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SHABBAT HOL HAMOED SUKKOT

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**ARE MODERN ORTHODOX JEWS MORE
COMFORTABLE WITH MYSTICISM OR
ANTHROPOMORPHISM?**

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Judaism focuses on the observances and commandments that govern our practice and religious expression, and often bypasses—or looks past—questions of belief and faith. Still, questions of what Judaism really believes often stand directly behind our practices, and Jews take a stand about what our beliefs are through their regular *mitzvah* observance, and through their prayers.

Different groups of Jews place more energy on maintaining and projecting certain beliefs within Judaism than on other beliefs. This essay will examine how Modern Orthodox Jews feel about two beliefs that may or may not be parts of the Jewish faith: anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics to the Creator; and mysticism—a feeling of imminence and narrowed distance between humanity and the Divine world; and how those Jews respond when faced with a choice to experience Judaism mystically or anthropomorphically.

Both mysticism and anthropomorphism come from the same point of departure: a desire to create a greater connection and a feeling of closeness with a distant, detached, perfect, and all-powerful Creator. Still, they arrive in two very different ways.

Anthropomorphism narrows the gap by describing, representing, and analogizing the Divine using human characteristics and human emotions, in order to enable a human being to associate and understand that distant God. The simple meaning of anthropomorphic texts are generally easy to understand, even if what they imply more broadly about theology can be more complicated and troubling.

In contrast, Jewish mysticism narrows the gap less by describing the Divine in simple terms, and more by describing a system or series of layers of Divine names, angels, emanations, and attributes which through their great complexity purport to provide understanding of that complex God, so long as one continues to study and probe the depths of these secret, obscure teachings. Here, the body of teaching that is Jewish mysticism is often obscure even at its initial stages, without even reaching the ultimate implication of those teachings.

Both of these approaches might be considered theologically problematic, especially for those whose Judaism is grounded in a Maimonidean-style rationalism. Rambam famously argued against both mysticism and anthropomorphism, and a pure rationalist would probably reject them both.¹ Yet, Jewish observance in general, and prayer in specific, becomes harder and harder when God is distant, unchanging, and unmoved. This has created a motivation for many Jews to embrace aspects of mysticism or anthropomorphism into their practice and prayer.

Before turning to the specific problem of the prayers of Sukkot, a brief historical sketch charts the role different prayer books in the United States have played in the development of this area of Jewish thought.

The ArtScroll Siddur

Orthodox Jewish prayer in this country has been shaped and defined for the last few decades through the editorial decisions of the *ArtScroll Siddur*, which demonstrates much more comfort with mysticism than anthropomorphism. The most anthropomorphic long-section of the Bible is *Ketuvim's* Shir Ha-shirim, which appears "translated" in the *ArtScroll Siddur*. Yet, these translations shy away from anthropomorphism on essentially every occasion, and provide only a hyper-metaphoric reading of the text, and not the underlying metaphor which captures the love between G-d and His nation.² Similarly, when the love song *Yedid Nefesh* appears, the words and translation follow the less controversial, and less anthropomorphic version.³

On the other hand, the *Siddur* is replete with mystical prayers. "*Ana Be-koach*"⁴ appears prominently as part of the daily *Shacharit* prayers, the counting of the *Omer*, and "*Kabbalat Shabbat*," as do the mystical songs for the third meal of *Shabbat*. Numerous *mitzvot* appear in the *Siddur* along with mystical dedications before the performance of the *mitzvah*,⁵ as do numerous prayers which are mystical in nature and invoke unusual names of G-d or of angels.⁶

A significant portion, if not a majority of American Jews, praying during the three decades beginning with the publishing of the first *ArtScroll Siddur* in 1984, would have become habituated to an experience of Jewish prayer that was heavy on mysticism, but reluctant and resistant in regard to anthropomorphism.

The Sacks/Koren Siddur

Besides a well-documented shift in focus around issues related to secular knowledge, Israel, and women's role in prayer, the recent *Koren Siddur* also brought with it a decided and focused shift away from mysticism in the prayer experience of the American, English-speaking, Orthodox synagogue-goer. Many of the mystical prayers appear in smaller print and without explanation and commentary, and are often preceded with the instruction "some say"—indicating that these mystical aspects of prayer constitute minority opinions within conventional Jewish prayer. The *Ushpizin* prayer is divorced from almost all of its original/mystical meaning, and is instead understood as strictly inviting historical Biblical figures as guests, nothing more.⁷ The secret "Divine names" of the third prayer of *Birkat Kohanim* are also glossed over by the

Siddur (736-37), left unexplained as if they were never there.

At the same time, the *Koren Siddur* is more comfortable with anthropomorphism. The alternative, anthropomorphic version of *Yedid Nefesh* appears in the siddur (40-41), along with *Anim Zemiroth*. A literal translation of Shir Ha-Shirim appears, despite the anthropomorphic nature of the allegory (1108-17). Thus, a Jew today using this *Siddur* might conclude that an authentic prayer service may include more human descriptions of God, or of the humanity/God relationship, but that mystical pronouncement, divine *sefirot*, and names of angels might be judged improper or marginal parts of the prayer service.

When Forced to Choose

The prayers of Sukkot offer an interesting case to contrast between the two approaches, as we reach a prayer that can be understood either anthropomorphically, or mystically, but probably cannot be understood without one or the other, in a neutral/rational vein. The individual coming to pray may take one approach or the other, but must take one and is forced to choose which one he or she is more comfortable with.

The Mishnah in *Sukkah* (45a) relates that already in the times of the temple, a special and unusual prayer was recited while walking around the altar in the temple on the holiday of *Sukkot*. The four-word prayer was based on Tehilim 118:25, and ends with the two words "*Hosheyah Na*," "Save Now." The first two words of the prayer, used in the temple and still used today, spelled *Alef-Nun-Yud* and *Vav-Hey-Vav*, are more obscure. From context, we can deduce that they serve as an address or invocation to the Almighty, but what they mean and how they refer to God is far from clear.

As expected, Rashi's Talmud commentary strives to explain the two word phrase, and offers our first explanation of the phrase, in an explanation that is decidedly mystical in nature, and which understands this phrase through an analysis of secret Divine names. Firstly, Rashi notes that the numerical value of the six letters *Alef-Nun-Yud* and *Vav-Hey-Vav* equals 78, which corresponds to the words "Please God" which appeared in the original Psalm at 118:25. But, moreover, Rashi continues, each of these two words *Alef-Nun-Yud* and *Vav-Hey-Vav*, are actually in and of themselves secret three-letter names of God, derived through the positioning of the letters in Shemot 14:19-21.

This first, mystical explanation of the phrase carries with it an important implication for the translation of the phrase and the vowelization of the phrase. For Rashi, the two

words should be translated in one of two ways, either “Please God” (what they numerically replace), or “God” (what the words mean), or perhaps should be left untranslated as “A-Ni Va-Ho.” Furthermore, the second word should also likely be vowelized with a *holam* as the second vowel, much as the Tetragrammaton and the Divine Name of Mastery are vowelized.⁸ True to form, ArtScroll adopts the mystical understanding of Rashi, (735-36), supplying his interpretation in the commentary, with the corresponding vowelization and lack of translation.

Yet, other interpreters and commentators of the Mishnah and Talmud offer a second explanation of this special phrase, which leans more in the direction of anthropomorphism. In their view, the first word *Ani*, should be understood not as a mystical name, but as the standard Hebrew word, “I.” The second word should be vowelized and translated also not as a mystical name *Va-Ho*, but as the standard Hebrew word “*Va-hu*,” “And He.” This second explanation, supported also by the spelling (*Vav-Hey-Vav-Alef*) and vowelization of the Kaufman Kodex (*Va-hu*) argues that God is invoked in this prayer through the use of two familiar pronouns “I and He.”

Why would God be referred to not by name, but with a pronoun or two pronouns? In the words of Ritva:

In the *Yerushalmi* they explained the matter, like the verse “I am with him in the painful situation,” that even the Divine Presence is with us in exile, and will be with us in the salvation ... Here too we say “Save us and *You*.” And in my view, “He” [is used to refer to God instead of ‘You’] in order to use the third person, in a manner of honor towards God.

In this explanation, the first pronoun “I” refers to the reader of the prayer, who asks that him or herself, “I,” be saved. The second pronoun, the “He” who must be saved—is God himself, and thus this prayer strikingly beseeches God in anthropomorphic terms that He save Himself from being in exile.

The Tosafists begin with a partial agreement to Rashi, but in the end accept the Ritva, with the minor change that both the “I” and the “He” refer to God’s need to save Himself, on the basis of Yechezkel 1:1 and Yirmiyahu 40:1. G-d is in exile,

and in chains, and must Save Himself, now.⁹ *Maimonides’ Mishnah commentary* also adopts the interpretation that this prayer uses two pronouns and refers to God’s Own exile, and not a mystical incantation.¹⁰

This interpretation of the prayer is significant, in that it ascribes to God the human, mortal quality of being in exile, being limited from a particular space, and being in need of salvation. Clearly, one choosing to adopt a strict Maimonidean rationalism would find it difficult to pray that God be saved, and might prefer instead to understand this prayer as being two mystical names of God instead.

Here also, the *Koren Siddur* conforms with expectations (754-55). The word is vowelized “*Va-hu*” to match the pronoun, and the phrase is translated “I and He.” For whatever reason, the word is still spelled *Vav-Hey-Vav* as spelled by Rashi, and not *Vav-Hey-Vav-Alef*, as spelled by Ritva and the Kaufman manuscript, but the translation and vowelization clearly indicate a preference for the anthropomorphic view and not the mystical one.

How Should a Modern Orthodox Jew Chose?

To the rational, modern Jew, both readings might seem problematic. We might be uncomfortable with the notion that there are two, new, *sui generis* Names of God which are unnecessary and hard to explain, used specially and uniquely in this one prayer. On the other hand, we might be equally uncomfortable with the idea that we pray for God to save Himself, as it were, from Himself being somehow limited or exiled. Yet, any Jew uttering this prayer must adopt one or the other reading, and—because of the unique pronunciation that corresponds to each view—is forced to intentionally select one and reject the other.

Modern Jews praying this Sukkot might be uncomfortable with having to chose, and with the philosophic implications of that choice. Yet, it is an important test-case to evaluate the twin doctrines of mysticism and anthropomorphism, their impact on our prayer book, and the implications for Jewish theology.

Surveying and researching how Modern Orthodox American Jews approach the prayer, and which of the two major approaches of the two major publishing houses dominates, will provide an important insight to the conventional theology of Judaism in this country today.

verses or signatures, they are within the category of those that have no share in the world to come, for these fools—it is not enough for them that they have invalidated the

¹ A famous reply to a mystical teaching appears in *Maimonides’ Laws of Mezuzah* (5:4): “but those who write the names of angels inside, or the names of Holy Ones, or

mitzvah, but they even make this great *mitzvah* which is the Unity of God's name and his love and service as if it was an amulet for their own benefit." Maimonides' rejection of anthropomorphism and God possessing human characteristics appears in the first chapter of *Mishneh Torah*. The *Guide* goes to great lengths to read most scriptural passages that appear anthropomorphic in non-anthropomorphic ways, by using expanded or new translations for the words that appear in those prophecies.

² A literal translation of Shir Ha-Shirim might have posed two different problems to the translator: both the anthropomorphic descriptions of God, and also the detailed descriptions of love and affection which might trouble a more conservative audience. While we cannot know for certain which of these problems led Artscroll towards their translation, the cumulative effect is that an opportunity for describing the humanity/God relationship in human terms is removed from the *Siddur*. All references to the *ArtScroll Siddur* are to Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1984). Shir Ha-Shirim is found on pp. 298-307.

³ In ArtScroll (590-91), God is asked to "*Ehov*," "Show Love," in the last line; but is not referred to as "*Ahuv*," "Beloved one", as He is in the other version. Despite this, however, *Anim Zemirot* still appears in standard form.

⁴ A prayer with "profound mystical significance" (41). Which in their view "contains forty-two words, the initials of which form the secret forty-two letter name of God. Moreover, the six initials of each of its seven verses form Divine Names" (315).

⁵ *Tzitzit/Talit* (4), *Tefillin* (4), Prayer (58), the Counting of the *Omer* (282-87), the *Lulav* (630), the *Sukkah* (720), and the beating of the *Aravot* (756).

⁶ Including the third prayer during the *Birkat Kohanim* (698-701) and the *Ushpizin* prayer (720-21).

⁷ See Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur for Shabbat and Hagim* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2015), 496-99. The change to the *Ushpizin* prayer is particularly striking, when one realizes that in its original origins, the *Ushpizin* prayer was designed to represent the seven *sefirot* of God. Yet, the option of arranging the *Ushpizin* around those *sefirot* is not recognized at all by the *Koren Siddur*.

⁸ This vowelization is also the standard one, found in the influential 1928 *Siddur Otzar Ha-tifelot* (Vilna: Romm), 10, and in an early American English Siddur- David de Sola Pool, *The Traditional Prayer Book* (New York: Behrman House, 1960), 523-24.

⁹ The relationship between the first and third verses of Yechezkel has long troubled interpreters, since the third verse refers to the prophet by name, while the first says that it was actually "Ani" or "I" who was in exile. Rashi's interpretation of the verse is that Yechezkel 1:2-3 is an editor's interpolation to Yechezkel's first person narrative of the I, namely himself, in exile. [The words *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* in Rashi refer to the voice of the omniscient narrator, see Bereishit 37:22.] That Yechezkel was edited is clear from *Bava Batra* 15a. Yet, Tosafot's resolution to the problem is to argue that the "I" in exile was actually God, Himself.

¹⁰ See Joseph Kapach, *Mishnah with Commentary of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 185. In Rambam's first explanation, the two words I and He are references to Devarim 32:29, and the phrase is taken non-anthropomorphically and non-mystically as "The I and He [of Devarim 32:29] please save [us] now." Yet, he still cites the view later espoused by Ritva in the name of the Geonim, but says that "this is in the manner of poetry [*melizah*]."

SOMETHING TO LOSE: EVIATAR BANAI AND THE SUKKOT PARADOX

SARAH RINDNER is a writer and educator.

Eviatar Banai is an Israeli rock musician who comes from a well-known family of performers. He is also a *ba'al-teshuva*, a returnee to faith, and his songs reflect the various stages of the religious journey he has undergone in the public eye. In his mesmerizing new song “Pergola” he reflects upon many of the personal changes he has undergone - musical fame, self-affiliation with the Haredi community, and the material accoutrements that accompany both developments. Many of the lyrics read as ironic, such as references to certain trappings of a bourgeois lifestyle (a “Hyundai Santa Fe,” his “crazy mortgage,” and eating “Kosher sushi” in the tony Jerusalem neighborhood of Shaarei Chesed). He describes his fame in equally wry terms - poking fun even at the way people praise his religiosity and his contributions to the Israeli cultural landscape. Indeed, the song’s repeated refrain, “*yesh li mah li-hafsid*,” “I have something to lose,” points to the potential downside of success. One can become, as Banai sings, “a slave to the body, a slave to fear.” The more we have, the more we are vulnerable to our fears of losing it all.

Yet the music video which accompanies this song provides an intimate portrait of Banai’s own family, who share Banai’s bourgeois lifestyle with him, but also elevate it and turn it from a subject of irony into a source of visual beauty. A child with *peyot* racing down an alley on a bicycle, or strumming an electric guitar, a family in full Haredi regalia frolicking on the beach. This life is built on the same edifice of financial success and greater religiosity of which Banai is wary. It seems, then, that to separate external luxuries and internal spirituality is not simple. It is also not clear that Banai is aiming for such a clean separation.

The chorus of the song raises the possibility of “going outside,” of leaving complicated modern trappings to engage in a simpler, more elemental kind of existence. “I will bring wine, I will bring a ray of sunshine,” sings Banai, “I will bring bread, I will bring wood and water” (אני אביא יין, (אני אביא קרן שמש, אני אביא לחם, אני אביא עץ ומים). These lines, especially when heard in Hebrew, have a Biblical cadence to them. They recall someone who is making offerings to God, not necessarily in a formal Temple context, but perhaps in the more homegrown way we associate with the book of Genesis. Alternatively, these elements may also obliquely allude to the holiday of Sukkot, a time when we specifically “go outside,” drink wine, eat bread, and sit in structures made from trees that filter in sunshine. Water too is an important part of the ritual landscape of Sukkot, coinciding

with the anxious beginning of the rainy season in Israel, which affects the coming year’s crops (as in *m. Rosh Hashana* 1.2). A pergola itself may also recall Sukkot, as it is a lattice roofed structure that can easily be converted to a *sukkah* with the addition of some natural greenery or bamboo.

Like the life that Banai describes in “Pergola,” there are contradictory elements at the heart of the Sukkot holiday. On the one hand, the *sukkot* themselves are meant to recall the fragile temporary dwellings the Jews resided in when they were wandering in the desert (Lev. 23). Leaving our permanent homes to voluntarily enter this vulnerable setting, we are reminded of the fleeting nature of all our material accomplishments and of our ultimate dependence on God. This element of the holiday is reinforced by the book of Ecclesiastes, which is read every year on Sukkot. Ecclesiastes reminds us that “all is vanity,” it asks the question: *מַה-יִתְרוֹן, לְאָדָם: בְּכָל-עֲמָלוֹ--שִׁיעֵמֶל, תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ*, “What value is there for a man in all of his toil beneath the sun?” (Eccl. 1:3). The book, like the *sukkah* itself, reiterates the idea that much of what we believe to be permanent, our homes, our possessions and so forth, are in fact as ephemeral as breath itself (*hevel*).

At the same time, Sukkot is a harvest festival, like Thanksgiving or Oktoberfest, or specifically, a time when the summer harvests were processed in advance of the rainy season. While Ecclesiastes reminds us that everything we toil for is in vain, Sukkot is also a celebration of the fruits of our labor. In Rabbinic literature, Sukkot is “*Zeman Simhateinu*,” “the Time of our Rejoicing,” and many aspects of the holiday, both Biblically and Rabbinically, have an explicitly joyous dimension. While the *sukkah* is meant to recall a fragile desert dwelling, *sukkot* are traditionally decorated in a beautiful manner, with furnishings and paraphernalia that are meant to recall one’s actual home.

Similar, in a way, to “Pergola,” the themes of Sukkot emphasize the ultimate meaninglessness of material possessions while simultaneously celebrating physical bounty with great joy. At the center of this paradox lies the “feast,” which appears prominently in the song and of course characterizes the holiday itself. At the climax of his song, Banai imagines a kind of feast, “I will bring wine... I will bring bread.” The *sukkah* by definition is a site of feasting, as one is traditionally obligated to eat all of one’s holiday meals in the *sukkah*. A feast, where a meal is both shared and consumed, is a physical experience fundamentally focused on food and aesthetics. Yet, the communal-social element of the feast, and the sanctification of the meal through blessings and other means, suggests that it is ultimately impossible to hoard one’s bounty and keep it to

oneself forever. While Ecclesiastes advocates for a kind of abnegation of the physical, the Sukkot holiday elevates these physical elements and transforms them into instruments of communal cohesion and spiritual growth. It is possible that Eviatar Banai did not intend to touch on all of the complex ritual and theological elements of Sukkot in his catchy song. Nevertheless, "Pergola" may help unpack some of the deeper messages of our most joyous Jewish holiday.

The lyrics along with a rough translation may be found below. Please be warned that some of the contemporary Hebrew idioms don't translate easily into English:

יש לי מה להפסיד, יונדאי סנטה פה, מתוק בפה, מתלבש יפה
מאה שלושים מטר בית, משכנתא מטורפת, שכונת רמות, וילה שתי
קומות

סושי כשר בשערי חסד, מקום קבוע בבית כנסת,
פרגולה למעלה, פרגולה למטה.

יש לי מה להפסיד, עוצר ברחוב לתמונות, מלא מחמאות, זאפות
מלאות

גם עושה קידוש ה', תפקיד בתרבות בישראל, אלבומי זהב,
פלייליסט לכיס של הגב.

אור יקרות, אני שלט חוצות, אוטם אוזניים, כרס לברכיים
פרגולה למעלה, פרגולה למטה.

אני אביא יין אביא קרן שמש, אני אביא לחם אביא עץ ומים.
בואי החוצה בואי נצא
בואי החוצה בואי נצא.

יש לי מה להפסיד, נעליים שפיץ שחור, על השטיח הכחול, עצים
גזומים עגול.

ויש גם תחרות, אני לא יכול להפסיד, סתם לתת להם לעקוף, נגן חזק
בתוף

עבד לגוף, עבד לפחד, פרי של שקר, תהום בלי חקר
פרגולה למעלה, פרגולה למטה.

I have something to lose, a Hyundai SUV, candy on my
tongue, nice clothes.

One big, fancy house, a huge mortgage, a two-storey villa
in Ramot.

Kosher Sushi in Shaarei Chesed, a permanent seat in the
synagogue.

A pergola above and a pergola below.

I have something to lose, stopping in the street for
pictures, they are full of compliments, I fill up Zappa
I also sanctify God's name, play a role in Israeli culture, the
gold albums.

I'm on every playlist.

I've got a halo 'round my head; I'm on billboards, in
headphones; with a potbelly.

A pergola above and a pergola below.

I'll bring wine, I'll bring a ray of sunshine, I'll bring bread, I'll
bring wood and water.

Come outside, let's go.

Come outside, let's go.

I have something to lose, shiny black shoes, on the blue
carpet, with manicured trees circling around.

And there's a competition, I can't lose, just let them pass
me by, play the drums harder.

A slave to the body, a slave to fear, the fruit of deception,
an unexplored abyss.

A pergola above and a pergola below.

HOW ZIONISM SAVED THE ETROG IN AMERICA

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In 1866, *etrog* merchants failed to deliver citrons on time to thousands of Jews in the United States. From New York to Texas, Louisiana to Kansas, “congregations were sadly disappointed,” opined one Jewish newspaperman at the time, “but not more so than the unfortunate importers, who, on the arrival of the steamer, received some splendid Corfu *Esrogim*, but, alas too late!”

The disappointment shared in the unhappy report indicates that many Jews in this so-called *Treifene Medine* had wished to observe the laws of Sukkot. Their plans, though, were stymied by the too-much-delayed delivery of the Greek *etrogim*. In fact, Jews in the United States had a long tradition—one that began with Shearith Israel in New York—of fundraising before Sukkot to ensure that anyone who wished could acquire the religious equipment to perform the holiday rituals.

Of course, America was not exactly the “*Goldene Medine*” either. By the 1870s, the *etrog* market was in steep decline. Mitzvah merchants—a terrific term coined by historian Annie Polland—like Hyman Sakolski continued to sell *etrogim* along with sacred books on Manhattan’s Division Street. However, Sakolski made it clear that *etrogim* were no longer a profitable item. He sold them to ensure that the dwindling number of interested Jews could observe the holiday. Peddlers and shopkeepers no longer bothered to make the necessary international arrangements to import the sacred goods. Accordingly, the number of newspaper circulars advertising *etrogim* for purchase speedily decreased. One Jew from Cincinnati summed up the sentiments of his coreligionists this way:

If you have no *Esrog*, no *Lulav*, etc., oranges, grapes, pears, and apples will do, not to be shaken, but to be gratefully enjoyed as God’s blessing bestowed upon our beautiful land. Instead of shaking, send a nice basket of choice fruit to some poor family or families, and you have done quite well. Be glad, be blessed.

Overall, religious observance among America’s Jews was at a nadir. It wasn’t that most observant Jews had migrated toward Reform and abandoned traditional rituals. Usually, it was the case in the post-Civil War period that young Jews no longer looked to any form of Judaism. Sukkot, therefore, suffered along with Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. In

September 1876, one Lower East Side merchant claimed with some exaggeration that he was the lone provider of *etrogim* left to Jews in the United States.

Then, something happened. In 1887, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger of New York reported that the “number of merchants selling *etrogim*” had “increased greatly in recent years, and the competition is now exceedingly great.” Here are Rabbi Weinberger’s observations found in his *Ha-Yehudim ve-Yahadut bi-New York*, translated into English many years ago by my teacher, Jonathan Sarna:

This has brought with it a certain amount of good. In New York, any Jew can now easily observe these mitzvot in the strictest possible fashion, without worrying about spending more than he can afford. Only a few years ago, a poor man in New York could not buy a *lulav* and *etrog* of his own; even the most highly Orthodox had to observe the commandments with *etrogim* circulated around every morning by poor peddlers. Now it is hard to find any kosher traditional home without an *etrog* of its own. In many synagogues, especially the small ones, there are as many *etrogim* as worshippers.

What had happened? For one thing, the Jewish population in the United States spiked due to mass migration from Eastern Europe. In 1880, there were a quarter-million Jews living on American soil. By the turn of the century, that figure was closer to a million. The spike in interest in *etrogim* also had something to do with their new place of origin. For instance, the newspapers announced that Mr. J.H. Kantrowitz of 31 East Broadway had “imported from the Holy Land a choice lot of *Esrogim*. This is the first time that *Esrogim* grown in the Holy Land have been sold in this city, and Mr. Kantrowitz’s enterprise deserves liberal patronage.” Mr. Kantrowitz did quite well for himself, convincing others to arrange for *etrog* shipments from *Eretz Yisrael*, as well. In short order, American Jewry experienced a great spike in *etrog* sales—and, accordingly, *etrog* observance.

There is no requirement to use an *etrog* from *Eretz Yisrael*. Yet, the connection between observance and the Holy Land triggered something powerful. Jews started to take a greater interest in the fruitful holiday of Sukkot. No doubt, they were moved by the news of the pioneering efforts to rebuild and replant the Holy Land. To them, support of *etrog* importation meant support for the Yishuv.

Mitzvah merchants still peddled some Corfu *etrogim*. However, Holy Land *etrogim* emerged as the citron of

choice. Orthodox Jews in the United States, for example, were happy to learn in 1881 that the “Agricultural School of Jaffa produces excellent white wine, and this year a small number of *Esrogim* were among its products.” Decades later, America’s Jews also started to purchase imported *etrogim* from Petah-Tikva. The lesson learned here is that religious observance can, and oftentimes is—inspired by ancillary, if not altogether righteous causes. In the case of *etrogim*, Zionism was this great cause.

Among the Orthodox, Zionism was not a controversial item. In June 1898, the founders of the Orthodox Union spent hours deliberating whether to call their new organization “Orthodox,” debating the pros and cons of such a nomenclature. However, the other plank decided at that inaugural meeting, on Zionism, required just minimal conversation and reached an overwhelming consensus in very short order. Likewise, the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim, established in 1902, was composed of much more religiously “rightwing” members compared to the Orthodox Union leadership. Yet, the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim agreed wholeheartedly with its Union counterparts.

The renewed prominence of the *etrog* in American Jewish life piqued the strange curiosity of Christian neighbors. In 1916, the editors of the *Country Gentleman*, the journal of record for the “farm, the garden and the fireside” in Philadelphia, told their readers about the “sacred Jewish citron” and the high prices paid for it by “Orthodox Hebrews.” The magazine noted that while most are imported from Palestine to the United States, to the delight of agricultural opportunists that, owing to the ongoing Great War, “it is possible that the *etrog* might be profitably grown on a small scale in some of the citrus sections of Florida and California.”

The plan did not work, but some still try. As of 2011, there was one 80-year-old *etrog* farmer who raises *etrogim* not too far from Sacramento. Aside from that, *etrog* yields from American soil are sparse if not non-existent. For more than a hundred years, Jewish bookstores and pop-up merchants in storefronts and residential basements urge their customers to purchase the slightly pricier Israeli *etrog* to support farmers in the Holy Land. Dutifully raised in a Religious Zionist home, I usually comply. It isn’t that Californian or Floridian *etrogim* would be any less kosher. However, there is much to be said for the ever-increasing extra layers of meaning of the mitzvot we observe.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND PRAYERS FOR RAIN AND DEW

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Weather concerns are a consideration in just about every decision we make each day. What to wear, how much time it will take to get to work, the timing of vacations, planning family celebrations – each one is impacted by our expectation and hope for what the weather will be. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that weather is a prominent part of our daily liturgy. We officially begin to pray for rain on *Shemini Atzeret* and start saying *mashiv ha-ru’ach u-morid ha-geshem* right after (or during) *musaf* that day. But we delay the actual request for rain for a few weeks. In Israel, they delay for three weeks in commemoration of the concern for ancient travelers who the Rabbis wanted to be sure returned home safely from their holiday pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Outside of Israel, rain was not needed as urgently. Therefore, the liturgical practice was to wait until 60 days passed after the fall equinox, the last date when wood was brought into people’s homes (*Ta’anit* 10a). For complicated calendrical reasons, we actually defer inserting the phrase, “*ve-tein tal u-matar*,” the definitive ask, until December 4th (or the 5th this past year). We stick with this formulation for several months through the winter. Then, with the approach of spring and *Pesah*, we switch gears and prepare to pray for dew. On the first day of *Pesah* we incorporate a prayer for dew into the *musaf* prayer and resume saying *morid ha-tal* (in some traditions) and *ve-tein berakhah* after the holiday. This year, as we watch spring unfold outside our windows, it seems like an opportune time to examine how we might consider prayers for good weather throughout the year.

Rain consists of liquid droplets that have condensed from atmospheric water vapor and fall to earth by gravity when they become heavy enough. Concern about rain features prominently throughout *Sukkot* and reaches a culmination on *Hoshanah Rabbah*, the last day of the holiday, and on *Shemini Atzeret*. Examination of the lengthy *hoshanot* prayers we recite on the seventh day of *Sukkot* reveals that concern about the full spectrum of bad weather is a prominent feature in the poetic and allusive but often-skipped prayers. There is a great deal of focus on water and the nutritive power of rain. We recall the many Biblical characters who were saved by rain or destroyed by floods and drought. Yet, while rain is the primary focus, we also pray that we should be spared windstorms, and pestilence, and a frightening litany of agricultural disasters.

What about dew? We start to pray for dew in the spring, perhaps in anticipation of several consecutive hot, rain-free months in Israel, when dew seems to be the only form of moisture available in the environment. As a meteorological phenomenon, dew is more mundane than rain. It is comprised of water droplets that imperfectly wet the surface on which they condense. Unlike rain, dew is experienced daily. The formation of dew is connected to a number of local physical phenomena occurring at the ground level. Unlike rain, which reflects recycling of water from the ground through the atmosphere and is an impressive natural phenomenon, the formation of dew appears to be inevitable, virtually automatic, simple condensation of water from the early morning air, a minor occurrence. Perhaps, that is why the prayer for dew is a brief, one-day affair and somewhat generic. It lacks the pomp and personality of *tefilat geshem*. Nonetheless, how dew gets started in the first place is still mysterious¹. Although growth of an assembly of dew droplets is better understood, the formation and expansion of an isolated droplet still remains poorly explained. It would be a mistake to dismiss dew as inconsequential. Dew generates free water in the environment. It is easily absorbed by plant leaves and maintains leaf moisture in the tree canopy². Dew has been found to account for almost half of the water content of three plant species that grow in the Negev³. All things considered, there is still space for prayer.

Along with sun, wind, and snow, rain and dew are how we experience the weather. Although we moderns are not as mindful as our ancestors were, the weather is still an imposing force. Hurricane Sandy shut down a major medical system for months. Flights are frequently cancelled and transportation services are shut down for days by ice storms. Extreme heat spells and poor air quality linked to temperature inversions kill the elderly and sick⁴. Large swaths of forest catch fire and burn out of control each summer. The Los Angeles hills and Australian outback seem so parched that even the early morning ground is dewless, dry to the touch.

We live in a world where only a small minority of the population is engaged in working the land and those who do often operate huge parcels of land owned by mega-corporations with computerized machines. Urban dwellers are distant from these concerns. Even in an electronically linked world, we live far away from people whose lives depend on the earth's seasonal productivity and cyclical changes. What are we to make of this disconnect and can we relate to the prayers for rain and fair weather on *Sukkot* and throughout the winter, and for dew in the spring on *Pesah*?

I propose that addressing the question of climate change in a thoughtful manner is one meaningful way to close this gap. This is a multifaceted, multinational problem that will require integration of a wide array of activities. Information about trends in weather and impact on the biosphere must be systematically assembled and analyzed. Medical and economic costs need to be calculated. People need to be educated about the impact of their activity on climate changes. Political will must be marshalled to define feasible and equitable approaches to dealing with this global challenge. These are monumental tasks and will require all of human ingenuity to tackle and solve. It will be human beings who feel themselves enjoined and empowered to protect the planet and its resources for future generations who will get the job done.

But humility must also come into play. One can argue the scientific facts about the amount and rate and main contributors to the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the impact of acidification on the oceans, the changing dimensions of the polar ice caps, the infectious disease implications of the expansion of the ecosystem for disease bearing animals and the spread of ticks to higher latitudes⁵. No computer modeling or simulation is able to fully capture the multidimensional aspects of these interlocked global problems or to provide foolproof answers. The sociopolitical factors will be very complicated and require patience and compromise to achieve a thoughtful balance. Regardless, it would be irresponsible to ignore the issue.

Many who question the rate of global warming and the nature of the threat it represents claim that human ingenuity will prevail and will find a solution. They assert that the earth has experienced significant fluctuations in atmospheric conditions and temperature in the past and endured. It is as if to say, "Don't worry so much. Climate change is a manageable problem like any other." They do not suffer from any "ecoanxiety," a diagnosis granted formal status by the American Psychological Association⁶. However, brushing off concern about worrisome changes in the weather as naïve angst may be a relatively moderate way of dismissing the issue. There is a newer and more troubling trend in which expressions of urgency about meteorological problems are dismissed as a form of misguided religious belief. Those who question climate change mock the predictions of impending doom and the eschatological tone of many of those who advocate for efforts to slow the trend in global warming. They dismiss the moralistic tone of environmentalists who endorse large-scale changes in human behavior and lifestyle. In a recent article in *Commentary* (November 2019, "The religion of climatism: a new faith emerges"), Josef Joffe criticized those

who champion a greener worldview as having an “unflinching certainty,” similar to the faith that Martin Luther espoused. Writing in *Law and Liberty*, Paul Schwennesen claims that environmentalists are adopting a quasi-religious tone that easily lends itself to the adoption of coercive actions directed by a central authority. Concerns about the environment are compared unfavorably to other fanatical belief systems. These critics overlook the measured prose of Bill McKibben, who has written “In the world we grew up in, our most ingrained economic and political habit was growth; it’s the reflex we’re going to have to temper, and it’s going to be tough⁷. Or Elizabeth Kolbert, who has stated, “With the capacity to represent the world in signs and symbols comes the capacity to change it, which, as it happens, is also the capacity to destroy it. A tiny set of genetic variations divides us from the Neanderthals, but that has made all the difference⁸.” Challenging words to be sure, but humane and direct.

The view that concern about climate change is irrational zealotry distorts a genuine religious sensibility toward the environment and mankind’s responsibility to protect it. The prayers we say on *Hoshanah Rabbah*, *Shemini Atzeret*, *Pesah*, and throughout the year are not magical incantations to be invoked as a means of bailing us out of environmental difficulties. The catastrophes they detail are not blind threats. They are an acknowledgement that nature is a divine gift for which we should be grateful but in which we play a significant part through our activities. Moreover, they embody the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people – do the right thing and things will work out well. If not, beware the consequences.

Neither science nor religion ever have access to all the facts or perfect solutions. Life is always changing, the past is never a perfect guide to the future, and the unexpected is the rule. Witness the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe as I write. But it demeans human rationality not to listen to the facts, weigh the evidence, and do what can be done to minimize threats to one’s self and to others. As I

said earlier in outlining the all-encompassing activity that will be needed to address climate change, it will require a combination of human power and humility. This reflects the philosophical sketch of human beings that Rabbi Soloveitchik drew in *The Lonely Man of Faith*⁹. The Rav was appreciative of the force of human intellect and creativity in confronting the world and asserting control over it. However, he underscored that science is not intrinsically moral and warned against hubris in applying technology.

This message should resonate as we deal with climate change. When Adam and Havah were placed in Gan Eden they were commanded to work it and protect it. They were granted the creative power (Adam/Havah I) to change and master the environment to serve their needs. But they were forced to acknowledge their limitations as finite mortals (Adam/Havah II). The human capacity to engage nature and alter the world is genuine but never comprehensive. Adam II looks upward and recognizes how miniscule he is in the universe that surrounds him. This sense of awe and scale serves as an antidote to any human notion of independent control of her existence.

We moderns must acknowledge the same dialectic as we pray for good weather and confront climate change. That means we must collect the relevant data, analyze it as thoughtfully and as comprehensively as possible. Then we need to define the causes, design effective solutions and spread the burden as equitably as possible. But we must always be aware of our limitations. Concerns about climate change reinforce human responsibility as humble stewards of the planet. As Jews, it plays out in our commitment to a good life that protects men and women and their God-given home on Earth. Incorporating these environmental messages into ongoing educational programs could enhance our appreciation of the holiday of *Sukkot* and *Pesah* and our daily prayers about the weather.

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its effects on human health in Hanoi City, Vietnam,” *Environ Geochem Health* 41:2 (April 2019):923-37.

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⁷ Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2010), 241.

⁸ Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2014), 319.

⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7:2 (Summer 1965): 32. Republished by Random House.

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