book of Jonah. Why is the book of Jonah read on Yom Kippur? The Mishnah associates the story of Jonah with fast days generally. The people of Nineveh, to whom Jonah was sent, are models of what repentance can do. Jonah told them that soon destruction would befall their city. When they heard this they put on sackcloth and ashes and repented. But the Mishnah goes on to say that they did not limit their repentance to fasting and praying. they also performed good deeds. The Talmud relates the following: "One case can serve to illustrate the complete moral transformation of the people of Nineveh. A man found a treasure in a parcel of land he had bought from his neighbor. Both buyer and seller disclaimed ownership of the treasure. They were both overjoyed when the Judge, after diligent inquiry, found out the name

of the man who had hidden it there, located his heirs, and they were able to return the treasure to its true owner.”

The message of the book of Jonah is that repentance is possible. It is interesting to note that the whole story did not take place in Palestine nor among Jews, but in Nineveh, among non-Jews. So we have repeated in this scene, the theme of repentance. But here there is also a new thematic variation. Repentance is Universal. It is for Jew and non-Jew alike. God is sovereign over all the world.

Afternoon shadows become evident. The long day of fasting and praying is approaching its "finale". The last scene of the opera begins. The themes are restated, reemphasized. There is a hush in the synagogue. The time for Neilah has come. The term Neilah was first used in connection with the Yom Kippur service in the Temple. As the day came to an end, the priests would close the gates of the Temple, "Neilat Shearim" - the closing of the gates. The Palestinian Talmud calls the service, "Neilat Shaarey Hashamayim" - the closing of the Gates of Heaven. The theme of the closing of the gates is the main idea. The day is at an end. The gates are about to close. This is our last chance to absorb the spirit of the Holy days. In this scene of our opera we stress the idea. that God is anxious to receive us if we repent. He is waiting anxiously for us to abandon our evil ways.

"You stretch out your hand and aid the sinners."

The whole congregation is moved to repeat the prayers.

"We ask pardon. Open for us the gates even as they are closing."

"We recognize our frailties. What are we: what powers do we have?"

Yet we also recognize our human dignity.

"You distinguished man from the beginning and filled him with the desire to seek your presence."

Though we are weak, though we are no more than flesh and blood, we are created in the image of God. There is a longing in the human soul for goodness, purity, kindness and holiness. We are strangers, we have strayed far away. But in our hearts their stirs a great homesickness.

The afternoon shadows lengthen. Soon we reach the stirring "finale" of our great opera. The whole congregation as one, repeats the ancient formula of faith: .

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom for ever and ever."

And, finally, as one great chorus of voices uniting the present and the past, the Israel of long ago and the Israel of today;

'The Lord is God'

We acknowledge our God. We are his children. The Shofar sounds, the day has ended. The curtain falls, the opera. is complete.

The opera of the High Holydays is one in which each one of us has a main role. It was not meant for us to be spectators, tourists in the synagogue. It is as if the director has given us the lead" without which the opera cannot go on. Let those of us who cannot pray, at least pray for the power to pray. This, too, is a profound prayer. If we cannot pray even for the power to pray, let us shed a tear for having wandered so far from our tradition and our God. And this, too, is a high form of prayer. For, according to Jewish tradition, there is a place reserved in heaven for those who can only weep but cannot pray. But each one, if he tries can find a way.

The Chasidim have a story about a "Rebbc" who heard about three modern inventions. These he said, teach a great spiritual lesson.

From the Railroad we learn that every moment counts.

From the Telegraph we learn that every word counts.

And from the Telephone we learn that whatever we say here is heard there.