



**DVAR TZEDEK:**  
*Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice for 30 years*

**AJWS**  
at **30**

We are excited to announce that in the new year AJWS will publish *JustThought—New Jewish Ideas on Global Justice*. This is a brand AJWS's series of essays applying Jewish wisdom to *tikkun olam* today. From Jewish history to Torah sources to the latest headlines, we plumb pressing questions about human rights and global justice through monthly essays by noted scholars, activists and AJWS staff. We will address questions like, "Does Jewish wisdom speak to human rights?" and "How do we understand the suffering in our own lives relative to the suffering of the world?"

Keep your eye out for this new publication after Simchat Torah in late October.

### Introductory Reflection

At the heart of what we do here at AJWS is the Jewish commitment to justice and a firm belief that we all must play a role in fixing our broken world. In his *Dvar Tzedek* on *Parashat Ha'azinu*, Rabbi Guy Austrian offers a reflection on the roles that God and human beings play in doing this critical work. His essay offers us inspiration for Yom Kippur and is a poignant conclusion to our year of weekly social justice Torah commentaries.

Reflecting on a midrash that explores the role of *teshuvah* (repentance and return) in a broken world, Austrian writes, "This midrash speaks so plainly, reflects so candidly our human experience that God doesn't always seem to be there, doesn't always seem interested. Diseases go unhealed; children starve in silence; the cruel impose their will and the greedy consume more than their share. At times, it seems that human beings suffer alone."

And yet, all is not lost. Austrian points out that the Midrash goes on to say that "during the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* [between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur] God is indeed available... Only our own actions, our own *teshuvah*, can erase those doubts by bringing God into our lives, because to truly do *teshuvah* for the harm we cause each other and the world would be to stop doing the harm, so that repair can begin.<sup>1</sup>"

Austrian ends with a striking and challenging question, "[I]f repairing the world is *our* responsibility, then why call on God at all?" If we are so sure that we have the power to fix things, what is the role of God in our work?

Deep questions like this one (see Austrian's answer in his essay, below) are the topic of our new series, *JustThought—New Jewish Ideas on Global Justice*. As we conclude *Dvar Tzedek* and launch this new publication, we thank you—our readers—for exploring these important issues along with us for the past 10 years.

As the new year emerges, we look forward to new questions, new ideas and new insights into the profound connection between the texts and wisdom of our tradition and our responsibility to build a better and more equitable world for all. Stay tuned!

## Parashat Ha'azinu 5776

By Rabbi Guy Austrian

October 15, 2016

(Reprinted from September 11, 2010)

*Parashat Ha'azinu* will be read this year on Shabbat Shuvah, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the period known as the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* (return and repentance). As we try to figure out whether and how to do *teshuvah*, whether and how to pray during the High Holy Days, we may well wonder if it matters.

A midrash on our *parashah* reflects this doubt with a remarkably ambivalent meditation on God's attention:

The Holy Blessed One at times appears, and at times does not appear;  
at times hears, and at times does not want to hear;  
at times responds, and at times does not respond;  
at times may be addressed, and at times may not be addressed;  
at times may be found, and at times may not be found;  
at times is near, and at times is not near.<sup>1</sup>

This midrash speaks so plainly, reflects so candidly our human experience that God doesn't always seem to be there, doesn't always seem interested. Diseases go unhealed; children starve in silence; the cruel impose their will and the greedy consume more than their share. At times, it seems that human beings suffer alone.

But then the midrash turns toward a poignant sense of possibility, imagining that God searches for us hopefully, even longingly, on Rosh Hashanah and the days that follow:

Thus says the Holy Blessed One to Israel: ... if you have done *teshuvah* before Me wholeheartedly, then I will receive you and judge you toward merit, for the gates of the heavens are open and I will hear your prayers, for I am watching from the windows, looking through the openings ... Thus Isaiah says: "Seek the Lord while God can be found" (55:6)—this is the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, when God is present among you.

While the midrash initially states that during most of the year God may not always be reached, this second section states that during the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* God is indeed available. We might ask: Is God's presence during the Ten Days guaranteed, making it the opportune moment to do *teshuvah*? Or is *teshuvah* the prerequisite for bringing about God's presence—and with it more Divinity, compassion and justice—into our world?

The midrash suggests a response: During opportune times such as the Ten Days, God is especially willing and waiting for our *teshuvah*—turning our way, peeking through the cracks in the barriers between us and the Source of Life. Our return to God will bring God pouring in toward us. In the midrash's portrayal, God's presence during the Ten Days is latent, vibrant with potential, but it takes our *teshuvah* to fully activate and manifest that presence. It's our responsibility, then, to do *teshuvah* even without, or before we feel, God's presence—even starting from our lonely, unsure, doubtful state of mind. Only our own actions, our own *teshuvah*, can erase those doubts by bringing God into our lives, because to truly do *teshuvah* for the harm we cause each other and the world would be to stop

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<sup>1</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma, Ha'azinu 4.*

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doing the harm, so that repair can begin.<sup>2</sup> In our doing so, Divinity, compassion and justice will be able to flourish freely.

Yet if repairing the world is *our* responsibility, then why call on God at all? Perhaps it expresses our feeling that it's too overwhelming a task for us to accomplish by ourselves. Our appeal to a force beyond us, more powerful than us, lets us acknowledge our own inadequacy and our need for help—just as God needs our *teshuvah* to fully manifest the Divine presence.

The haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah therefore begins, “*Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Eloheicha*,” typically translated: “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God.”<sup>3</sup> But the word *ad*, meaning “to,” can be read with different vowels as *eid*, “witness.” Read as such, the verse can be understood in two ways: either “Do *teshuvah*, Israel, for you are the witness to the Lord your God,” or “Do *teshuvah*, Israel, for the Lord your God is witness.”

When the Jewish people return and repent, a powerful mutual encounter occurs between Israel and God, in which each sees and recognizes the presence of the other. The tradition teaches that now, in the days before Yom Kippur, we have an especially potent opportunity to ensure God's presence and to assist the emergence of Divinity in and into our world—among, between and within us human beings. “All God's ways are justice,” says the Torah in *Parshat Ha'azinu*.<sup>4</sup> God waits for us to walk those ways, so that God may walk with us, and we may find our way into the Book of Life.



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<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, *Laws of Teshuvah* 2:1, states that the test of complete *teshuvah* is to re-encounter a situation in which one had sinned and then to decide not to repeat it.

<sup>3</sup> Hosea 14:2.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 32:4.

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