



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום
SUMMER 2024

High Holiday Sermon Seminar

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Some years we search earnestly for a High Holiday sermon. And some years, the sermons come searching for us. This is one of those years. This year, our communities yearn to understand what has happened to Israel, to the Jewish world, and to each of us. More than any year in recent memory, our communities will ask us for perspective, wisdom, direction, and above all, hope. Our annual Hartman High Holiday seminar will be devoted to this sacred task.

1. Anna Swir (1909-1984, Warsaw), "Poetry Reading"

I'm curled into a ball
like a dog
that is cold.

Who will tell me
why I was born,
why this monstrosity
called life.

The telephone rings. I have to give
a poetry reading.

I enter.
A hundred people, a hundred pairs of eyes.
They look, they wait.
I know for what.

I am supposed to tell them
why they were born,
why there is
this monstrosity called life.

2. Questions A Rabbi Must Ask

It was the case before October 7th. It is more so since that earth-shattering day. Noise, chaos, and distractions demand our attention though our souls are better suited to "slow cooked thinking." Can we distill down what we are hearing, reading, feeling, and arguing into those issues that a religious tradition like ours is best prepared to address? A few examples:

1. October 7th has been compared to September 11th, Kristallnacht, the Kishnev program, and other critical dates in history. As Rabbis, we look beyond factual comparisons to ask: *What is the Jewish metaphor for this moment?*

- Esther, Shir HaShirim, Ruth, and Kohelet (the global community that moved onto the yearly cycle) vs. Eichah (Israel and the Jewish people who are inside the lament).
- The Seder's Four Children for those in relationship who cannot sit down at the same table for a meal.

2. A question for the Right: Put aside any doubt about the justness of this war. Presume that every single action taken by Israel and its army is, with zero uncertainty, justified. Even with all of that, there is blood on the hands of the Jewish people. *What must be done to restore the wholeness of our souls? How do we live with having caused inordinate amounts of pain?*

- Purification rituals, models of teshuva, nezikin

3. A question for the Left: *What is a fitting reaction to evil? When the choice is to kill or be killed? We have made great efforts to cultivate compassion and understanding. What does it mean to us when these are not appropriate responses? (How) does this impact our identities and worldview?*

- Vehi she'amda, Kohelet, ben sorer u'moreh, New York Times: The Hamas Chief and the Israeli who Saved His Life
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4. *What do you – in your deepest heart of hearts – want to say to the next generation?*

First, forgive them for not understanding Israel and America the way that you do.

Explain to them your perspective and why this is so important to you. Invite them to do the same.

Write a letter to your children/grandchildren or the young people in your community. *What is your connection to Israel? What is your vision of America's future?* Articulate the Israel and the America you would hope to see.

- R. Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion*. (2004)
- [Jonathan D. Sarna](#), *A Time to Every Purpose: Letters to a Young Jew* (2009)

3. Our Truths Have Been Shaken

Post-war Jewish life has been constructed on two foundational narratives: We told ourselves and our children that Jewish life is protected by the sovereignty of Israel and by the stability of liberal democracy. Both are stories of our accumulation of power in fulfillment of our pledge, “Never Again.” Both narratives have been violently shaken by the catastrophe of October 7th and its aftermath. In Israel and in the diaspora, we have one generation to discover new narratives for Jewish life. That is a daunting task. But the hopeful news is that we, Jews, have a particular talent for coping with discontinuity and re-inventing ourselves.

There are hundreds of articles, columns and podcasts on Oct 7th and its aftermath. Here are a few:

- Franklin Foer, [The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending](#) Atlantic Monthly, March 4, 2024

Interview with Franklin Foer, [Franklin Foer, Interview](#)

- Mishael Zion, [How Will We Know When It's Time to Leave](#) Times of Israel, May 14, 2024
- Shaul Arieli, [Israel's Secular and Religious-Messianic Publics See Oct 7 Very Differently, Is Civil War Looming?](#) Haaretz, May 29, 2024
- [Rachel Korazim](#), Poetry for our time,
- Rachel Korazim, Podcast with R. Jeffrey Salkin, [A New Poetry after Oct 7](#)

The Jewish talent for re-invention:

- Rabbi Benay Lappe, [An Unrecognizable Jewish Future: A Queer Talmudic Take](#), Eli Talk
- [Traditional Sources](#) (a few of our favorites): “The World Still Stands,” **Pirke Avot, ch 1**; “Moshe in R. Akiba’s beit midrash,” **Talmud Menachot 29a**; “It’s not in heaven,” **Talmud Baba Metzia, 57a–b**; “Get out of your cave,” **Talmud Shabbat 33b**
- [Zionist Sources](#): Ahad Ha-Am (Asher Zvi Ginzberg, 1856-1927), “The People of the Book” (1894), “The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem” (1897) in Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*.(1959)

Gil Troy, *The Zionist Ideas*. (2018), Part Three: “Torchbearers”

David Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition*. (2000)

4. Homiletics 101: A Refresher Course – What is a sermon?

A sermon is a form of rabbinic communication. Its purpose is to educate, enlighten, inspire and above all, to change people – to change behavior, ideas, values, and attitudes. A sermon has the following elements:

1. A sermon offers a **thesis** that can be stated in one literate sentence.

A sermon's thesis must be **provable** but **not trivial or obvious**. This year, in particular, sermons and *kavannot* need to say something significant about this moment in our experience.

2. A sermon teaches a **Torah text**, however broadly we define Torah. The text should be quoted in Hebrew, where appropriate, translated, set in its historic place, explained and interpreted.

3. A sermon demonstrates that **life's meaning can be found in Torah** and enriched by Jewish living.

4. A sermon speaks to the listeners before us, **in their language and idiom**, respecting their situation, needs and intelligence. A sermon opens with a "hook", to grab attention. It closes with a statement that solidifies the thesis in the mind of the listener.

5. A sermon calls upon the listeners to **change** their behavior, thinking, values and attitudes.

6. A sermon must express **the rabbi's deepest passion**. It flows from a place of conviction and emotion.

Taught the great **Rabbi Stephen S. Wise**,(1923): *"If you have something to say to these people that fills you with living fire, it will not be necessary to have any [gimmicks] to bring [Jews] to the Source of things for which they must long. If you feel this, you can preach in such seething syllables as to make them feel it; and unless you preach in that way I advise you to go into some more honest occupation.*