Shima UDW

High Holiday Edition | September 2015

אפשרות

Efsharoot / Possibility

"A chance that something might exist, happen, or be true; something that might be done or might happen; abilities or qualities that could make someone or something better in the future"

You may be familiar with the journal *Sh'ma*, first published in 1970 by the liberal theologian Eugene Borowitz and in continuous publication ever since. You may be surprised to find this *Sh'ma* insert in the *Forward*. In surprise, we hope you will find possibility.

What you hold in your hand is a link between *Sh'ma*'s past and its future — an issue that examines the idea of possibility (*efsharoot*, in Hebrew) and at the same time embodies a possibility: a partnership with the *Forward* that would continue to bring *Sh'ma*'s unique content to the newspaper's readers.

Since early 2014, we have been experimenting with the delivery and framework of *Sh'ma* — how we can fully engage readers in *Sh'ma*'s commitment to creating conversation and bringing together a wide array of voices around a single theme.

In conjunction with several partner organizations, we have spent the better part of the past year designing, prototyping, and testing new iterations of Sh'ma in order to hold onto the best of what we've been — a curated conversation on contemporary, relevant Jewish topics — while transforming our modes of engagement. As we come to the end of this iterative, prototyping process, Sh'ma has partnered with the *Forward* to bring you this next-generation prototype of the journal: a twelve-page insert designed to spur new thinking about "possibility" and, for those who are so inclined, a guide to facilitating discussions around the theme.

Each year, many of us approach the High Holidays with the idea of possibility sitting on our shoulders. We anticipate some potential for change — especially given the liturgical framework that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provide. And, while the holidays offer a ten-day period of introspection, study, spiritual encounter, and community engagement, we're likely to find ourselves at midstream still wondering how to actually feel and do things differently.

We hope you will use the host guide (found on page 14-15) to start conversations in your home or synagogue that unpack open-ended questions relating to the holidays. We have found that these conversations sometimes spur readers to consider alternate perspectives and to rethink Jewish texts, ideas, and sensibilities. Please let us know what works for you in this experiment by completing a brief online survey (url to survey found on page 5). As we contemplate our possibilities going forward, we look forward to sharing a fruitful year with you.

— Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

* share and read online jd.fo/shmaED

Find "Consider & Converse" — our facilitator guide — on page 14-15

Every person must view himself all year long as though he is half meritorious and half culpable, and also the entire world is half meritorious and half culpable. [Therefore,] if he commits one single sin, he will have tilted himself and the entire world to the side of culpability, and cause them destruction. But if he does one mitzvah, then he will tilt himself and the entire world to the side of merit, and cause himself and them to be saved.

Rambam's Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4, based on Kiddushin 40a-b

"Is it possible for a human being to do all his work in six days?

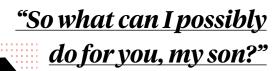
Does not our work always remain incomplete? What the verse means to convey is: Rest on the Sabbath as if all your work were done. Another interpretation:

Rest even from the thought of labor."

- Abraham Joshua Heschel on Exodus 20:8-11 in The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man

<u>"If you will it, </u>

it is no fairy tale."



 Isaac, on his deathbed, to Esau, after Jacob took Esau's blessing (translation/commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Genesis 27:37)1



newness



optimism



Presidents who have used "possibility" in an inaugural address:

Presidents who have

used "impossibility":

stories

"She saw him as he must have looked when he was young, long before she had been born: boyishly hopeful, possibilities turning his eyes into stars."

— Celeste Ng, Everything I Never Told You

Theodor Herzl

"No people can live to itself alone. The unity of all who dwell in freedom is their only sure defense. The economic need of all nations — in mutual dependence - makes isolation an impossibility."

— Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2nd inaugural address, January 21, 1957

of wonderment and curiosity. I see this wonderful innocence that's reflected in conversation: the goodness, the sweetness, the gentleness, and the sense of hope that children have."

Ted Kennedy, former U.S. Senator from Massachusetts²

"Being a grandparent has renewed my energy and my sense

"Overall, the risk for heart failure was approximately half in optimists versus pessimists."

Study published in Circulation: Heart Failure, "Optimism and Other Sources of Psychological Well-Being," by Alan Rozanski, M.D., American Heart Association

"Possibility"

is ranked as the 1,199th most used word out of 450 million words in contemporary American English.

^{1.} Rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-toldot-chosenness-and-its-discontents/

^{2.} As quoted in Wisdom: The Greatest Gift One Generation Can Give to Another, by Andrew Zuckerman

NiSh'ma

NiSh'ma — let us hear — is our simulated Talmud page. Here, we find three people offering three takes on a seemingly simple but surprisingly complicated sentence uttered in the fourth century by Rava, a rabbinic sage.



Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon: To the casual reader, this statement by the talmudic sage Rava seems to dismiss skill and effort in the face of fortune. Why bother with exercise and diet when your genetics might kill

you anyway? It's a troubling conclusion but, fortunately, it's not what Rava is saying. "Merit," here, really means "religious virtue." Rava

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Moed Katan 28a

Leslie Gattmann: One needs only to look at the families lost in the Holocaust to recognize how luck is paramount. My mother's family escaped Germany on the last ship — as she describes it — before Kristallnacht. Cousins, aunts, and uncles were lost, all of them kind and observant Jews. It was luck and foresight that saved my mother and her immediate family.

מועד קטן כח

Some families carry tragedies heavily on their backs, some families less so. My first

> husband was plagued by health problems. In the midst of preparing our daughter for her bat mitzvah — after spending six months reading Torah with her and chanting blessings — he collapsed and died in front of her and our 7-year-old son. He was such a loving, attentive father, passing on Jewish traditions. I was left without any explanation to give my children as to why such a righteous person would die. At 45 years old, his luck ran out; he certainly did not merit this end.

> We can always find those we believe to be luckier than ourselves, and those less fortunate. I believe life is totally about luck, and the great creative challenge is how to turn away from bitterness in the face of loss, how to create a life that is meaningful and affirming.

Said Rava: "[Length of] life, children, and sustenance depend not on merit, but luck."

...אמר רבא חיי בני ומזוני לא בזכותא...

תליא מילתא אלא במזלא תליא מילתא...

Rava's teaching affirms the value of prayer for the welfare of the community while discouraging reliance on prayer to effect

continues with a story

about two rabbis - both

men of such great merit that their prayers brought

rain to end a drought.

And yet, one of the rabbis

lived to the extraordinary

age of 92, while the other

died at 40.

indirect change in our personal lives. He also dispels the dangerous notion that personal fortune indicates moral character. Rava's perspective is similar to that of an anonymous voice in a different talmudic passage. (Kiddushin 39b) In that passage, a father asks his son to climb up a tree to a bird's nest, send away the mother bird, and take her eggs. Though the Torah promises long life for honoring parents (Exodus 20:11) and for sending away a mother bird (Deuteronomy 22:6), this boy falls from the ladder and dies. Our anonymous scholar concludes that the ladder must have been unstable. The boy did not deserve to die, but you can't count on miracles, so don't climb rickety ladders!

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon, who has a doctorate in biochemistry, is rabbi-educator at Congregation Beth Jacob in Redwood City, Calif.

Leslie Gattmann is a Judaic artist who works in porcelain, mosaic, and Hebrew and English calligraphy. Recently retired as a special education teacher in the Santa Rosa, Calif., public school system, she still directs Celebrations!, a Jewish program for children with special needs and their families. She also runs a bed and breakfast in California's wine country.

Lawrence Bush edits Jewish Currents and writes the blog Jewdayo, a daily blast of Jewish pride, at jewishcurrents.org.



Lawrence Bush: Luck, according to some psychologists, comes more readily to those who deviate from routine. If you repeatedly walk the same path en route to work, shopping, or whatever, you're likely to encounter the same neighbors, same sights and sounds, and same possibilities as the day before. If you vary your route, you vary your likely experiences, which broadens your range of having

something lucky happen — like meeting your love, who happens to live five blocks over.

Luck is therefore partly a function of merit — if we count risk-taking as a feature of merit. For example, Moses chooses to amble off the beaten path and stumbles upon the burning bush.

But in American society, which is fundamentally capitalistic, the idea that merit attracts luck is often used to tout the achievements of wealthy people and to deny the collective nature of economics (what Rava calls "sustenance"). Whereas Judaism, in texts such as Psalm 24 ("The earth is the Lord's, and all of its fruits"), recognizes that wealth is a collective product — wrought from our shared blessings (natural resources) and based on generations of civilization-building, knowledge, infrastructure, effort, and community — those who place their faith in the marketplace would have us believe that the super-wealthy deserve their super-wealth (and the long lives and privileged children that often come with wealth) because they are just that marvelous, just that meritorious. Rava counters: It's luck. Bow your head.

CORRESPONDENCE V

Preserving the Politics of Hope:

An Exchange of Letters

From the Editor's Desk

We invited Julie Saxe-Taller and Jon Elkin — both political activists — to think about "hope and change" in politics. As part of an issue on "possibility," we wondered whether — in a political arena — the promises of hope and change President Obama campaigned on eight years ago can be fulfilled. We asked our writers to consider how "possibility" has been embraced in the Obama Administration and whether only the arc of history may reveal the successes of a campaign slogan.



Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller. associate rabbi of Congregation Sherith Israel in

San Francisco, was ordained at Hebrew Union College in New York in 2004. She currently serves on the Bay Area Regional Council of Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice, where she finds partnership and inspiration to act for justice. Saxe-Teller served as co-chair of the J Street Rabbinic Cabinet for several years.



Jon Elkin is a graduate student at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College

and the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Azerbaijan from 2008 to 2010, and co-led a service-learning program with the American Jewish World Service in Ghana. Prior to returning to graduate school. Elkin spent eighteen months in Washington, D.C., working for a firm specializing in corporate social responsibility and international trade-consulting.

Dear Jon,

What an interesting way to meet - to engage in an exchange of letters about hope and change in the political arena. In such an exchange, one of us might have represented the perspective that victories by forces of greed and injustice comprise ample evidence that political hope and progress are dead in the water; and the other might have argued that a long view reveals that, despite obstacles and defeats, hope is alive and progress is happening, if slowly. But because hope is not a function of circumstance, it can be chosen even in the roughest of times. And so I want to open not a debate but a conversation about how we nurture hope and work for justice, and how we deal with political defeats and frustration.

I choose "hope" and I participate in political campaigns (most recently for Prop 47 in California, reducing incarceration for nonviolent crimes), not because I always feel hopeful about politics, but because I need to be part of hopeful efforts toward a just society, as I need friendship and fresh air. We cannot deny climate change, increasing resource disparities, or the violence done by armies and governments to the vulnerable. It is because these realities are so discouraging that I take seriously my responsibility to nurture a sense of possibility in myself and in others. Judaism — both religiously and historically — calls us to act from hope even when we feel hopeless. We are called to choose life, to light candles in darkness, to show up for each

There is a passage in Ze'ev Jabotinsky's novel The Five in which the reciting of the mourner's kaddish is a locus for the fight against despair. A mourning father "stands at the edge of the pit and presents his bill, his accounting for the damages, to the Lord of the Universe. He is furious. He shakes his fists and he vilifies the heavens." But next to the man is Satan, who is waiting to take advantage of the man's rage at God. The grieving man begins to say kaddish, a prayer that praises God, saying, in other words: "'You, Satan, keep out of this! Whatever grievances I have against God — that is our business... Somehow we will settle the [matter] between ourselves..." Here is Judaism's powerful acceptance of reality, including our sorrow and rage, and at the same time the affirmation of the ongoing possibility for healing and hope. In fact, it is grieving that makes room for hope to reappear in time.

To capsulate: Pursue justice, and seek real victories, but do not rely on them as your source of hope. This is how I understand Psalm 118:8: "It is better to take refuge in the Eternal than to trust in people." Relationships are the key to both life and political organizing, but when people cannot or do not come through for us, our hope is not at stake. And if we have chosen hope and a commitment to action, there is endless interesting material from which we can learn, in both victories and defeats.

What has nurtured your commitment to working for justice? How do you balance choosing projects or campaigns that are more likely to succeed versus causes that are dear to you? I look forward to learning about you and from you.

Yours.

Julie Saxe-Taller

I need to be part of hopeful efforts toward a just society, as I need friendship and fresh air.

other in mourning, to turn from our own discouraging habits toward acting on our principles. And we are called to pursue justice, because it will not unfold before us without effort.

Dear Julie.

Thank you so much for the thoughtful letter. I appreciate your reframing of this topic and, quite frankly, I agree with your sentiments and analysis. "Hope" can certainly thrive regardless of the circumstances, making it a tool that sustains our optimism, fuels our pursuit for a better world, and preserves our mental health. I like that you compare hope to friendship and fresh air; it is certainly essential for a fulfilling, connected, and passion-filled life. As a selfproclaimed idealist, I choose hope and optimism while recognizing that I have been privileged never to have encountered serious challenges to either.

That said, as I read your letter, I found myself wondering: How is hope instilled in those who do not feel the responsibility to inspire hope in others (as you do), nor have the fortitude to conjure it up within themselves? How can hope be communicated and shared in the absence of noticeable progress? President Barack Obama, as he ran for president in 2008, called on us to "hope" by reminding us of the improbability of our collective history. In the midst of a crippling economic crisis and two seemingly endless wars, at a time when many felt disillusioned and underrepresented by the political process, Obama symbolized change and asked us

to imagine possibilities for a new future - as many generations of Americans had done before.

But while some may be inspired and their hope may be sustained through hearing about our country's history of "hope" and its triumph over the societal ills we've managed to minimize, others may need more. How do we understand the possibility that President Obama promised during his campaign, now that we near the end of his term and enter an election cycle featuring names of the past? For those on the short end of our country's growing economic inequality, what is it about our political choices today that suggest we're on the cusp of making change? In the absence of candidates who symbolize and demonstrate through their

record the potential for change in our society, how do we make a credible plea for hopefulness?

Best regards, Jon Elkin

Dear Jon,

Thank you very much for your reply, for sharing your personal perspective, and for putting on the table what I agree are urgent questions for all of us who wonder how to find the energy and inspiration for presidential election politics, given the gap between what is promised and what is achieved.

You ask: "How can hope be communicated and shared in the absence of noticeable progress?" And you press further: "For those on the short end of our country's growing economic inequality, what is it about our political choices today that suggests we're on the cusp of making change?" As I read this question, I thought to myself: Nothing. Nothing currently suggests that presidential politics are on the cusp of a significant change of direction. And nothing will create such a cusp if we pretend we are already at one. As with telling a child, "We're almost there" when we are hours from our destination, we lose credibility when we lie about where we are.

Election promises are almost always fantasies. Honesty about the forces organized against social and economic justice is part of organizing effectively for justice. I think we gain credibility by being honest about the obstacles we face, and that the honesty itself creates a degree of hope.

Honesty requires exposing the ways our government fails its people (such as bailing out banks while allowing individuals to hit bottom) as well as taking genuine responsibility for change. Jews have been key members of progressive movements in this country. Yet there is something a little tricky about this. We are a community of immigrants and descendants of immigrants who came to this country seeking security. Many of us have benefited from access to upward mobility. These benefits ally us with

some of the same systems that our principles as Jews often cause us to oppose - systems that rely on classism, racism, and the prioritizing of market values over human ones. (For example, our schools are tools for advancement but they also keep a class system in place.) Working for justice requires those of us who are economically privileged to work for structural changes that may rattle our sense of security. This is where we have the chance to follow the wisdom of the slogan "no justice, no peace," whose flip side is found in Pirkei Avot: "Marbeh tzedakah, marbeh shalom" — "One who increases justice increases peace."

Certain campaigns — for example, the Affordable Care Act, burgeoning national conversations on both race and inequality, same-sex marriage

son for the cause. President Obama only became a supporter of samesex marriage in 2012 — and we do not know what motivated his change. But we do know that samesex marriage was achieved through a grassroots movement and not by the charisma and leadership of an individual.

What's remarkable about these past eight years is that we've seen both the power of an individual's charisma and leadership and the strength of a passionate movement. President Obama inspired us to send him to the White House but it was the people who inspired government to correct an injustice. At the risk of sounding trite, I think this is precisely what "possibility" means in the public sphere: that we can't know where change will

The existence of possibility in our politics preserves an unknown and unquantifiable potential for progress.

- have moved forward under President Obama, with his leadership but not without massive popular organizing. Can we get as hopeful and excited about campaigns for change as we historically have about a personality? Do you think we can enthusiastically back campaigns, not primarily because we are enamored with the candidate, but explicitly for their movementbuilding potential?

Yours. Julie

Dear Julie,

Thank you for your response and for posing such timely questions. You ask: "Do you think we can enthusiastically back campaigns, not primarily because we are enamored with the candidate, but explicitly for their movement-building potential?" I can't help but answer yes. This past summer, the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Constitution guarantees same-sex couples the right to marry. But this remarkable and rapid progress in the area of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) rights happened without the benefit of a visible and charismatic spokesper-

come from. As the field for the Republican presidential nomination reaches the midteens, and as I read yet another story of Hillary Clinton withholding emails from her years as a public servant, I can't help but feel somewhat discouraged. But I will always vote, I will continue to donate to causes I believe in, and I will take action when I feel compelled to do so because the existence of "possibility" in our politics preserves an unknown and unquantifiable potential for progress. We are living in a time of unparalleled connectedness, which time and again has served to expedite and magnify the changes we pursue. If "hope" is air, then "possibility" is our lifeblood.



Illustration by Justin Winslow

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PERSPECTIVES

Dwelling in Possibility

From the Editor's Desk

Paradox runs through a couple of the following essays and expands how we talk about "possibility" — including how we understand "newness" and how a therapist understands reactions to change. In the next pages, you will find essays by rabbis, activists, and scholars, as well as paragraphs from an author and a scientist exploring what possibility means in their fields. And we asked three writers to dream up first sentences for stories that feature the notion of possibility (we invite you to imagine how these stories might possibily end!).

A Life Never Lived Before

DAVID KASHER

In the midst of reading the rather technical talmudic account of ancient court proceedings in Mishnah Sanhedrin, one suddenly encounters a profound reflection on the nature of the human being.

It comes on the heels of the instructions to witnesses in capital cases; they are being reminded of the gravity of their responsibility and the extreme caution with which they ought to render judgment. "Perhaps," the judges warn, "your testimony is based on hearsay or conjecture." "Do you understand," they ask, "that just as a murder is irrevocable, so, too, is the death penalty?" And then, as if struck by the weight of their own warnings, the rabbis put aside their legal discussion for a moment in order to declare to the reader:

"This is why the human being was created alone in the world [in the account of the Creation in Genesis] — to teach us that anyone who destroys one life, we consider to have destroyed a whole world; and anyone who saves one life, we consider to have saved a whole world." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

This story suggests that since all of humanity is descended from the same singular person that God created on the sixth day of Creation, each one of us has the potential to produce a world of new life. This creative potential manifests itself both in the tangible form of our descendants and, more symbolically, in the impact we have on the world that will ripple out through eternity. Every one of us is a wellspring of unique possibility, a world unto ourselves.

However, the same Mishnah then continues:

[The human being was created alone also] so that no one person can say to his fellow, "My father is greater than your father!"

Here, the idea of a common ancestor seems to serve a quite different function. Rather than representing our unique capacity for creative potential, the story of Adam is an equalizing force, suggesting that on some level we are all the same. No one can claim an inherent superiority or special privilege, for we know that all human beings are descended from the same source. You are no different from your fellow human being.

So which is it? Does our Creation story tell each one of us that we are special, unique, unpredictable, and full of possibility? Or, does it remind us that we are, on some fundamental level, all the same — and, if so, what happens to all that possibility?

As if recognizing this tension, this Mishnah goes on to present a metaphor that offers something of a resolution:

"If a person casts many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the Supreme Holy One, blessed be God, fashioned every person with the stamp of the first person, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow."

No person is like any other, though we are all equal in our humanity, all drawn forth from the same genetic source material. Unlike the factory mold, which produces identical products, one after another, the Holy One is somehow able to imbue each person with both a wholly unique identity *and* a shared stamp of equality.

And what is this "stamp," exactly? Surely it is the *tzelem Elokim*, the image of God, as we learn:

And God created the person in God's image, in the image of God God created him, male and female He created them.
(Genesis 1:27)

In other words, our common humanity is found in the imprint of the divine that each one of us receives. All people are equal, not simply because we trace our ancestry to the same place, but also because we are all united in our shared essential holiness, which cannot be denied or violated.

However, once we recognize what makes us alike, we then can turn to marvel at the remarkable diversity of humanity. Though we are stamped from the same mold, we are each unique, both in our various physical appearances and, more importantly, in our potential to live a life that has never been lived before — and, in so doing, to create a whole new world. That is why this same Mishnah comes, finally, to this bold proclamation:

Therefore, every one of us should say, "The world was created for me."

Like the first person, each one of us is a completely unique creation, a promise of new possibilities, never seen before. The world is waiting.

* share and read online jd.fo/shmadebate5

Rabbi David Kasher is the senior rabbinic educator at Kevah, a Bay Area-based organization that runs a network of Torah study groups for adults across the country. He blogs on the weekly Torah portion at: parshanut.com.

Faith in Newness

Sam Fleischacker

Newness is the most radical kind of possibility. It's possible that there will be rain today, even if it in fact does not rain, and it's possible for me to choose chocolate rather than vanilla ice cream, even if I, in fact, go for the vanilla. These are rather more banal kinds of possibility compared to the possibilities we wonder at, religiously, such as things we didn't think possible before they happened: a radical personal or political transformation, a cure for a seemingly incurable disease, or an artwork or natural sight more beautiful or striking than

Newness, the space of radical possibility, is what marks the crucial difference between a Godinfused universe and a purely naturalistic one.

we could have imagined. Unexpected events of this sort suggest that even what seems fixed can be changed: that there is (with all due respect for Ecclesiastes) something new under the sun.

Traditional Jews attribute to God, first thing every morning, the will to institute such newness, to remake creation in unforeseeable ways. "You create all," we say in the "Yotzer" blessing, which follows the "Barchu."

The blessing continues: "Every day in your goodness you renew the Creation [ma'aseh bereishit: literally, 'the work of the beginning']." Creation seems, indeed, to be newness.

René Descartes, the 17th-century French philosopher, brings creation and newness together in his Meditations. "It does not follow from the fact that I existed a short while ago that I should exist now," he says; I would not exist now unless some power "creates me, as it were, anew." More generally, the difference between "conservation and creation" exists merely in how we think about things, he says, not in reality. Newness is creation, a bringing to be out of nothing.

Hermann Cohen, a 19th-century German Jewish philosopher, may be drawing on Descartes as he glosses on the Yotzer

exists only in contrast to an "old" and expected pattern. And while the rising of the sun each morning is not really new

First Sentence

That yom tov, my mother shoved on her oven mitt to check on her roast and said to me, "Child, never rule out the possibility for certain disaster."

> Sara Lippmann is the author of the story collection, Doll Palace, which was long-listed for the 2015 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award.

> > * Share and Read Online jd.fo/shmadebate6

blessing that I have been discussing: "Creation is God's primary attribute." But Cohen does not see Creation as an act that happened only in the beginning of the universe: rather, it happens constantly. That is what our liturgy means by declaring that God "constantly renews in each day the work of the beginning."

What is newness? It's not the same as change. If you work for a boss who changes the office furniture around every day, your reaction on coming in will not be, "Oh, how new!" Rather, you will think, "Same old, same old; he's moved the chairs again." The arrangement you see today is different from yesterday's arrangement, but not new. The new

in this sense, it tends to give us hope and thus serves as a useful metaphor for newness. Artists, composers, and novelists more clearly present us with paradigms of newness — the composer Arnold Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" and James Joyce's Ulysses, of course, but also the 16th-century painter Pieter Bruegel's peasant scenes and Rembrandt's selfportraits. Great religious teachers and political actors also envision stunningly new ideas or initiate new practices.

For something to be new, a pattern of events and expectations must exist against the background of which it is unexpected. But expectations are something that only humans fully have,

Sam Fleischacker is a

professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author, most recently, of The Good and the Good Book (Oxford University Press, 2015), What Is Enlightenment? (Routledge, 2013), and Divine Teaching and the Way of the World (Oxford, 2011). He is also director of Jewish studies at UIC. and the founder of its Jewish-Muslim Initiative

A Novelist on Possibility

Language holds endless possibilities, myriads of possible worlds...

For me, writing is always ignited by friction, by a unique linguistic gesture that disrupts the routine of language and stands out within its current. This is especially potent when I write in Hebrew, where the many layers of the language and its history are ever present. A strange verb, an archaic conjugation, or an unusual noun may serve as a trigger for a possible literary universe. And then I feel as though an invisible window opens in the room, bringing in new light and fresh air. Paradoxically, the arc of the narrative always comes to me in its complete form, demanding and formidable, locked against changes or even variations. I always write the ending right after I complete the opening paragraph of a new work; only then do I sit down to fill the gap between these poles. This tension between the sense of endless possibility and the tightly predetermined arc of the narrative never ceases to intrigue me, and it sustains me through the arduous process of writing.

Ruby Namdar a New York-based Hebrew writer, is the author of HaBayit Asher Necherav (The Ruined House), which won the Sapir Prize, Israel's most prestigious literary award.

* Share and Read Online jd.fo/shmadebate6

something that requires articulation and institutionalization. We constitute the patterns that the new defies; we set up and hold fixed ways of understanding or living through the world that can be broken by the new. We set up patterns of understanding and practice because we are rational. But our rationality also tempts us to fit everything, no matter how unexpected, into a pattern we have already established — to rob everything of its newness. Many of us say, in the face of something apparently new, "I actually thought things would work out like this."

So a paradox is built into the very idea of "new." And it is that paradox to which religion is fundamentally addressed. For without newness, our lives would be monotonous and desperate. We would have no hope of being surprised — no hope, therefore, of experiencing spiritual joy. We would also have no hope that we could ever overcome our individual patterns of jealousy or laziness or self-centeredness, or our social patterns of classism and racism, or flagrant commercialism.

For both moral and spiritual reasons, then, we need newness. But if newness is precisely the breaking of patterns that seem unalterable, then we have no naturalistic — scientific — reason to think we can encounter it. We can have only a faith in newness.

And that faith is what we declare at the opening of our morning prayers. Our God is a God of newness who can always make and remake the world (this is no less miraculous than making it in the first place). Newness, the space of radical possibility, is what marks the crucial difference between a God-infused universe and a purely naturalistic one. It is what

Exposure to "the possible" is core to an approach called "wide-angle Judaism," and it aims to broaden the definition of an authentic Judaism.

makes possible our personal hopes for transcending our vices, our political hopes for transcending injustice, and our spiritual hopes for experiencing something truly wondrous, something that humbles and awes us. These radical possibilities are what we affirm first in our morning prayers — as they should be first in our religious hopes, first in our commitment to God.

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Wide-Angle Judaism

Rachel Brodie

I once ordered a Torah scroll on eBay that arrived in a cardboard box made for a Sony television set; even my Berkeley born-to-recycle children were disconcerted. After the Torah was removed, I noticed the tagline emblazoned on the box: "Imagine the Possibilities: The Centerpiece of Your Home." The TV? Not so much. But the Torah...

In many ways, my mantra as a Jewish educator is summed up by that line: "Imagine the possibilities." Exposure to "the possible" is core to an approach called "wide-angle Judaism," and it aims to broaden the definition of an authentic Judaism by revealing Judaism to be infinitely bigger than any institution, denomination, or historical moment.

When asked what Judaism says about "x" or "y," I responded with, "Which Judaism? The one understood by Chabad in 19th-century Belarus? The one practiced by Persian Jews in Iran in the 1970s? The one taught by Maimonides? The one imagined by Abraham Joshua Heschel?" There is no "Judaism"; there are Judaisms. I'm not trying to make a case that Judaism can be "anything," but rather to engage with Judaism as a multifaceted, continuously evolving civilization that includes wisdom and practices that I know to be profoundly affecting, relevant, and useful in supporting our quest for wellbeing - individually, communally, and globally.

In my work at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, the ultimate measure of success is when a student says, "Really? I didn't know that was possible," or "I never expected to feel that way." Broadening perceptions allows



Photo by Rudi Halbright

for a more informed decision-making process. We want people to be informed consumers and that means knowing as much about what they are rejecting as what they are accepting.

My commitment is to the process and preparation — that the experience itself be meaningful. As an educator, this is often perceived as countercultural, but I do not set an agenda regarding "next steps." I have learned to trust that having an opportunity to experience Judaism one that has integrity and is personally engaging, that honors both the collective tradition and the individual's values can be the tipping point toward continued engagement, even if I never find out exactly how it plays out. To be content with that unfolding process requires that I approach my work with the optimism of an educator, the humility of a parent, and the naïveté of someone who has never tried to get a program funded.

At the JCC, we also train a wide-angle lens on human potential using an approach we refer to as "grounded optimism." The underlying assumption is also somewhat countercultural in an age of increasing cynicism and even nihilism: We start from a belief that positive change is possible in our selves, in our relationships, and in our society. We encourage the question: "What now?"

What now? The "grounded" aspect of "grounded optimism" is the radical acceptance of reality. The optimism points to the intersection of American and Jewish values: the vote and/or voice of an individual can make a difference. As

Rachel Brodie is the chief Jewish officer (CJO) of the JCC of San Francisco (and while LOL is an appropriate response to the title, the job itself is GR8).

both an American and a Jewish organization, we are called to put aside our cynicism and confront brokenness without the paralysis of uncertainty or "compassion fatigue." We are called to act on our

A Scientist on Possibility

There are many different directions that scientific thought has taken relating to pondering possibility and change. One such concept, developed by biologist Stuart Kauffman, is that of the "adjacent possible." Basically, this idea holds that what is possible right now is limited by constraints (such as technology or capital). But we continue to push this edge of possibility by working around constraints. These new concepts create not only new breakthroughs, but also new niches that drive continued exploration. (For example, the Internet is a relatively modern niche.) As individuals and as a society, we consider where we want to go and we make shortterm decisions that open doors toward our longerterm goals. We make it more likely to get where we are hoping to go, but we can't predict with certainty that we will get there, because we don't know what the variables will be in the future.

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* Share and Read Online jd.fo/shmadebate6

social, moral, and political obligations (as we perceive them). We are called to imagine the possibilities.

Exposure to a wider-angle of "the possible" - both personally and communally - is where we see our work as personal trainers, programmers, or preschool teachers. We try to inspire, support, and guide our fellow-travelers to do the best they can. (As I regularly remind my own children, my colleagues, myself, if it's really the best you can do, then I actually can't ask for more.) And in doing so, we strive for the best possible outcome — not the best or the possible but the best possible.

Thinking through a wide-angle lens, using grounded optimism, and having deep trust in the process allow us to let go of an attachment to a particular outcome that may benefit our institution or some larger vision of Judaism and, as Reb Emily Dickinson said, "dwell in possibility."

* share and read online jd.fo/shmadebate5

Core Stories

Elie Kaunfer

Teshuvah is an opportunity to change one's life story. But what does it mean to change that story? How much of what I do in the future is inextricably linked

to my past selfunderstanding, and how much of it is a complete break with my old narrative? To what extent do our old

stories stay with us, even when we have fundamentally changed?

These questions are discussed — albeit implicitly - in a talmudic argument deliberated upon in the Passover Haggadah. While debating the meaning of a seemingly unnecessary word in a passage in Exodus, the rabbis arrive at two positions about when to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. One of the rabbis, Ben Zoma, claims that one must mention the story of the Exodus at night as well as in the day. But the majority opinion of the sages is that one must mention the story of Exodus in the world to come. This is the part of the debate we discuss during the seder.

But the debate continues, recorded in Tosefta Berakhot 1:10, cutting to the core of our experience of our past stories. Ben Zoma responds to the sages, saying: Is it possible that we mention the Exodus in the days of the Messiah? But we know it says (in Jeremiah 16:14-15): "There is a time coming — declared YHVH — when it shall no more be said: 'As YHVH lives, who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,' but rather: 'As YHVH lives, who brought out and led the offspring of the House of Israel from the Northland...'"

Ben Zoma's position now becomes clear. One must mention the story of the Exodus at night to the exclusion of mentioning it in the future redemptive time of the Messiah. Buttressing his opinion with a quote in Jeremiah, Ben Zoma points out that in the future, the story of the Exodus from Egypt will be supplanted. No longer will we call God: "the One who took us out from Egypt" but rather, "the One who took us out of the Northland." In this conception, stories are discarded once they become overridden by later narratives. Leaving Egypt happened in a prior redemption, but in the future, says Ben Zoma, the more current redemption is the only story that matters.

Elie Kaunfer, co-founder and executive director of Mechon Hadar (mechonhadar.org), is the author of Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities (Jewish Lights). A frequent lecturer on prayer and building grassroots Jewish communities. Kaunfer is particularly interested in the siddur as a text to be interpreted.

Teshuvah isn't about a radical retelling; rather, it is simply the next chapter in an integrated storyline.

Ben Zoma's position — especially as it relates to teshuvah — is perhaps best captured by this statement from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: "Repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation - self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I," and the creation of a new "I," possessor of a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals — this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future." (Halakhic Man, p. 110)

But the sages take a different approach to this question. Rebutting Ben Zoma's excellent proof-text from Jeremiah, they suggest that while the story of the Exodus from Egypt will change in relative

importance — and how we tell the story will evolve — the story will never entirely fall away.

Our past stories — no matter how distant and no matter how removed from our current experience — always stay with us. Even after God redeems us again and brings us to the Messianic age, we will still be talking about the past redemption — albeit differently. Preserving our stories may make change less stark — and therefore more achievable. In this conception, *teshuvah* isn't about a radical retelling; rather, it is simply the next chapter in an integrated storyline.

This is perhaps best summed up in a very short verse describing the genealogy of Abraham, and referencing his name change: "Avram is Avraham." (I Chronicles 1:27) Avram is always wrapped up in Avraham. Indeed, the letters that make up Avram are all found within the name Avraham. The new person that Avram becomes still contains the old one. Or, in the view of the Talmud: "Avram is Avraham"; he maintained his righteousness from beginning to end. (B Megillah 11a) He may have fundamentally changed, but core parts of him remained.



Our stories must change in order for us to change. But we never let go of those past stories. They are always a part of us. We just tell them differently.

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Cultivating Optimism

Melanie Weiner

Our human condition is distinguished by a profound and unique central paradox. We are creatures who crave security and attach deeply. And we are creatures both gifted and burdened with the awareness that everything and everyone is impermanent. Above all, we want to hold onto what makes us feel safe and protected; yet we know that everyone we love will die at some moment. Contemplating this, it's a wonder we're not all much crazier than we are!

The basis of a healthy psychological foundation is "secure attachment," in which an infant learns to trust and rely upon a caregiver. For secure attachment to occur between a parent and baby, caregiving must be sensitive, consistent, and predictable. How ironic that a theory of psychology based on attachment coexists with existentially based theories of psychology in which the path to human freedom, meaning, and health lies in a recognition of our impermanence and mortality — in other words, in our nonattachment and our acceptance of the reality that nothing is secure.

Whether or not we acknowledge it, change is occurring all the time. Our environment is changing, as are our bodies, our very cells. The more we resist this knowledge, the more fixed we are. The more we accept this knowledge, the more flexible we become.

Fatalism fixes the future. It clings to the familiar and projects it forward. It doesn't matter if this projection is positive or negative. In some ways, it is easier for the mind to say, "I am marked for misfortune" or, "I will never be truly loved" than to allow that the future is entirely unpredictable. By fixing the future, an illusion of control and security is attained — even if the future then becomes shrouded in gloom, to the point of making life dark and perhaps even unlivable.

First Sentence

Possibly, it was the worst decision she'd ever made, and possibly, possibly, it was the very thing that would save her.

Tova Mirvis is the author of Visible City, among other books.

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Optimism, on the other hand, may best be described as being conscious of the possibility — the inevitability — of change. Optimism neither projects the past or the present into the future, nor paints the future in a deliberately rosy hue (that would be denial). Rather, optimism is a willingness to meet whatever arises with trust in one's ability to do so.

Fatalism is fear-based. One dynamic of fear is to externalize threat. Paradoxically, this creates a feeling of false security: "I am safe in here, in my own personal cocoon. The world out there is unsafe." Optimism does not cling to perceived security. There is no "in here" and "out there."

Both are one, and everyone and everything is interconnected and interdependent. In order to cultivate optimism, we must observe our security-seeking behaviors and habits and gently disarm them. Gentleness is key, because without it we fall prey to debilitating shame.

Compassion toward oneself allows for "mistakes" (which might be considered "not mistakes," but natural byproducts of experimentation). Without experimentation, we cannot learn, grow, imagine the impossible, or change. In a compassionate mindset, we accept and even welcome mistakes — while taking full accountability by acknowledging how those mistakes impact others. This is the opposite of a mindset in which the fear of making mistakes is

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overwhelming, even paralyzing, and mistakes are denied or defended through justification and rationalization.

Compassion and empathy for oneself the building blocks for optimism — will also naturally extend to others. There can be no compassion or empathy for others without the ability to extend them first to oneself.

To summarize, optimism means gently acknowledging our craving for security and certainty while also embracing the fact that no security or certainty exists. It also means directing compassionate inquiry to uncover and disarm our security-seeking habits and attempts to evade our existential knowledge. In this way, we can stay present with the terrifying inevitability of change and loss, and embrace our full potential to meet life as it comes, in every moment.

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Change One Thing

Susan Goldberg

"Change One Thing" is one of my favorite theater games. Two people sit back-to-back and, when instructed, change one thing (such as untying a shoe). After making the change, they turn to face one another and guess what has been changed. The partners continue to change one thing at a time, and after several rounds, each person has transformed his or her look. It is hilarious to watch and a powerful reminder that changing one thing and then one more thing and again one more thing over time does transform us.

The High Holy days offer us an invitation to play that game. We are beckoned to make changes - some small and incidental, others more serious and impactful. We are invited to get close to certain aspects of our lives that we might otherwise avoid. We are encouraged to draw near to our tender spots and see what they hold. What might our limitations and hurts teach us about how we can grow and change? And though this sacred season in the Jewish calendar is ripe for transformation, figuring out where to begin can feel frustrating. How will

we find personal meaning in the prayers, the acts of teshuvah (return, amends, and forgiveness), the teachings of the selected Torah and haftarah portions, and the Slichot preparation prayers?

Here is one way to approach the fall holidays that has been helpful personally. I use the month of Elul (the month preceding Rosh Hashanah that generally begins in August) to reflect on my life. I begin with general reflections and then get more specific. What do I want to think about more deeply and shift or change? My reflections usually center on either relationships or *middot* (qualities of character). My aim is to choose one area of my life/focus that will serve as the lens through which I experience all aspects of the holidays.

In the realm of relationships, I take enough time to consider each person I care about and try to notice any concern or issue that arises. In addition to my family, friends, and coworkers, I think about relationships with my community and neighborhood — and extend my consideration to the city where I live, the country, and the world. Finally, I think about my relationship with God. How are these relationships working in my life? Is there one that needs more attention and reflection? There may be more than one, but I choose one to focus on.

When I turn to the second realm of reflection, middot, I think about which quality I want to cultivate: humility, generosity, forgiveness, kindness, or compassion. (A good resource on middot is the book Everyday Holiness by Alan Morinis, a teacher of mussar.) For example, if I were to focus on kindness (chesed), how might I cultivate more

kindness toward those I care for, toward others in the world, toward myself? I choose one quality. Sometimes, I combine one aspect of relationship and a middah and see how they inform each other. For example, I can choose to focus on my relationship with my father and the quality of humility (anavah).

Once I have the focus, I write a sentence or two in a journal naming what it is so that I can refer to it throughout the holidays. I can also share my focus with a friend so we can talk about it together. Now the prayers, the teachings of the rabbi, the music, the conversations in between services, the walk in the neighborhood, the days in between the holidays — all of these holiday activities — are filtered through the prism of this reflection. Each time I get a new thought or insight, I again write about it or share it with a friend. Some years, I have worked in tandem with a friend — as in a chevrutah or study partnership — along this path of reflection.

As the holiday season concludes, the important next step beckons. I choose at least one way to put my reflections into a concrete action. The holidays are designed for this. We are not asked simply to reflect on difficult thoughts and feelings. Our reflections are in the service of changed action inside of ourselves and in the world. Just days after Yom Kippur, we take out a hammer and a nail and start to build a sukkah. So in the days after Yom Kippur, I take action on my specific reflections.

My "action" will emerge from the specific lens I employed during the holiday period. Some examples: making time to connect with someone in my life who needs my attention, calling

Rabbi Susan Goldberg

is passionate about the revival of Jewish life in the east-side neighborhoods of Los Angeles, where she is a rabbi to the group, East Side Jews. As a rabbi at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, she focuses on revitalizing the synagogue's historic campus in Koreatown.

First Sentence

Possibly, he could have been a rabbi; possibly, Albert Einstein could have accepted the invitation to be the president of Israel; possibly, Stalin could have been a yoga instructor, and Marilyn Monroe could have been an actuary; but it seemed far more likely to him that people pretty much did what they were good at and avoided that which they had no business doing... which is what he found himself thinking as he mounted the steps to the bima to address a congregation in a synagogue he'd never set foot in, on a holiday whose name he wasn't sure how to pronounce.

Rachel Kadish is the author of several novels, including From a Sealed Room and Tolstoy Lied: A Love Story.

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Illustration by Justin Winslow

an organization that is doing work in the world where I want to volunteer, or reaching out to good friends to tell them I need help. The clarity that such simple practices provide makes possible the deepest themes of change that this season offers. Choose one thing for these days of awe and let it guide you.

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Diagnosis — Impossible

Denise Wiesner-Berks

I sat in a red chair in the waiting room at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. I felt like a bag lady, having brought with me my computer, snacks, the phone and its charger, a jacket, a scarf, a book to read, and my breakfast: a blended smoothie. I knew the drill. Over the past two years, I had sat in this room - and the hospital's infusion center across the street - many times. Today, I was waiting for Alex, my husband of 15 years, to finish a procedure. I shivered, not because it was cold, but because I was worried. I had lived daily with anxiety since Alex was diagonoised with a sarcoma — a connective tissue cancer. Since then, the cancer had metastasized to his lungs and now it was causing a blockage.

As I pulled my sweater over my shoulders for warmth, I noticed Alex's doctor. Why was he approaching me in the waiting room? The doctor, who had graying hair and a large frame and protruding belly, walked toward me. "Mrs. Berks, hello." He paused for a very long time. "I am sorry to tell you that it doesn't look good. When we went in to remove the tumor, I saw that it was too big. I am sorry." There was a longer pause as he looked into my disbelieving eyes.

Though I hoped this was a nightmare from which I would awake, my legs started to give way, my breath turned into uneven panting, and my eyes swelled with tears. I was sure that the doctor with the big white lab coat was speaking to the wrong woman. I was sure that my 6'6" otherwise healthy husband couldn't die from cancer. I was not prepared for the doctor's diagnosis that there was no longer a possibility for healing.

Once I understood the implications of the doctor's words, I knew I would have to help my husband and children face the challenges in front of us. I had heard the saying "God gives us only what we can handle." I knew I would have to draw on an abiding and deep courage to face my fears and to help those around me face theirs.

Worry about my husband's declining health ate away at me in the middle of the night and woke me up each morning. How would I survive without the father of my children? How would I support my family alone? Who would support me emotionally as he had? He was the one who listened to me endlessly about everything, the one who cared about our family. He was the one I loved. I couldn't imagine life without him.

I looked up and met the doctor's eyes. "What happened?" I started to wail, tears washing my face as he tried to explain about the tumor, the lungs, the breathing: all words I couldn't focus on. I was so unprepared for this — today or any day. How do you prepare for death?

I knew I was frightening all the other people who were waiting for their beloveds in that waiting room. The doctor gave me a hug; or maybe it was that he put his arms around me so I wouldn't fall over. Over the next five weeks, as Alex became weaker and sicker, I wanted to speak with him about dying, his fears, his reality, his life. But I couldn't. I couldn't entertain the possibility that there was no possibility. I couldn't fathom the idea that he wouldn't make it.

There had always been hope. He would be among the percentage that survived. We would write a book together about how he had beaten cancer.

In retrospect, I see that he wasn't able to talk to me about death because he didn't want to upset me. One day at the hospital, he wrote, "Death is not glamorous." He wanted it to be over; he could barely breathe. I was the one that had a difficult time acknowledging the situation and letting him go. It was only during his final hours, when I gave up on possibility, that I came to terms with his dying. Then, I became present to his every shallow breath, his every irregular heartbeat. I started to live in only the moment before us. I stayed attuned to every inch of my beloved. This focus became the bridge that helped to lift me from despair and inevitability. Being present was the gift given to me when I faced Alex's death, because, in reality, death is certain. Life really is moment to moment, one breath at a time.

* share and read online jd.fo/shmadebate5

The Strength to Struggle

Arik Ascherman

I just marked the 20th anniversary of my tenure with the Israeli organization Rabbis for Human Rights. I've often been asked how I maintain my passion and focus when the prognosis for a human rights agenda appears so bleak. And, indeed, the situation in Israel is the bleakest it has been in 20 years. While we can cautiously hope that our recently elected government will make some advances on internal socioeconomic justice issues, the attitudes of coalition members toward non-Jews range from hostility to indifference. Most coalition members — such as Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked — are intent on undermining Israel's independent judiciary and stifling Israeli human rights organizations.

Denise Wiesner-Berks practices acupuncture, herbology, and Chinese medicine in Santa Monica, Calif. While earning her master's degree in traditional Chinese medicine from Emperor's College, she spent several months studying and treating patients in a hospital in Shanghai, China. Having studied integrative oncology with Donald Yance, author of Herbal Medicine, Healing and Cancer, Wiesner-Berks supports cancer patients and their caregivers. She lives in Los Angeles with her two sons, Noah and Ethan.

Rabbi Arik Ascherman is the president and senior rabbi of Rabbis For Human Rights.

On a recent speaking tour in the United States, I found the mood among those concerned with human rights ranging from intense anger to despair. I hear about similar feelings from Israeli activists - especially among those of us committed to the human rights of non-Jews in Israel, be they African asylum seekers, Palestinians, or Negev Bedouin.

I've learned that unchecked anger is counterproductive. I would have burned out years ago if I didn't believe in the decency of my fellow Israelis. Nevertheless, I prefer anger to despair. We have no right to give up. At stake are many Negev Bedouin and Palestinian villages, thousands of asylum seekers, and essential elements of Israel's democracy.

I look to models such as the biblical Ruth who inspires Naomi, her despondent mother-in-law, to become a partner in redemption. Often, those we aid tell us we give them the strength to continue to struggle. When we feel like a despairing Naomi, I pray we find our Ruth and strengthen one another. My ability to maintain hope is a matter of faith. I believe God created us to be partners in repairing the world, tikkun olam. God sustains an arc of history tilting toward justice and compassion if we play our part: "You are not expected to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from doing your part." (Pirkei Avot 2:15-16) Sometimes, that requires us to step into the sea up to our necks, trusting that God will assist us when we help ourselves. A midrash on the biblical story of Judah and Tamar teaches that when all appears dark, God can be sowing the seeds of redemption. While Jacob and Joseph are preoccupied with their troubles, and the Jewish people are headed toward slavery, the inappropriate relationship between Judah and Tamar produces the ancestor of King David, who is believed to be a forerunner of the Messiah. (Bereshit Rabah 22)

My optimism also has objective roots. Most Israelis and Palestinians want a better future, but don't believe there is a partner on the other side. When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat came to Jerusalem and addressed the Knesset in 1977, we began to believe that peace was possible. Israeli public opinion about Egyptian conditions for peace changed overnight. And, for inspiration, I sometimes think about our seemingly impossible successes. For example, in 2006, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the Israel Defense Forces must allow Palestinian farmers to work in their olive groves and must protect them from Israeli settlers who may threaten them. We have not vanquished all injustice. However, "One who saves a single life, it is as if one has saved an entire world." (Sanhedrin 4:5) These are the first fruits reminding us that the harvest is possible. * share and read online jd.fo/shmadebate5

Embodied Optimism

Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield

Every year around Rosh Hashanah, I purchase tickets to see the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in December. It's as much a ritual for me as cleaning for Passover or building a sukkah.

Having grown up taking dance lessons, I'm drawn to the way movement allows for freedom and expressiveness, and although I will never move as the Ailey dancers do, I resonate with how these dancers stretch the outer reaches of possible human movement. Their muscles contract and extend, their arms move and their hips sway; as if I possess a phantom body, my synapses are firing, echoing the movement. I know this is the sensation of fully realized possibility. This awareness becomes a benchmark for my own sense of what's humanly possible, of the feeling that I aspire to in all areas of my work and life.

Over the past decade I have worked in the social justice arena focusing on climate change, human rights, and now the North American-Israel relationship. There are no short cuts to addressing any of these issues. Oftentimes, they feel overwhelming. Over the years, I've learned that the antidote to apathy or ignorance, or, worse, destructive behaviors is radical human creativity.

Sometimes when I've despaired, I've been surprised to find nuggets of creativity - creative moments when I shift from a passive position of being acted upon to acting. For example, watching the final credits of Al Gore's film, "An

Inconvenient Truth," I felt truly daunted by the cataclysmic issue of climate change. And yet, it was during this exact moment that I imagined how I could help my own Jewish community address this issue. These efforts ultimately yielded the Jewish Greening Fellowship. Another example: After witnessing the profound pain caused by the verse in Leviticus (18:22) about homosexuality, I resolved to address the issues of LGBT inclusion in my community. I began to imagine an inclusive community that would test and challenge communal norms, pushing past limiting boundaries toward a new realm of possibility.

In the face of despair, an initial spark of empathy and imagination can fuel creative action and make change possible. While the steps may seem simple —listening with curiosity, pushing at "boundaries" to test their malleability, holding engaging meetings and programs, learning new skills and ideas these steps toward change take the form of art; the inspired embodiment of an Ailey dance.

The realm of possibility opens up when we transform a series of small movements into unexpected and extraordinary outcomes. These moments often occur after years of slow and unrecognizable change; they offer optimism and inspire us to believe in our potential to make change. At other times, it seems painfully obvious that creativity and perseverance — even political power - are not enough to solve the immense problems we face. But we cannot default to cynicism, hopelessness, or passivity; if we do, we utterly surrender our power to be change-makers.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world; it celebrates our aspirational capacity. We are curious, playful, rulebreaking seekers of knowledge. On Rosh Hashanah we can ask ourselves: Have I fully accessed my powers of creativity? Have I nurtured them adequately? Have I deployed them against the world's greatest challenges? And have I inspired others to use creative means to address human ills? Am I moving through the world and my life reaching for the outer limits of human possibility?

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BEYOND THE PAGE 🗻

Consider and Converse: A Guide



Sh'ma curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of Sh'ma is the theme of possibility. The

perspectives shared in these pages are meant to be expansive — to inspire reflections on Judaism and possibility in ways you may not have considered before. They aim to hold discord. We hope that the richness and diversity of these essays will show you new perspectives that are personally meaningful and edifying.

Sh'ma has never viewed learning or "meaning-making" as solely an individual activity. That's why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you consider the idea of possibility independently or with others, formally and informally, during these High Holidays.

How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of opportunities, including activities and conversation prompts for individual contemplation and informal or more structured conversations. If yours is a holiday table where you share words of Torah or discuss resolutions for the New Year, you may find it helpful to incorporate some of the prompts from this guide, bringing articles from this issue to your table. Or, you may decide to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop prior to the holidays. Perhaps you would like to host a program at your synagogue, where you bring this conversation to a small group or an adult education class. To support your conversation, you can print out a PDF of this issue from shma.com. We offer conversation outlines below.

Suggestions for Exploration On Your Own

 Pick an article (or two). List questions you may want to ask of the author(s), as many questions as you can without editing yourself.

- Complete these sentences: "Possibly..." and "Possibly, I..." and "Possibly, we..."
- If you spend time in synagogue during the holidays, look at the theme of possibility in the liturgy. How does Jewish prayer talk about possibility? How is God related to possibility?

Suggestions for Exploration with Others

Read through the rest of this guide and think about whether you prefer a formal or informal venue for your discussion. Select questions you find most engaging. For example, you may select one "interpretive" question and one "reflective" question, or two from one list and none from the other. Engage in some of the activities from the section "exploration on your own" or watch the suggested video. If the questions you selected refer to a specific article or essay, go to shma.com, download the pieces referenced, and distribute them at the beginning of your conversation. Remind participants of the basic "guidelines for discussion" (see next section). As you begin your conversation, ask participants to "free-write" on the topic for five minutes if that appeals to you, then invite guests to share their written thoughts, and then move into the articles and questions or other activities. You might close the discussion by asking participants to share "possibilities" that they can imagine for the coming year.

Some discussions might flow naturally as participants respond to each other. Sometimes, participants share their own thoughts irrespective of other participants' comments. Your task is to create a generative space for participants, help them reflect in a comfortable and welcome space, and engage uniquely with friends and family during the holidays.

Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

 Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation. Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other's comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.

Interpretive Questions can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles

- David Kasher (page 6) asserts that humanity's sameness comes from the imprint of God in us. Where does our potential for possibility come from? What possibilities might you imagine in the upcoming year? Do you feel your power to create this change why or why not?
- Melanie Weiner (page 10) describes a place from which human beings can be optimistic. How would you characterize that place?
- When **Denise Wiesner-Berks** (page 12) receives notice that there are no more treatments for her husband, she gives up on possibility. At the same time, she finds something new in his last moments. When can the loss of possibility actually make something possible?
- Arik Ascherman (page 12) works for change in spite of the tremendous challenges he faces including pessimism in his field. What particular strand of possibility sustains him? Is there a strand that sustains you?

Reflective Questions help readers integrate the ideas in these articles with their own sense of self

- Does Judaism offer you possibility? Or impossibility? When does it offer you each?
- What possibilities do you want to open for yourself this year? How can you open these possibilities?
- The Rambam (Maimonides) suggests that we each must view ourselves as though we are "half meritorious and half culpable" (see

Infographic page 2). Are there moments when you feel this in your life? When? What does it add to our lives to practice this idea?

- Emily Dickinson famously wrote, "I dwell in possibility." What can this mean in the context of writing or other creative expressions? If we all truly did dwell in possibility, what would that look like?
- Rachel Brodie (page 8) defines something called "wide-angle Judaism," suggesting that Judaism is "infinitely bigger than any institution, denomination, or historical moment" — that, in fact, there is no Judaism, but rather, "Judaisms," What could she mean by this? When does Judaism seem full of possibility and when does it seem to be closed?
- Susan Goldberg (page 11) outlines a paradigm for reflection, for the strengthening of relationships, and for change during these holidays. She spends the month before the High Holidays (Elul) considering her character and her relationships, thinking about each person important to her and about her relationship with God. She chooses to focus her attention for the coming year on one of the characteristics and relationships, which she then records in a journal. Based on these reflections, she identifies particular actions to take in the coming year. Does this paradigm resonate with you? How? What would it mean to take on any of these steps in your life? (In which of these steps do you already engage?)
- Look again at Lawrence Bush's (page 3) short commentary in NiSh'ma. What are the ways in which you may want to "vary your route" in the coming year?

Watch Short Video:

This short video (2:28) of a scene from the television series "The West Wing" captures the nuance of possibility: It explores the support we need in order to allow ourselves to be vulnerable when we attempt to change, the need for optimism even in the face of fear, and the notion that we can be simultaneously compelled

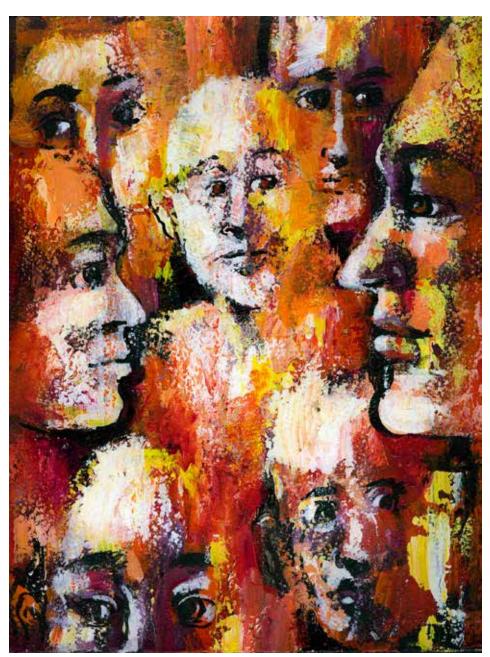
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toward and afraid of possibility. Watch the clip, read the letter exchange between Julie Saxe-Taller and Jon Elkin (pages 4-5), and then discuss these questions: What are the greatest impediments to change? What does it take to jump into possibility?

Clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ9-3NxTzQ8

Take Action:

If you usually perform the ritual of tashlich (symbolically cleansing yourself of sin by throwing bread crumbs into a moving body of water), see your act through the prism of possibility. As you rid yourself of your sins, what possibilities do you open? How have your sins limited you? If you don't normally perform the ritual of tashlich, give it a try!



Art by David Wander