

Classic Prayers for the Days of Awe

For Both Rosh Hashanah and Yom
Kippur



RECONSTRUCTING JUDAISM

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We are grateful for the efforts of Rabbi Amy Loewenthal for producing this excerpt in tandem with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association under the leadership of Rabbi Elyse Wechterman.

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HAPPY NEW YEAR • SHANAH TOVAH • שנה טובה

The following psalm is traditionally recited each morning and evening—from Rosh Hodesh Elul through Hoshana Rabah.

[A psalm] of David

THE ETERNAL is my light and my salvation; whom, then, should I fear?

THE ALMIGHTY is my living source of strength; before whom should I tremble?

When evildoers approach to eat my flesh, when tormenters and enemies come after me,
see how they stumble; see how they tumble down!

Should a force encamp against me, my heart shall have no fear;
should a war arise against me, in one thing I shall trust,
one thing have I asked of GOD, one goal do I pursue: to dwell
in THE ETERNAL'S house throughout my days,
to know the bliss of THE SUBLIME, to visit in God's temple.

Truly, in a day of trouble, I am nestled in God's shelter, hidden
in the recess of God's tent. God sets me high upon a rock. ↪

KAVANAH. It is only a true and close community that develops associations, traditions and memories that go to make up its soul. To mingle one's personality with that soul becomes a natural longing. In such a community one experiences that mystic divine grace which, like radiant sunshine, illumines our lives when joyous and, like balm, heals them when wounded or stricken. Then all questions about saying this or that become trivial, for the real purpose is attained in having each one feel with the Psalmist: "One thing I ask of God that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life, to behold the graciousness of God."

M.M.K. (Adapted)

לְדָוִד

יהוה אֹרִי וַיִּשְׁעֵי מִמִּי אִירָא:
 יהוה מְעוֹז־חַיִּי מִמִּי אֶפְחָד:
 בְּקִרְבִּי עָלִי מְרַעִים לֶאֱכֹל אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי
 צָרִי וְאִיבֵי לִי הֵמָּה כָּשְׁלוּ וַנִּפְּלוּ:
 אִם־תִּחְנַנֶּה עָלַי מִחְנָה לֹא־יִירָא לְבִי
 אִם־תִּקְוֶם עָלַי מִלְחָמָה בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בּוֹטֵחַ:
 אַחַת שְׁאֲלַתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ
 שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי לְחַזוֹת בְּנֹעַם־יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ:
 כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְּסֹכּוֹ בַּיּוֹם רָעָה יִסְתִּירֵנִי בְּסִתְרֵךָ אֲהֵלוּ בְּצוּר יְרוּמָּיִנִי: ←

Ahat sha'alti me'et adonay otah avakesh shivti beveyt adonay kol yemey hayay la hazot beno'am adonay ulevaker beheyhalo.

COMMENTARY. Many Jews recite this psalm every day between the first of Elul and the end of Sukkot. The rabbis doubtless chose it to accompany us through every phase of the fall holiday season because it encompasses such a range of powerful emotions. Identifying with the experience of the speaker can help us at various moments to get in touch with our fears of abandonment, our need for security, our yearning for joyful religious experience, our need for guidance from God, our steadying commitment never to lose hope. Above all, we experience the psalmist's vulnerability. Feeling that it is possible to be hidden and secure within God's presence, the psalmist also knows, by contrast, the terrible fear that God can hide the divine countenance and seem utterly unavailable. The psalm delicately balances these two kinds of hiddenness, as it seeks a "level path," the right way of moving in a difficult, dangerous world. The psalm ends by urging that we cling to the hope that comes from connection to יהוה, the One of Being and Becoming, in whose presence all life unfolds. H.L.

And now, my head is raised in triumph on my foes around me,
and I offer sacrifice in celebration in God's tent.

I offer song and melody to MY REDEEMER.

Hear me, PRECIOUS ONE, I call aloud;
be gracious to me, answer me!

To you my heart cries out, to you my face is turned;
your presence, GRACIOUS ONE, I seek.

Hide not your face from me; do not, in anger, turn away your
servant.

You have been my help, don't shun me now; do not abandon
me, my God who saves!

For my father and my mother have abandoned me,
but THE LIVING ONE shall take me in.

Teach me your way, WISE ONE, and guide me in a just path as I
meet my foes.

Don't place me at the mercy of my enemies, for slanderers arise
against me, and they fume in violence.

Were it not for my belief that I'll behold GOD's goodness in the
Land of Life . . .

Hope, then, for THE ETERNAL ONE; strengthen your heart with
courage, and have hope in THE ETERNAL.

Psalm 27

וְעַתָּה יְרוּם רֹאשִׁי עַל אִיבֵי סְבִיבוֹתַי וְאֶזְבְּחָהּ בְּאֵהָלוֹ זִבְחֵי תְרוּעָה
אֲשִׁירָה וְאֶזְמָרָה לַיהוָה:
שְׁמַע־יְהוָה קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנּוּנִי וְעַנּוּנִי:
לֵךְ אָמַר לְבִי בְקִשׁוּ פָנַי אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ:
אֶל־תִּסְתֵּר פְּנֵיךָ מִמֶּנִּי אֵל תִּטְּבֹאֶף עֲבֹדֶךָ
עֲזַרְתִּי הָיִיתָ אֶל־תִּטְּשֵׁנִי וְאֶל־תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
כִּי־אָבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי וַיהוָה יֶאֱסָפֵנִי:
הוֹרֵנִי יְהוָה הַרְפֵּךְ וּנְחֵנִי בְּאַרְחַ מִישׁוּר לְמַעַן שׁוֹרְרֵי:
אֶל־תִּתְּנֵנִי בְּנַפְשׁ צָרִי כִּי קָמוּ־בִי עֲדֵי־שֹׁקֵר וַיִּפַּח חָמָס:
* לֹלֵא הָאֱמָנָתִי לְרֹאוֹת בְּטוֹב־יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים:
קוּה אֶל־יְהוָה חֲזֹק וַיֵּאֱמֶץ לִבֶּךָ וְקוּה אֶל־יְהוָה:

י אספני /For my father and my mother have abandoned me, but THE LIVING ONE shall take me in. Everything human is imperfect and finite—even my parents—who were to me as gods when I was a young child. As I mature, I realize that only in sensing my connection to the ground of being and becoming, the perfect and infinite, can I ever fully feel safe. S.P.W.

י לולא האמנתי לראות בטוב יהוה בארץ חיים /Were it not for my belief that I'll behold God's goodness in the land of life... This line is a fragment—the beginning of a thought stranded in mid-air which I refuse to complete. I don't want to put into words or visualize a life without faith. It would be like the end of the verse—an empty chasm. S.P.W.

בְּסֵפֶר חַיִּים בְּרָכָה וְשָׁלוֹם וּפְרֻנָּסָה טוֹבָה נִזְכָּר וְנִפְתָּב לְפָנֶיךָ אֲנַחְנוּ
וְכָל-עַמֶּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל לְחַיִּים טוֹבִים וְלְשָׁלוֹם:

In the book of life, blessing, peace, and proper sustenance, may we be remembered and inscribed, we and all your people, the house of Israel, for a good life and for peace.



THE PROMISE OF THIS DAY

Look to this day,
For it is life,
The very life of life.
In its brief course lie all
The realities and verities of existence,
The bliss of growth,
The splendor of action,
The glory of power—

For yesterday is but a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision.
But today, well lived,
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.

Sanskrit Proverb

A GUIDE TO GREETINGS

During the month of Elul, the traditional greetings are *Shanah tovah* (“A good year”); or *Leshanah tovah tikatevu* (“May you be inscribed for a good year [in the Book of Life]”); or *Leshanah tovah umetukah tikatevu* (“May you be inscribed for a good and sweet year”); or—less common—*Ketivah tovah* (“A good inscription [in the Book of Life]”).

The appropriate response: *Gam leha* (feminine *lah*)—“The same to you.”

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, some people add to the above: *Leshanah tovah tikatevu vetehatemu* (“May you be inscribed and sealed for a good life”). Others use these greetings only through the first night of Rosh Hashanah; after that, it would be indelicate to suggest that a person is not already inscribed in the Book of Life, for on Rosh Hashanah all the righteous are so inscribed—only those whose records are closely balanced between good and bad have their fate postponed until Yom Kippur.

On Yom Kippur (and until Hoshana Rabah) the greeting is *Gemar hatimah tovah* (“A good final sealing [to you]!”) or *Hatimah tovah* (“A sealing for good!”).

Michael Strassfeld

On the High Holy Days in some communities, the ḥazan or a second sheliḥ tzibur/prayer leader begins here.

The sovereign one,
presiding on your lofty and exalted throne!

COMMENTARY. When we are brushed by the magic of the world's splendor, when we catch a hint of the mysteries of the universe, when we behold nature in all its wild beauty, we are embraced by a majesty that both takes our breath away and restores it to us in an inspiring rush. At that moment, the "lofty and exalted throne" shines before us. We are humble—and joyful. L.G.B.

KAVANAH. Praised be to absolutes, to the truths planted deep within us. Praised be these inner sovereigns and our ability to revere them, to hold them sacred, so that we can act in their name. D.B.

COMMENTARY. Rosh Hashanah is the descendant of ancient Near Eastern ceremonies celebrating the annual re-enthronement of the local king and deity. In the ancient mythologies, this enthronement was associated with the defeat of chaos. We too have a need to re-enthrone meaning in the face of the chaos of our lives. J.A.S.

DERASH. On a hospital bed in an intensive-care unit, a critically ill patient was heard to say, "I'm ready. If God calls me now, I'm ready to go." This acknowledgment of our basic human frailty, mortality and ultimate lack of control is an essential aspect of addressing God as *Hameleḥ*/the Sovereign. We live life for as long as we have it, doing godly acts as long as we are able. When our time comes, may we be ready. Carl S. Choper

*On the High Holy Days in some communities, the ḥazan or a second sheliaḥ tzibur/
prayer leader begins here.*

הַמֶּלֶךְ
יוֹשֵׁב עַל כִּסֵּי רָם וְנִשְׂא:

Hameleh
yoshev al kisey ram venisa.

The traditional liturgy subtly underlines the changes in mood and meaning from weekday to Shabbat to Holiday to High Holy Day by its shifts in *nusah*, the melodic liturgical line. Such a shift occurs at this juncture. On weekdays much of this passage is omitted, and the person who will chant the main part of שחרית/the morning service begins simply—“ישתבח שמך לעד”/your name will always be praised.” On Shabbat the new service leader emphasizes the stative, restful nature of Shabbat and its grandeur by beginning “שוכן עד מרום”/forever dwelling in the highest heights.” On the Pilgrimage Festivals the new leader emphasizes the historical origins of the festivals and their connection to revelation and redemption by beginning “האל בתעצמות עוז”/divinity so consummate in strength.” On the High Holy Days the leader leads us toward the primary struggle of this season, the effort to re-enthroned the divine in our lives, by beginning, “המלך/the Sovereign.”

D.A.T.

Today, give us courage and strength.	Amen!
Today, give us blessing.	Amen!
Today, give us goodness.	Amen!
Today, seek our welfare and good.	Amen!
Today, write us down for a good life.	Amen!
Today, please hearken to our cry.	Amen!
Today, accept with mercy and good will our prayer.	Amen!
Today, may your right hand keep us safe.	Amen!
Today, forgive and pardon all our sins.	Amen!

On a day like today,
 may you bring us, joyful and glad,
 to the completion of our reconstruction.
 As is written by your prophet's hand:
 "And I shall bring you to my holy mountain,
 and you shall celebrate there inside my house of prayer...
 For my home shall then be called
 a house of prayer for all peoples!"

And may we and all the people Israel,
 and all who dwell on earth,
 enjoy justice and blessing,
 lovingkindness, life, and peace,
 until eternity.

COMMENTARY. The **היום** /*Hayom*/Today is the crowning prayer of the High Holy Day liturgy. Its power stems not only from its fresh and energetic sense of hope and from its beautiful music; it comes also from the powerful awareness that what matters is Today, the powerful commitment of this moment. The challenge of the High Holy Days is in part to remember that when tomorrow comes, it too will be Today. The hope of this moment, every moment, lies in the knowledge that when tomorrow comes it will be Today. If we live in the possibility of this moment, Today is more than enough. D.A.T.

אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תֵּאֲמָצֵנוּ :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּבְרַכְנוּ :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּגְדְּלֵנוּ :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּדְרָשְׁנוּ לְטוֹבָה :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּכְתַּבְנוּ לְחַיִּים טוֹבִים :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁמַע שׁוֹעֲתֵנוּ :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּקְבַּל בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרָצוֹן אֶת־תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּתְמַכְּנוּ בִּימֵין צְדָקָה :
אָמֵן :	הַיּוֹם תִּמְחַל וְתִסְלַח לְכָל עוֹנֹתֵינוּ :

Hayom te'amtzenu.	Amen.
Hayom tevar <h>u</h> enu.	Amen.
Hayom tegadlenu.	Amen.
Hayom tidreshenu letovah.	Amen.
Hayom tihtevenu lehayim tovim.	Amen.
Hayom tishma shavatenu.	Amen.
Hayom tekabel berahamim uveratzon et tefilatenu.	Amen.
Hayom titme <h>u</h> enu bimin tzidkeha.	Amen.
Hayom timhol vetislah lehol avonotenu.	Amen.

כְּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תִּבְיָאֵנוּ שְׂשִׁים וּשְׁמִחִים כְּבִנְיָן שְׁלֵם כְּפָתוּב עַל־יַד
 נְבִיאָךְ: וְהִבִּיאוּתָיִם אֶל־הַר קְדוֹשֵׁי וְשִׂמְחָתָיִם בְּבֵית תְּפִלָּתִי... כִּי
 בֵּיתִי בֵּית־תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים: וּצְדָקָה וּבְרָכָה וְרַחֲמִים וְחַיִּים
 וְשָׁלוֹם יִהְיֶה־לָּנוּ וּלְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְכָל־יְשׁוּבֵי תְּבֵל עַד עוֹלָם:

And...peoples (Isaiah 56:7). / והביאותים...לכל-העמים

(3)

The Torah of THE ONE is flawless, it restores the soul.
The testimony of THE ONE is true, it makes wise the simple.

The precepts of THE ONE are sure, they make the heart rejoice.
The mitzvah of THE ONE is clear, it gives light to the eyes.

Fear of THE ONE is pure, it stands eternally.
The judgments of THE ONE are true, together they are just.

The following paragraph is omitted on Shabbat.

ADONAY ADONAY, God loving and gracious,
patient, and abundant in kindness and truth,
keeping kindness for a thousand ages,
forgiving sin and rebellion and transgression,
making pure!

And as for me, my prayer is for you, GENTLE ONE,
may it be for you a time of desire.
O God, in the abundance of your love,
respond to me in truth with your help.

יהוה...צדקו יחדיו / The Torah...together they are just (Psalms 19:8-10).

ואני...ישעך / And as for me...your help (Psalms 69:14).

יהוה...ונוקה / ADONAY...pure! It is customary to recite Exodus 34:6-7 on the High Holy Days. Kabbalists beginning with Isaac Luria (sixteenth-century Safed) understood these verses to contain the thirteen attributes of God. Reciting the attributes celebrates God's presence as vividly experienced in the observance of the Days of Awe. D.A.T.

(3)

מְשִׁיבַת נְפֶשׁ:	תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה
מִחְפֵּימַת פְּתִי:	עֲדוֹת יְהוָה נְאֻמָּה
מְשִׁמְחֵי לֵב:	פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה יִשְׂרָיִם
מְאִירַת עֵינָיִם:	מִצְוֹת יְהוָה בְּרָה
עוֹמְדַת לְעַד:	יִרְאֵת יְהוָה טְהוֹרָה
צְדָקוֹ יַחְדָּיו:	מְשִׁפְּטֵי יְהוָה אָמַת

Torat adonay temimah meshivat nafesh.
Edut adonay ne'emanah mahkimat peti.
Pikudey adonay yesharim mesamehey lev.
Mitzvat adonay barah me'irat eynayim.
Yirat adonay tehorah omedet la'ad.
Mishpetey adonay emet tzadeku yahdav.

The following paragraph is omitted on Shabbat.

יְהוָה יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אַרְךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאָמַת נֹצֵר חֶסֶד
לְאֵלָפִים נִשְׂא עֶז וְכָפַשׁ וְחִטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ:
וְאֲנִי תְּפִלְתִּי־לָךְ יְהוָה יַעַת רְצוֹן אֱלֹהִים בְּרַב־חֶסֶדְךָ עֲנֵנִי בְּאָמַת
יִשְׁעֶךָ:

Adonay adonay el rahum vehanun ereh apayim verav hesed
ve'emet notzer hesed la'alafim nosev avon vafesha vehata'ah
venakey.

V'ani tefilati leha adonay et ratzon elohim berov hasdeha aneni
be'emet yisheha.

UNETANEH TOKEF/NOW, WE DECLARE...

And so, let holiness arise to you,
for you, God, are our sovereign,

The ark is opened.

Now, we declare the sacred power of this day,
which is the most awesome and solemn of days,
when your rule is established over all,
and your throne set in place by the power of love,
and you come forth to govern in truth.

True it is that you are our judge,
you alone can reprove, you alone can know,
you alone are witness to all deeds.

It is you who shall write,
you who shall seal what is written,
you who shall read,
and you who shall number all souls.
You alone can remember what we have forgotten;
it is you who shall open the Book of Remembrance,
but its contents shall speak for themselves,
for it bears the imprint of us all,
which our deeds and our lives have inscribed.

And when the great shofar is sounded,
a small, quiet voice can be heard,
and the heavenly beings are thrown into fright,
and, seized by a terrible dread, they declare:

“Behold, the Day of Judgment has arrived,
when even those in heaven’s court are judged,
for none can be exempt from justice’s eyes!” ↪

וּבְכֹן לְךָ תַעֲלֶה קְדֻשָּׁה כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלֹךְ:

The ark is opened.

וּנְתַנֶּה תְקֵף קְדֻשַׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאִים: וּבּוֹ תִנְשֵׂא מְלֻכּוֹתֶיךָ
וַיִּכּוֹן בְּחֶסֶד כְּסָאֲךָ וַתֵּשֶׁב עָלָיו בְּאַמָּת: אָמֵת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דַיִן
וּמוֹכִיחַ וַיּוֹדֵעַ וְעַד וְכוֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֶה וְתוֹזֵכֵר כָּל־
הַנְּשַׁפְחוֹת וְתַפְתַּח אֶת־סֵפֶר הַזְּכוּרוֹנוֹת וַיִּמְאַלְיוּ יִקְרָא וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל־
אָדָם בּוֹ:

וּבְשׁוֹפֵר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דְקָה יִשְׁמַע. וּמְלֶאכִים יִחַפְּזוּן
וְחֵיל וְרַעְדָה יֵאֱחָזוּן וַיִּאֲמְרוּ הִנֵּה יוֹם הַדִּין: לְפָקֵד עַל צָבָא מְרוֹם
בְּדִין כִּי לֹא יִזְכּוּ כְּעֵינֶיךָ בְּדִין ←

KAVANAHA. *Unetaneh tokef* refers to the awesome and threatening power of this day. Our ancestors saw themselves as if exposed to divine retribution for their sins. They pictured punishment from God mainly in terms of natural disasters to life and livelihood—plagues, wars and other woes that can swoop down on us, physically maiming us, ruining our stores and crops, starving our families. While that feeling—the sense that life’s tragedies are largely externally imposed—may linger, another way of understanding this prayer, and the whole of these “days of awe,” is to recognize how small and hidden from sight is the nature of so much misfortune that we experience. The splitting of an atom, which we cannot see, unleashes terrors of dreadful, almost unimaginable proportions. Similarly, we should not regard lightly the little wounds to the spirit which happen daily. Every insult uttered, every belittling gesture, every lie or rejection or unfair accusation is a punishment to a society that does not value the spirit of respect, the necessity of truth, or the power of love. If we pay better attention to each other’s feelings, the small cruelties and hidden meannesses that are tearing us apart from within will no longer threaten. Let us resolve to heal the environment of suspicion, in which promises are broken, wills are broken and hearts are broken. Let us no longer make excuses for selfishness that causes such injuries to the human spirit, made in God’s image.

S.D.R.

And all who come into the world
pass before you like sheep for the shepherd—
for, just as a shepherd numbers the flock,
passing the herd by the staff,
so do you make us pass by before you,
and number, and count, and determine the life,
one by one, of all who have lifebreath within.
You decide for each creature its cycles of life,
and you write down its destined decree.

On Rosh Hashanah, all is written and revealed,
and on Yom Kippur, the course of every life is sealed!

—how many pass on, how many shall thrive,
who shall live on, and who shall die,
whose death is timely, and whose is not,
who dies by fire, and who shall be drowned,
who by the sword, and who by the beast,
who by hunger, and who by thirst,
who by an earthquake, who by a plague,
who shall be strangled, and who shall be stoned,
who dwells in peace, and who is uprooted,
who shall live safely, and who shall be harmed,
whose life is tranquil, and whose is tormented,
who shall be poor, and who shall be rich,
who shall be humbled, and who is raised up! ↪

וְכַל-בָּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבֹרוּן לְפָנָיִךְ כְּבִנְי מְרוֹן: כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עֶדְרוּ
מֵעֵבִיר צֹאנוּ תַחַת שְׁבִטוֹ כֵּן תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנָה וְתִפְקֹד נַפְשׁ
כָּל-חַי וְתִחַתְּךָ קֹצֵבָה לְכָל-בְּרִיָּה וְתִכְתָּב אֶת-גְּזֹר דֵּינָם:

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתָּבוּן וּבִיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחַתְּמוּן

Kevakarat ro'eh edro ma'avir tzone taḥat shivto ken ta'avir
vetispor vetimneh vetifkod nefesh kol ḥay vetaḥtoḥ kitzbah
leḥol beriyah vetihtov et gezar dinam.

Berosh hashanah yikatevun uveyom tzom kipur yeḥatemun

כְּמָה יַעֲבֹרוּן וְכִמָּה יִבְרָאוּן מִי יַחֲיָה וּמִי יָמוּת
מִי בְקִצּוֹ וּמִי לֹא בְקִצּוֹ מִי בְאִשׁ וּמִי בַמַּיִם
מִי בַתְּרֹב וּמִי בַחַיָּה מִי בְרֵעֵב וּמִי בְצָמָא
מִי בְרֵעֵשׁ וּמִי בַמַּגָּפָה מִי בַחֲנִיקָה וּמִי בַסְקִילָה
מִי יְנוּחַ וּמִי יְנוּעַ מִי יִשְׁקֹט וּמִי יִטְרַף
מִי יִשְׁלוּ וּמִי יִתְיַסֵּר מִי יַעֲנִי וּמִי יַעֲשֶׂר
מִי יִשְׁפֹּל וּמִי יָרוּם: ←

The glory and agony of being human rousing us
entreating us to wake up!

To know that we who have no power
can be filled with power.

When we wake up to our transparent nature,
divine forgiveness shines through us.

When we forget our names,
we become part of God's name.

When we learn to act and yield, act and yield,
we smash the contradiction of existence.

S.P.W.

But *teshuvah*, and *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*
make easier what God may decree,
make easier what life holds in store,
make easier facing the world,
make easier facing ourselves.

For, as is your name, so is your praise—
slow to be angry, quick to forgive;
you do not desire a person to die,
but only to change and to live.
Down to a person's last day of life,
the person is given the chance to return,
and all who return, and resolve to be just,
are welcomed by you straight-away.

For truly you are their creator,
and you know their innermost nature,
and they know they are flesh and blood. ↩

COMMENTARY. But *teshuvah*, and *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*.... These meritorious acts, says the original Hebrew text, “cause the evil of the decree to pass away” (*ma'avirin et ro'a hazezerah*). The English rendition seeks to encompass several ways that we are likely to feel ourselves facing a decree on the Day of Judgment: by God, by the events of our lives, by the world around us, and, of course, by ourselves. The power of repentance, prayer, and acts of giving to turn “judgment,” in all its forms, from an alien and arbitrary event to a shaping force of our life and our identity is the subject of these lines. We cannot will away either what happens to us or what happens around us, but we may have it in our power to turn it into something quite other than “evil.” J.R.

מעבירין את רע הגזרה / make easier what God may decree. We cannot change the decree. But sometimes our *tzedakah*, by providing food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, or peace for the embattled, reduces רע הגזרה / the severe effects of the decree. We can make easier what “God may decree” by living lives of meaning in the face of apparently meaningless events.

J.A.S.

וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתִפְלָה וְצְדָקָה

מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רַע הַגְּזֵרָה:

כִּי כְשֶׁמֶד בֵּן תְּהִלְתֶּךָ קָשָׁה לְכַעַס וְנוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת כִּי לֹא תַחֲפֹץ בְּמוֹת הַיָּמַת כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדַּרְכּוֹ וְחָיָה: וְעַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ תַחֲפֶה-לוֹ אִם יָשׁוּב מִיַּד תִּקְבְּלוּ: אַמֶּת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא יוֹצֵרָם וְאַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ יִצְרָם כִּי הֵם בְּשׁוֹר וְדָם: ←

Uteshuvah utefilah utzedakah
ma'avirin et ro'a hagezerah.

Ki ḥeshimeḥa ken tehilateḥa kasheh liḥos venoah lirtzot. Ki lo taḥpotz bemot hamet ki im beshuvo midarko veḥayah. Ve'ad yom moto teḥakeh lo im yashuv miyad tekabelo. Emet ki atah hu yotzram ve'atah yode'a yitzram ki hem basar vadam. ↪

ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה / But *teshuvah*, and *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* make easier what God may decree. After the fierce determinism of the first half of *Unetaneh Tokef*—suggesting that nothing is within our control, and all is decreed—we are suddenly presented with a note of encouragement: How we act can, in some way, affect how we live.

Reconstructionism rejects the superstitious dimensions of prayer, and we do not believe either that “all is decreed” or that “*teshuvah*, and *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*” can magically mitigate what may happen. But we do accept, as this prayer suggests, that though there are things beyond our control, we do retain control over how we react to those things.

A Reconstructionist interpretation of the Hebrew might yield: “Direction (*teshuvah*), Reflection (*tefilah*) and Connection (*tzedakah*) make it possible to live within boundaries not of our making and beyond our control.” *Teshuvah*, or turning-to-God/liness, is the process of deciding the *direction* of our lives. *Tefilah*, or prayer, can be a *reflection* on who we are, where we are, and where we are going. *Tzedakah*, both charity and acts of justice, *connect* us to others, reminding us that our own salvation or self-fulfillment cannot exist apart from those with whom we share past, present and future.

R.H.

All of humanity is founded on dust—
of dust they are made, and to dust they return;
as long as they live, they strive for their bread.
Like vessels of clay, they can break.
Like grass they can wither, like flowers they fade,
like shadows they pass, like clouds they are emptied,
like wind their strength is exhausted,
like dust they are scattered about,
like a dream they shall vanish from sight.
But you, holy one, your reign is eternal,
the God who lives and endures!

No limit exists to the years of your life,
no end is assigned to the length of your days,
no measure contains the array of your glory,
your name is beyond all translation.

Your name is the perfect expression of you,
and you have, in turn, embodied your name,
and have called us, as well, by your name.

The ark is closed, and we remain standing.

אָדָם יְסוּדוֹ מֵעֶפֶר וְסוּפוֹ לְעֶפֶר: בְּנִפְשׁוֹ יָבִיא לְחָמוֹ: מְשׁוּל כְּחָרָס
הַנְּשֻׁבֵר כְּחֻצִיר יָבֵשׁ וְכֻצִּיץ נוֹבֵל כְּצֵל עוֹבֵר וְכַעֲנַן כְּלָה וְכָרוּחַ
נוֹשֶׁבֶת וְכֶאֱבֵק פּוֹרֵחַ וְכַחֲלוּם יְעוּף:

וְאַתָּה הוּא מֶלֶךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם:

Adam yesodo me'afar vesofu le'afar. Benafsho yavi lahmo.
Mashul ka^heres hanishbar kehatzir yavesh uhetzitz novel
ketzel over uhe'anan kaleh uheruah noshavet uhe'avak pore'ah
vehahalom ya'uf.

Ve'atah hu meleh el hay vekayam.

אֵין קִצְבָה לְשִׁנוּתֶיהָ וְאֵין קֶץ לְאַרְךָ יָמֶיהָ וְאֵין שְׁעוֹר לְמַרְכָּבוֹת
כְּבוֹדָהּ וְאֵין פִּרוּשׁ לְעִילוּם שְׁמֶיהָ: שְׂמֵךְ נֶאֱדָה לָהּ וְאַתָּה נֶאֱדָה לְשִׁמְךָ
וְשִׁמְנוּ קִרְאתָ בְּשִׁמְךָ:

The ark is closed, and we remain standing.

and have called us, as well, by your name. This refers to the godly quality that is inherent in all people. If our name and God's name are intertwined, then our calling to God and God's calling to us are reciprocal actions. We speak God's voice as well as listen for it. God is within each of us. As we call out to God, God calls out to us. M.B.K.