

# Introduction: Getting to the Heart of the Discussion of a New Machzor

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Each year, as the High Holy Days approach, we, as the spiritual leaders of our congregations, are sure of one fact. The community will show. Regardless of spending hours in sermon preparation, pondering the worship experience, or organizing the sanctuary spaces, members, their friends, neighbors, and family will present themselves in vast numbers. We take their presence seriously and want it to be meaningful and powerful. If, however, they show up merely for some annual roll call of community duty, we have not succeeded in creating a transformative prayerful environment.

We, as leaders, recognize our sacred responsibility to cultivate a connection with the Divine whether we define it through relationship, peoplehood, mystery and awe, or in some other way. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to focus significant attention on the liturgical images and metaphors of God that fill the pages of our *machzor*. If our goal is to enable our people to be touched by the experience of High Holy Day worship, we must step back and reflect on whether and how these images of God resonate with the people sitting in the pews and what effect such a portrayal has on their experience.

In this issue of the *CCAR Journal*, the Worship and Practices Committee of the CCAR has attempted to explore how we, as a community of worshipers, understand the Divine in our *machzor*. Our committee has posed a question and a challenge. As all of us enter into our worship spaces during this momentous time of year, how do we understand the way God is conveyed in our liturgy of the High Holy Days? The challenge that confronts us is to understand

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and respond to the theological message as we struggle with that which is dissonant in the language of those images. By asking the question and making it a challenge, our committee hopes all of us will discover a deeper understanding and a profound appreciation of the magnificence of our liturgical experience.

As our committee discussed our approach, we wanted the conversation to be more than a theological exploration. It is not just the content of the words that challenges us, but the act of believing and interacting with the words that has the potential for resonance. Abraham Joshua Heschel called this kind of inquiry, depth theology. He said, "Theology has often suffered from a preoccupation with the dogma, the content of believing. The act of believing; the questions, What happens within the person to bring about faith? What does it mean to believe?—all this is the concern of a special type of inquiry which may be called 'depth theology.' The theme of theology is the content of believing; the theme of depth theology is the act of believing, its purpose being to explore the depth of faith."<sup>1</sup>

As people reflect on their own lives and their search for meaning, the experience of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur afford them the opportunity to plunge the depths within their inner lives to reach out and avail themselves of the divine encounter. It is a moment that allows a personal inquiry into a belief system. The High Holy Day experience has great potential for such an exploration when those who join in our communal worship feel touched by the words and images they use in praying and feel moved to act upon those words.

The five gifted authors of the essays in this issue of the Journal have offered a myriad of ways to respond to our question and challenge. We started with the *Un'taneh Tokef*. Many rabbinic colleagues have struggled with the complicated divine image offered by it. Daniel Plotkin performs a meta-analysis of how rabbis, through their sermons, have contemplated how *Un'taneh Tokef* speaks of God. He has collected, contrasted, and compared how our colleagues have reconciled and approached an understanding of God in this prayer. Maggie Wenig takes the prayer to a new level and considers its paradoxical point of view. Instead of rejecting that which might make us uncomfortable, she posits an alternative to rejection and opens new possibilities not only of reconciling whatever might have initially felt dissonant but also of appreciating its

significant place in our liturgical experience. Yoel Kahn investigates the specific image of Kingship and regal metaphors prevalent in our High Holy Day worship. He shares the struggle with such metaphors, analyzes their placement, and then posits a number of helpful responses. Joel Mosbacher has used his dissertation work on understanding the way adolescents comprehend God to further our own development as adults to appreciate God-concepts in our prayer. His work challenges us to open pathways to create meaning in the worship experience. Nancy Flam takes us with her on her own journey of articulating a theology of God that not only incorporates the High Holy Day themes of *din* and *rachamim*, but one which also takes all of life's experiences and the eternal Presence of God into account to bring a full and whole understanding of God.

This issue has an added bonus. The poems included here have been selected specifically for their connection to the theme of this issue. We received over 150 submissions. These poetic expressions bring their unique artistry to complement the articles.

The genesis for this issue came about through three different sources. First, my colleague Jeremy Morrison posed the question to me in a conversation about the nascent development of a new *machzor* for the Reform movement. He asked how we could proceed if we have not yet had a comprehensive exploration of how God is presented and conveyed in our liturgy. Second, Peter Knobel suggested the Journal as a vehicle to begin the conversation about a new *machzor* for the Reform Movement. Third, those who attended the Worship and Practices Committee meeting at the 2007 CCAR Convention brainstormed an approach. Many who attended have offered their own response within these pages, and we are grateful for their contribution.

This issue is meant to spark the discussion of how we understand and encounter the Divine during this most significant time in the Jewish calendar year. As we recognize that the community will fill the sanctuary on these important holidays, we can explore the ideas presented here on many levels and in many venues throughout our movement and beyond.

#### Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Depth Theology," in *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1966), pp. 117–118.