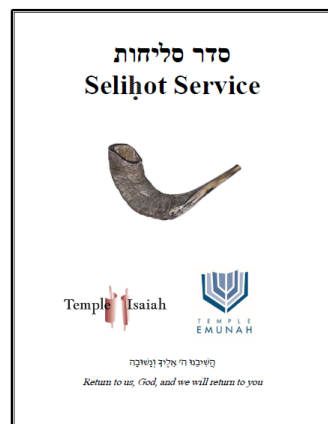


## The Forgiving God

Earlier this week, Rabbi Kling Perkins and I had the chance to Zoom with the clergy of Temple Isaiah to plan our annual joint *Selihot* service.

First, it was really nice to see colleagues who, like us, are trying so many creative things and working hard – so we commiserated a bit and lifted each other's spirits with some humor on that Zoom meeting!



And then they told us that there is a new version of Zoom – 5.2.3 where you can highlight two windows simultaneously – make sure you download it after Shabbat – we will be using it on *Rosh Hashanah!*

We also planned [a meaningful service](#) where the two communities – one Reform and one Masorti/Conservative – come together as one. During a time like this, unity is vital and appreciated.



The main theological statement of the *Selihot* service is that we are asking for forgiveness, and it ushers in two weeks of intense repentance, introspection, and reflection culminating with *Yom Kippur* where, if we do things correctly, we can come through this period cleansed, renewed and forgiven.

It is a stark juxtaposition from where we were a mere six weeks ago when we sat on the floors of our homes on Zoom or some of us outside on our courtyard sitting on the ground reading the book of Lamentations,

lamenting the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

The words that we read that night were stark and discomfoting to the modern ear: “Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to God in heaven: we have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven. You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us, You have slain without pity. You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through. You have made us filth and refuse In the midst of the peoples. We have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven.” [[Eikhah 3:40-45](#)]

This is yet another tough passage in the Hebrew Bible. And though I recognize all the images of God to be the understandings of human beings, we can still wonder what caused our ancestors to imagine God in such a harsh light.

And yet, we can also appreciate the way our calendar moves from this unforgiving view to *Selihot* tonight!

My teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, z”l, who also officiated at the *ketubah* signing of my wife’s and my wedding – may his memory be for a blessing – continues to inspire me and others in his writing about what an “amazing theological leap [this shift] constitutes!”



He taught that we should juxtapose these two moments on our calendar. Six weeks ago we read *Eikhah* where we heard: “We transgressed and rebelled; You have not forgiven.”

And then tonight, it's a totally different ballgame: we are totally forgiven! Six-week whiplash!

This image of God in the book of Lamentations is simply out of touch with the dominant view of our tradition.

Why would we emphasize the power of repentance for the next two weeks straight and God's willingness to accept our forgiveness if God does not actually forgive?!?

Now, Rabbi Gillman, or Neil, as I called him since he was also a family friend, pointed out that while repentance is found in later parts of the *Tanakh*, of the Hebrew Bible, there are almost no references in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. But there is one in this morning's Torah reading.

However, here, it comes only after punishment. We read this morning: "When all these things befall you [... and] the various nations [...] banish you and [then you will be considered returned] to *Adonai* your God [...], then *Adonai* your God [...] will take you back in love."

So there is forgiveness. But it's a long haul to get there! You have to first get through a long punishment: years of exile!

Interestingly, there is another model in the *Tanakh*. Two weeks from now, on *Yom Kippur* afternoon, Susan Lipson and a group of teens will read the Book of Jonah (make sure you don't miss that Zoom!) where we are given a totally different vision of God.



Jonah Praying  
Marble sculpture (c. 280 CE)  
Current location: Cleveland Museum of Art

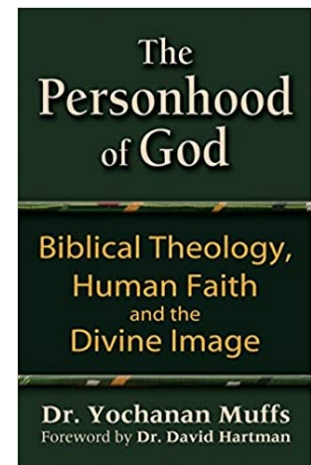
There, we will read of the God of Jonah who forgives Nineveh as soon as the city repents, before the city was destroyed. There is no punishment, no extended experience of chastisement.

This is good; this is nice.

We want to relate to this type of divine being, One more like the *haftarah* this morning where Isaiah has God empathizing with the people, saying that God will be troubled along with their troubles. God is with us when we are suffering. The Holy One is with us when we are sad and scared.

That is the God we imagine in a post-Holocaust world; God does not intervene in history to save us, but descends into the suffering with us, to hold us, to comfort us, and to console us.

In a *dvar* Torah that Rabbi Gillman published in *The Jewish Week*, he pointed to another brilliant teacher of his and mine at the Jewish Theological Seminary: Professor Yochanan Muffs. Professor Muffs' masterful book "The Personhood of God" portrays a God who understands what it means to be a human being. This is what he called the "true humanity" of God. This Divine Being shares with us a rich emotional life, a fully developed personality, and an astonishing vulnerability.



This is the God we can approach during the *Selihot* prayers we will recite tonight and throughout the liturgy on the Days of Awe.

As Rabbi Gillman wrote: “Our ancestors appreciated that God was beyond the grasp of human understanding, but this never inhibited them from describing this God. On the contrary, it liberated them. They reveled in describing God in multiple and often contradictory ways, never worrying whether or not their descriptions were ‘true.’”

They were all true for different people at different times, just as they themselves were different people at different times. It is precisely this treasury of divine images in our tradition that enables us to leave behind the God of *Eikhah* and welcome the God of *Selihot*.

So, I invite you to return tonight and begin that journey with me, with Rabbi Kling Perkins and our entire community as we turn inward, to ourselves, to each other, and to a God who wants to support and sustain us even in this most challenging time.