

Putting Ourselves Back in the Narrative

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[Begin by making the Hamilaria sign]

A video making the rounds of the Internet refers to a new malady. Those who suffer from it hear phrases in everyday speech as triggers that cause them to break into songs from the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*. I have to admit that I occasionally suffer from this Hamilaria. The video suggests that I redirect my cravings by learning to make this sign [do so again], ASL for the letter “H,” rather than to sing the musical to all those not similarly obsessed.

I’m working on it. I’ve listened to the album countless times. I own the book about the making of the musical – which fans have dubbed the *Hamiltome*.¹ And I had the amazing good fortune to see the show on Broadway last spring.

For those who don’t know, *Hamilton* recounts the career of our first Secretary of the Treasury. You might not have thought that the life of a founding father would be the basis for a groundbreaking musical, especially a founding father best known before the show for (a) having his face on the \$10 bill, and (b) getting killed in a duel with Aaron Burr. But then you wouldn’t have been Lin-Manuel Miranda. Miranda read a biography and then wrote the book, music, and lyrics of the show. He also played Hamilton in the original cast.

In this show, the only parts played by white actors are King George and his sympathizers. Blacks, Latinos, Asians – outsiders all – play the parts of the founders. And they sing in an idiom of the outsider: hip hop.

Hamilton works because Lin-Manuel Miranda does something new, yet puts it in traditional frameworks. He brings rap into a show, but the show still feels like a Broadway musical, with references to songs and moments in other Broadway musicals. Likewise, this stage show about the founders of this country references hip hop standards of the past thirty years.

¹ All Hamilton references in this sermon come from Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016).

And this, of course, brings me to *Mishkan HaNefesh*. We have been praying out of our new “*machzor*,” that is our new High Holy Day prayer book. Our *machzor* works within the traditions of *machzorim* throughout the centuries. But it also brings in new prayers, other new materials, and – most important – new ways of thinking. It is a kind of synagogue *Hamilton*.

Lin-Manuel Miranda is creative, but he alone did not shape my experience of watching the play. Rather, live theater also consists of acting, directing, musical arrangements, lighting, costumes, and much more. Our *machzor* is also a kind of script. We need it, but we need more for our High Holy Days to work for us.

Great theater leaves the viewer with an experience of catharsis. When you leave a remarkable performance of a remarkable play, you know that something has happened to you. You are still yourself, but you have also changed.

Just as a script alone can't produce catharsis, neither can a *machzor* produce what the High Holy Days should do for each of us. That isn't catharsis; it's *t'shuvah*. We typically translate *t'shuvah* as “repentance,” but the word literally means “turning around.” On the High Holy Days, we should strive to turn our lives around. That may sound like a major task, and sometimes it is, but often we just need a small course correction. A story is told of a rabbi. His students asked him a question that might have felt more like a Zen koan: How far is it from east to west? And the rabbi answered by doing this [turn around]. Sometimes it's just one step.

The contents don't encompass the whole of a *machzor*. To see if a *machzor* works, you shouldn't look for the things you'd find in a book that you're reading for its own sake: style, literary merit, readability. It's not that those things don't matter, but in a *machzor*, they serve a higher purpose. As the editor of *Mishkan HaNefesh* writes, “We were not creating a book, per se, so much as a sacred tool that is part of a solution to a problem (or set of problems).”² The problem is how to help us do *t'shuvah* in today's world, in today's synagogues, with today's people in them.

So, let's look at some ways the new book can help us do *t'shuvah*, can help us start turning from east to west over these next ten days – with a little assistance from *Hamilton*.

In the show, *Hamilton* arrives in New York City from his home in the Caribbean at the beginning of the Revolutionary War. He comes from a place where people die young, and he expects the same thing for himself. He dreams of falling in glory on the battlefield. But he comes to realize that he can live and do so much more. He seizes the opportunity. In his words, “I am not throwing away my shot.”

² Edwin Goldberg, “The New Reform Machzor is a Solution, but What Is the Problem?,” *Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis Press, 2016) (ed. Edwin Goldberg), p. 57.

On these High Holy Days, we shouldn't be throwing away our shot, either. We should be challenging ourselves, looking at who we can become, seeing how to turn ourselves from east to west. And in doing so, we shouldn't just settle for the easy answers.

Yehudah Amichai wrote a poem that deals with exactly that human tendency. We can choose the easy way by removing difficult stories from the Bible:

I've filtered out of the Book of Esther the residue
of vulgar joy, and out of the Book of Jeremiah
the howl of pain in the guts. And out of the
Song of Songs the endless search for love,
and out of the Book of Genesis the dreams
and Cain, and out of Ecclesiastes
the despair and out of the Book of Job – Job.
And from what was left over I pasted for myself a new
Bible
Now I live censored and pasted and limited and in
peace ...³

Our Reform prayer books have often sought to give us this easy peace by removing texts from the Bible and elsewhere in our tradition. Not every difficult text needs to find its way into our prayer books, and the process of removing them antedates Reform by several centuries. On the High Holy Days, however, we have ample time to look at texts on our own that we might not be saying aloud. If some of those texts are troubling, perhaps they can push us to work on different and better ways of living.

Let's take the V'ahavta, the prayer that calls on us to love God with all our mind, soul, and strength. Traditionally, however, that paragraph is only one of three Biblical selections that make up the V'ahavata. Two others follow it. Reform *machzorim* have not included them. The second one is particularly problematic, in that it suggests that our land will yield good harvest if we follow God and that it will fail if we go after false gods. On one level, we dismiss that; we know bad people and bad societies that have good harvests, and good people and good societies that don't. And yet, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the text. Our *machzor* points out that when we as a society despoil the earth in pursuit of money, we likewise are following false gods. And when we as a society send carbon gases into the atmosphere, the earth will not produce what it once did. So, maybe an individual harvest won't be affected if we follow the idol of profit above all else, but our global harvest just might. It makes you think.

So, this is my first request for you as these Days of Awe begin: search out some of those challenging texts. Consider them, especially the ones that make you uncomfortable. Push yourself to wonder if there are other ways that you, that we, can do things that we haven't done before. See if you can start to take that step toward *t'shuvah*. This is your shot; don't throw it away.

³ Yehudah Amichai, "Hazman (Time) 29," quoted in Janet R. Marder, "Praying in Captivity: Liturgical Innovation in *Mishkah Hanefesh*," in *Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 68.

As *Hamilton* goes on, the title character has an affair which eventually becomes public. His wife, Eliza, is understandably hurt. She burns all the letters he had written to her – this actually happened – and sings about taking herself out of the narrative. However, when Hamilton is shot in the famous duel with Aaron Burr, she spends the next fifty years of her life working to preserve and enhance his memory and what he stood for. This actually happened, too. In the play, she sings “I put myself back in the narrative.”

Many of us have to find a way to put ourselves back in the narrative of the Jewish worshiping community. This is harder to do than it once was. Our Jewish community has changed. We come from more diverse backgrounds than ever before. A larger number of those who are connected to synagogues, especially Reform synagogues, include at least one person who didn't grow up Jewish. Some of them have embraced Judaism, some haven't, but all bring a new dimension to our communal life.

In addition, we have a diversity of beliefs about God. I study God with the Confirmation class and with those considering conversion. We look at different ways of imagining God, and we consider the possibility that there is no God. We rarely arrive at a consensus. I suspect that if we tried to find one in this sanctuary today, that too would fail.

The basic High Holy Day narrative, however, does have a consensus. A powerful God determines our fates and writes on Rosh Hashanah who will live and who will die. *Mishkan HaNefesh* contains these texts, but it also contains what the editors call “countertexts,” those that challenge this traditional theology. Take this example from the Yom Kippur volume, a poem called “Who is like You among the silent?” It stands as a “countertext” to the *Mi Chamocha* prayer, which begins *mi chamocha ba'eilim adonai*, “who is like you, Adonai, among the gods [that are worshiped].” By a one letter change in the Hebrew, *eilim*, gods, becomes *il'mim*, silent ones. With that small revision, we can see a prayer that praises God for rescuing us turned into “a cry of anguish, denouncing a God” who doesn't rescue us.⁴ You may find this poem compelling, and it may make you see the *Mi chamocha* as deeply problematic. Or you may find the original prayer compelling and this poem problematic. The *machzor* lets you decide which Jewish narrative you want to place yourself in.

I hope that this new script gives more and more of us that opportunity. We need to find whatever place is ours on the page. And we then go from here and find more ways for us to be involved in all the narrative of the Jewish community, a narrative that plays out in the daily life of our synagogue.

The first act finale brings together the voices of each of the major characters in the play. They all sing something that recalls a signature song from earlier in the act. Sometimes their songs connect with each other, and sometimes they don't. But they are all there. And, without sacrificing their individuality, they come together to move the action of the play and the emotions of the audience.

⁴ Marder, “Praying,” p. 72.

Just as those of us in this room have a variety of beliefs, so too we have our own different ways of approaching *t'shuvah*. Some are moved by the words of traditional prayer. Others are inspired by poetry. Still others find that study can help them get to where they would like to go. And, of course, some are helped by more than one form of words.

Mishkan HaNefesh contains all of these forms and more. It makes these books bigger than any previous Reform *machzor*. In fact, for the first time, there is one volume for Rosh Hashanah and one for Yom Kippur, because one volume for both would have been too unwieldy. For those concerned about the length of the services, I can assure you that we won't be reading every page. But that's not just a matter of making choices about what we'll do in the service. It's also a matter of giving you the opportunity not to do what the rest of us are doing.

One of my favorite poems is by Robert Frost. It's called "Directive." I'd like to read you the beginning of it:

Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculptures in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm.
And in a town that is no more a town.
The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost
May seem as if it should have been a quarry ...

Think about that line: "the road there, if you'll let a guide direct you/who only has at heart your getting lost." This summer, Eileen and I went to Italy. We wouldn't have tried to hire a guide who told us that he wanted to get us lost. Yet, I was glad when I sometimes did get lost. That is indeed what our guide – or at least our guidebook – said to do in Venice, a very confusing city: Let yourself get lost. Let yourself find things you didn't expect. Be open to new possibilities.

A guide who wants to get you lost knows that something remarkable can happen when you do. So that's what I'd encourage you to do: Lose yourself in this *machzor*. Don't feel that you have to follow along every minute. Listen in your mind for the voices on the page, and let the one that speaks most clearly to you be the voice you hear.

Toward its conclusion, the guide in the poem says, "If you're lost enough to find yourself by now." That really is the goal of getting lost: it's finding yourself. It's hearing the words and the music and the moment and finding who you are when you're turned the right way around. It's hearing your steps as you go from east to west.

As Hamilton ends, we're asked "who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" They're big questions, big enough to ask on the Days of Awe. The *unetaneh tokef* that we recite tomorrow and on Yom Kippur asks two of them: *mi yich'yeh umi yamut*, who will live and who will die? Whether the answer to that is up to God is one that we have been debating for centuries. But the *unetaneh tokef* answers the last one, too: Who tells your story? *V'chotam yad kol adam bo*, the seal of each of us is on it. This I do firmly believe. Whatever our legacy, we contribute to it. We set out seals on it. We do so by how we live.

The house lights came up. The play had ended. I was stunned, and amazed, and transformed. In ten days, the house lights will come up on these Days of Awe. May each of us be stunned, and amazed, and transformed. May we be turned toward our best and truest selves. May we tell our story.

Kein y'hi ratzon, be this God's will.