YOM KIPPUR 5778: THE DAY OF ATONEMENT
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THE SHOFAR'S CALL: YOM KIPPUR 5778

Baruch Cohen

***CIJR*, Sept. 29, 2017**

In Loving Memory of Malca *z"l*

The shofar, New Year's symbol, blows

The long-drawn call for all humanity!

A call for peace that's yet to be

Addressed to all humanity.

Within the little synagogue the lights are dim

We hear the shofar sound–

Piercing a silence that seems

To pray, for you and me, its call

A prayer for you and all.

A call for a peace yet to be,

A long-drawn note to all humanity:

The tone resounds,

And mankind knows

It is the call for love,

For a humanness yet to be…

All around the air is hushed!

We hear the shofar's blast redound:

From my heart, may peace abound!

(Baruch Cohen, CIJR's Research Chairman, will soon be celebrating his 98th birthday)

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YOM KIPPUR THOUGHTS

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

***Jewish Press*, Sept. 28, 2017**

Yom Kipper, the Day of Atonement, is the supreme moment of Jewish time, a day of fasting and prayer, introspection and self-judgment. At no other time are we so sharply conscious of standing before God, of being known by Him. But it begins in the strangest of ways.

***Kol Nidre*, the prayer that heralds the evening service and the beginning of the sanctity of the day, is the key that unlocks the Jewish heart. Its melody is haunting. As the cantor sings, we hear in that ancient tune the deepest music of the Jewish soul, elegiac yet striving, pained but resolute, the song of those who knew that to believe is to suffer and still to hope, the music of our ancestors that stretches out to us from the past and enfolds us in its cadences, making us and them one. The music is sublime. Tolstoy called it a melody that "echoes the story**

of the great martyrdom of a grief-stricken nation." Beethoven came close to it in the most otherworldly and austere of his compositions, the sixth movement of the C Sharp Minor Quartet, opus 131. The music is pure poetry but the words are prosaic prose.

Kol Nidre **means "all vows." The passage itself is not a prayer at all, but a dry legal formula annulling in advance all vows, oaths and promises between us and God in the coming year. Nothing could be more incongruous, less apparently in keeping with the solemnity of the day. Indeed, for more than a thousand years there have been attempts to remove it from the liturgy. Why annul vows? Better, as the Hebrew Bible and the rabbis argued, not to make them in the first place if they could not be kept. Besides, though Jewish law admits the possibility of annulment, it does so only after patient examination of individual cases. To do so globally for the whole community was difficult to justify.**

From the eighth century onwards we read of gaonim, rabbinic leaders, who condemned the prayer and sought to have it abolished. Five centuries later a new note of concern was added. In the Christian-Jewish disputation in Paris in 1240, the Christian protagonist Nicholas Donin attacked Kol Nidre as evidence that Jews did not feel themselves bound by their word, a claim later repeated by anti-Semitic writers. In vain, Jews explained that the prayer had nothing to do with promises between man and man. It referred only to private commitments between man and God. All in all, it was and is a strange way to begin the holiest of days.

Yet the prayer survived all attempts to have it dislodged. One theory, advanced by Joseph Bloch in I917 and adopted by Chief Rabbi J.H. Hertz, is that it had its origins in the forced conversion of Spanish Jews to Christianity under the Visigoths in the seventh century. These Jews, the first Marranos, publicly abandoned their faith rather than face torture and death, but they remained Jews in secret. On the Day of Atonement they made their way back to the synagogue and prayed to have their vow of conversion annulled. Certainly some such reason lies behind the declaration immediately prior to ***Kol Nidre*** **in which the leaders of prayer solemnly grant permission "by the authority of the heavenly and earthly court" for**

“transgressors” to join the congregation in prayer. This was a lifting of the ban of excommunication against Jews who, during the year, had been declared to have placed themselves outside the community. That, surely, is the significance of *Kol Nidre* in the Jewish imagination. It is the moment when the doors of belonging are opened, and when those who have been estranged return.

The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, usually translated as “penitence,” in fact means something else: returning, retracing our steps, coming home. It belongs to the biblical vision in which sin means dislocation, and punishment is exile: Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden, Israel’s exile from its land. A sin is an act that does not belong, one that transgresses the moral boundaries of the world. One who acts in ways that do not belong eventually finds that he does not belong. Increasingly he places himself outside the relationships – of family, community and of being at one with history – that make him who he is. The most characteristic sense of sin is less one of guilt than of being lost. *Teshuvah* means finding your way back home again.

That, on this night of nights, is what Jews do. The synagogue is full of the faces of those who rarely visit it. During the year – albeit less dramatically than their medieval predecessors – they may have been Marranos, hidden Jews. They have worn other masks, carried different identities. But on Yom Kippur night the music of *Kol Nidre* has spoken to them and they have said: here is where I belong. Among my people and its faith. I am a Jew. In ancient Israel, there were holy places. The land itself was holy. Holier still was the city of Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem the holiest site was the Temple. Within the Temple was the supremely sacred place known as the Holy of Holies. There was holy time. There were the festivals. Above them was the Sabbath, the day God himself declared holy. Above even that was the one day in the year known as the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the most holy day of all: the Day of Atonement.

There were holy people. Israel was called “a holy nation.” Among them was a tribe of special sanctity, the Levites, and within it were individuals who were holier still, the *kohanim* (priests). Among them was one person who was supremely holy, the high priest. In ancient times the holiest man entered the holiest place on the

holiest day of the year and sought atonement for his people. Then the Temple was destroyed. Jerusalem lay in ruins. Devastated, too, was the spiritual life of Israel. There were no sacrifices and no high priest. None of the rites of the Day of Atonement, spelled out in the Book of Leviticus, could be performed. How then could sins be purged and the people of Israel annually restore their relationship with God?

One saying has come down to us from that time, a sentence that rescued Judaism from the ruins. Its author, Rabbi Akiva, lived through the destruction. His early years were spent as an illiterate shepherd. Tradition tells us that he fell in love with Rachel, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem. She agreed to marry him on condition that he studied and became a Torah scholar. Her father disinherited her, but she remained devoted to Akiva, who eventually became the supreme scholar of his day and one of the architects of rabbinic Judaism. He died, a martyr, at the hands of the Romans.

Rabbi Akiva was a remarkable man. It was at his insistence that the Song of Songs was included in the biblical canon. He framed a number of enactments to foster love as the basis of marriage. He said, “Beloved is mankind, for it is created in the image of God,” and declared that “Love thy neighbor as thyself” is the fundamental principle of Judaism. But above all he could see through catastrophe. When others wept at the destruction of the Temple, Rabbi Akiva preserved a spirit of hope, saying that since it had been prophesied, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, which had also been prophesied, would also come to pass. “Whatever God does is for the best.” About the Day of Atonement he said this: “Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom are you purified and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is said: ‘And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be purified’ ” (Ezekiel 36:25).

Israel did not need a Temple or a high priest to secure atonement. It had lost its holiest place and person. But it still had the day itself: holy time. On that day every place becomes a holy place and every person a holy individual standing directly before God. By turning to Him in *teshuvah* it is as if we had brought an

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offering in the Temple, because God hears every cry that comes from the heart. When there is no high priest to mediate between Israel and God, we speak to God directly and he accepts our prayer. So it has been for almost two thousand years.

So we fast and remove our shoes and dress in white shrouds. We spend the day in prayer and confession as if each of us stood in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, because God heeds not who or where we are, but how we live. And though we no longer have a Temple and its offerings, we have something that is no less a powerful prayer: the "service of the heart." Hear our voice, Lord our God, Have pity and compassion on us, And with compassion and favor accept our prayer…

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FROM POLAND TO LITHUANIA:

A WRITER'S SEARCH FOR HER JEWISH PAST

Charly Wilder

***New York Times*, Sept. 18, 2017**

I think I was in an iced-over bus lot in northeastern Poland, standing in front of a mound of desecrated gravestones, when I first had the feeling that Jewish heritage travel in Europe might be a mistake. I had been walking with a guide and an interpreter, both Polish men in late middle age, through Makow Mazowiecki, a small town about 45 miles north of Warsaw. This was where two of my great-grandparents were born in the late 19th century, when Jews made up nearly half the local population.

Like the vast majority of American Jews, I descend from Yiddish-speaking Europeans who settled along the Rhine River around the first millennium. Known as Ashkenazi Jews (Ashkenazi being an old term for German), they later moved to the edges of the Russian Empire, the so-called Pale of Settlement, an area spanning much of present-day Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Moldova, where Jews were allowed to reside.

All eight of my great-grandparents immigrated around the turn of the century from the Pale to the United States. They settled in New Jersey, where my father grew up, and Kansas City, Mo., where my mother, and later my brothers and I, were raised among the mowed lawns and flush supermarkets of Midwestern suburbia. "They lived in shtetls," my parents would say, using the Yiddish diminutive for town. "Backward, mud-caked, poverty-stricken little villages surrounded by anti-Semites." Or something along those lines.

It wasn't until recently, after a decade of living in Europe, that I decided to find out more about my ancestors, to travel to the places they were from and see what, if anything, remained of the shtetl world they had left behind. In this, I wasn't alone. Jewish heritage tourism has been growing steadily since the fall of the Iron Curtain, when the former Pale of Settlement began to open up to Western tourists. The influx of foreign interest has encouraged a re-examination of Jewish history, especially in larger urban centers. New museums, most notably Warsaw's phenomenal Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, but also smaller institutions throughout Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic nations, cater to visitors of Eastern European Jewish descent.

"It's a tremendous change," said Tomasz Cebulski, a Polish Holocaust scholar whom I contacted early in my heritage quest. "Within the last 25 years in this country, it's like day and night," said Mr. Cebulski, whose company, Polin Travel, offers Jewish heritage tours and genealogical services. He attributes the change partly to the lifting of taboos around discussion of Judaism and the Holocaust —

but also to growing interest in ancestral research. In addition to hundreds of booming genealogical resources like Ancestry.com and FamilySearch, there are numerous sites geared to Jews, most notably JewishGen, a nonprofit organization affiliated with the New York-based Museum of Jewish Heritage, with more than 20 million records and links to country-specific Jewish record archives, like Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland.org).

But like most genealogical quests, mine started the old-fashioned way, through talking to relatives. My mother knew a few facts. Samuel Frank Wengrover, her maternal grandfather, was a tailor from Makow Mazowiecki. After arriving in New York around the turn of the century, he moved to Alabama and opened a tailor shop. It was almost immediately burned down by Klansmen types. "So he picked up and moved to Kansas City and tried it again," my mother said. My father knew that his mother's family, the Russaks, moved around the same time from Lodz, Poland, to the Jewish section of Paterson, N.J. The whole family had once been Orthodox, but had forsaken religion and "turned into Communists." Of his father's Lithuanian parents, he knew almost nothing.

I set up an account on Ancestry.com and began building a tree, adding facts the website extracted from now-digitized public records. At the same time, I started reaching out through the JewishGen databases to people who had searched similar name-and-place combinations. That's where I found Kathy Herman. I had never heard of her, but she turned out to be my second cousin on the Russak side. Her grandfather, Benny, was the brother of my great-grandfather Joe. She was the first to tell me the names of their parents: Moishe Meyer Russak and Mindel Stetin. "Family lore is that she was raped by a Cossack, and my grandfather killed the guy," she wrote in an email. "They hanged my grandfather by his hair (I don't even really know what that means), and then the Russaks had to get Benny out fast." That, Kathy said, is why the Russaks moved to the United States. Not exactly "Fievel Goes West," but I was hooked. She had two addresses in Lodz where the Russaks had lived. Armed with these anecdotal scraps and scant genealogical documents, I was off. Old Country or bust.

In Warsaw I met a man who has been working for decades as a fixer for Jewish visitors researching their Polish roots. It's a job that often stirs resentment in Poland, especially since the current right-wing government came to power, said the fixer, a retiree with kind eyes and a talkative, disheveled demeanor who asked that his identity be concealed. Widespread anti-Semitism persists, he said, and there is fear, especially in remote, provincial areas — *shtetl* country — that the descendants of Polish Jews will come back and claim their stolen property. "Keep in mind that Poland before the Second World War was like the United States. We had a huge mixture of minorities, and the Jews made up 10 percent of the prewar Polish population," he said, as we drove past fields of black currants, lindens and the occasional roadside taverns, until we reached Plock…

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ON BECOMING AN AMERICAN

Ben Cohen

***JNS*, Sept. 20, 2017**

This week, I became an American citizen. As I intently studied my naturalization certificate after the oath-taking ceremony, it struck me how fortunate I am to be accepted into this nation on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, of all occasions. I should stress that my own story is rather routine and uninteresting. I came to the US from the United Kingdom with my family, I had a job and a home in New York, and as the years went by, I progressed from a work visa to a "green card" to full citizenship. Along the way, I did nothing more dramatic than fill out lots of forms and attend periodic interviews with immigration officials.

But there were 199 other people in the room with me, from 60 different countries,

and with vastly different experiences that, nonetheless, led us all to this single moment. As I wound my way to my seat, climbing as delicately as possible over the outstretched knees and handbags on the narrow floor between the rows in the auditorium, I said hello to individuals I learned were originally from New Zealand, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines. When we went up to the stage to collect our naturalization certificates, it felt as if the entire world had been locked in the embrace of American democracy: a fellow from Cote d'Ivoire, another from Mali, a young woman from Bangladesh, an older woman from Ukraine, even a couple of people from Israel, just moments after we all swore the same oath of allegiance before the same flag.

For me, taking the oath was the most powerful part of the ceremony — the clearest reminder that America is built upon the idea of liberty, and the most compelling signal to all of us present we were now participants in the American republic. Consider, if you will, the last clause of the oath: "…and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God." Is there any pithier expression of the idea that we are, as humans, bestowed with individual consciousness, along with an innate ability to think and speak freely and make our own decisions, so long as the circumstances allow? Does any country represent and respect that idea better than the United States?

More than two centuries after the American Revolution, we accept this idea as commonplace. But that ceremony reminded me of just how revolutionary it is. Thomas Paine — a son of Norfolk, England, who came to these shores in 1774 — wrote in his splendid pamphlet, "Common Sense," that the "independence of America, considered merely as separation from England, would have been but a matter but of little importance, had it not been accompanied by a revolution in the principles and practice of governments."

These principles have been considered utopian, but I believe they also reveal a fundamental truth about how humans should be governed. We are imperfect, we are selfish, we will always clash, but we have as well common principles and common beliefs that bring us together — the task of government, therefore, is to

reconcile those two poles in a manner that is lawful and liberal in the classical sense of that term. For all the bitterness of our current politics, who wants to live in a society where beliefs and opinions are imposed from above? I'd rather be free to pick my way through the drek of social media than have my access blocked by the government. I'd rather be free to express disappointment in the society I live in — silly and unjustified or eloquent and persuasive — than be compelled by my rulers to toe the line. That is a key element of the historic promise the US continues to offer.

In his speech to the UN on Tuesday, President Donald Trump quoted John Adams, the second US president, observing the American Revolution was "effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people." That collective sense of freedom — which breeds furiously divergent opinions, rather than dull uniformity — is what led the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville to note in 1831 that America's free press contained "such a strange mixture of good and evil that, without its presence, freedom could not thrive and with its presence good order could hardly survive."

That ever-present tension, perhaps, is part of freedom's very nature – yet as the years have progressed, "good order" has become more stable at no discernible cost to our revolutionary liberties. And it's that same good order that allows us to take for granted what our forefathers in foreign lands certainly did not: the right to spend a peaceful Rosh Hashanah with one's family in a land with no established religion. This year, I will do that as an American for the very first time. *Shanah Tovah*.

CIJR Wishes All Our Friends & Supporters an Easy Fast & Shabbat Shalom!

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Yom Kippur: Guide for the Perplexed: Yoram Ettinger, *Jewish Press*, Sept. 29, 2017—1. Yom Kippur is one of the six main annual Jewish fasting days: (a) The 10th day of the Jewish month of Tishrei is Yom Kippur, an annual day of repentance for one's misconduct toward fellow human-beings – in order to minimize future missteps – the cleansing of one's behavior, recognition of one's fallibilities, forgiveness of fellow human-beings' misconduct.

The Most Interesting Jews of 5778: David M. Weinberg, *Israel Hayom*, Sept. 29. 2017—It's become a Rosh Hashanah tradition for newspapers to publish lists of the "most influential" or "most prominent" Jews. The lists are mainly a potpourri of the wealthy, powerful, organizationally well-positioned or pop-culture famous.

Israeli Identity: What Has Changed This Year?: Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen, *BESA*, Sept. 29, 2017—External threats to our existence as Israelis create an awareness of a common fate. It is tempting to focus on such threats, because they provide a comfort zone in which security-political experts can ask the familiar question: how will we continue to defend our existence over the coming year? By concentrating on this question, we have found a way to repress basic questions about Israeli identity.

A Chorus of Mazel Tovs in Uganda: Merissa Nathan Gerson, *New York Times*, Sept. 22, 2017—Seven years ago, Shadrach Mugoya Levi drove three hours from his rural village of Magada in the Namutumba District of Uganda to find a woman named Naomi. His friends had insisted he meet her. When he arrived at her house, her mother answered the door and said: "No, my daughter is too young."