

# Culture Report

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# A call for self-reflection

Marcia Falk recreates the language and concepts of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgy to make it more accessible to the contemporary sensibility

**By Rochelle Furstenberg**

**MARCIA FALK'S** newest work, “The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart” is a beautiful call for self-reflection in the High Holy Days season.

American-Jewish poet, translator and scholar Falk brings these talents to bear in this compilation, recreating the language and concepts of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgy to make it more accessible

to the contemporary sensibility. Steeped in Jewish scholarship and belief in the continuity of Jewish civilization and culture, she does not write a new liturgy, but bases it on traditional prayers.

Yet Falk, who grew up in New Hyde Park on Long Island and has lived in Berkeley since 1988, refashions the traditional prayers in nonhierarchical, nonpersonal-

ized poetic address. This continues the process begun in her 1996 “Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayer for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival” where she explained her dissatisfaction with the blessing formula “Blessed are you YHVH our God, King of the world...”

“I find the strictly formulaic language for the divine and immutable liturgical forms



COURTESY MARCIA FALK

to be dangerously susceptible to an unwitting form of idolatry in which reverence for the whole is supplanted by the enshrinement of particular (human-made) images... Of course, the heavily patriarchal imagery of the rabbinic form makes it particularly problematic," writes Falk in the "Book of Blessings." But she does not merely seek to replace male address with the address of a

female image. Rather, she insists on a liturgy that expresses her sense of the divine "as an awareness of the dynamic, alive and unifying wholeness within creation... a wholeness greater than the parts."

The title of the work, "The Days Between," is a springboard to discuss the whole period from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur. These are the "days of turn-

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Marcia Falk's drawing 'Gilead Apples' was used for the cover of her book 'The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart'

ing and returning,” a time of intensely experiencing this “wholeness,” feeling a part of what Falk calls, “the flow.” She asks, “What does it mean to be ‘in between’ as in twilight, between day and night. And aren’t human beings always ‘in between,’ poised between dawn and dusk, past and future, living in the present, and yet unable to capture the present, we live in the ‘flow between.’”

“Although we cannot hold onto any moment,” says Falk, “we are alive in the ongoing flow of ‘between.’” The goal of this work is to create a liturgy that intensifies this sense of “flow.”

According to Falk, the word *teshuva*, one of the primary themes of Rosh Hashana is not well served by the translation “repentance.” She looks to the root of *teshuva*, the word, *shuv*, “return,” “turning of the heart,” as central to the renewal of the year. It echoes the cyclical movements in nature, the year turning, as the days become shorter, a reminder of man realizing his own end and new beginning, as part of the wholeness of the universe. This emotional and intellectual turning calls us to contemplate what has happened during the past year. But it also brings promise of new possibilities for the coming year. Ultimately, it offers new hope, optimism.

This is encapsulated in Falk’s poem “Opening the Heart.”

*At the year’s turn  
in the days between,  
we step away  
from what we know  
into the spaces  
we cannot yet name.  
Slowly the edges  
begin to yield,  
the hard places soften,  
the gate to forgiveness  
opens.*

The openness and expansiveness that *teshuva* allows, the implicit compassion it entails for man, according to Falk, truly captures the spirit of the “Days of Awe.” The very process of *teshuva* is not that of accepting a rigid formula, closing oneself into a conventional form, but rather, opening oneself to transformation. Falk sees it primarily as “returning to one’s truest self.” And, as the poem indicates, it is not always clear where this will lead. *Teshuva* means “moving into spaces we cannot yet name.”

The poem, “Turning of the Heart,” at

the beginning of the Yom Kippur service, emphasizes further the barely perceptible unfolding of the process. Quoting Talmud Brachot “like the morning star whose light

**Aren’t human beings  
always ‘in between,’  
poised between  
dawn and dusk, past  
and future, living in  
the present, and yet  
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‘flow between’**

bursts forth... so Israel’s redemption will come; bit by bit, at first, bigger and bigger as it makes its way.”

So Falk offers her own poem about the hidden movements of the *teshuva* process.

*“Slow spin of earth against sky – /imperceptible, yet making the days./One stone tossed into the current, and the river, ever so slightly rising.”* One thing affects another, a small stone creating an almost imperceptible movement of change.

Falk, a discerning observer of nature, is always aware of what goes unobserved. This was evident in her translation of the “Song of Songs,” where she not only immersed herself in biblical imagery, but was exacting about its fine distinctions.

In this work, Falk’s own poems and blessings are enriched by the sensitive translations into Hebrew of the Israeli biblical scholar, Prof. Yair Zakovitch.

Falk organizes the book by beginning with blessings for the home and festive meal on Rosh Hashana eve, including the blessing for the children, “Be who you are and may you be blessed in all that you are.” The text goes on to offer poetic renderings of prayers that comprise the core elements of the High Holiday synagogue service.

In both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur *Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom* is a central part of the High Holy Day liturgy. This traditional prayer establishes God as the judge and ruler of the universe, and describes how every individual passes before

him like sheep under his staff, as he counts, calculates and considers the fate of all the living.

Falk admits to the power of the prayer. “It has a mysterious, almost eerie quality, that makes it difficult to set aside,” she writes. At the same time, she feels that “for many readers today, the theology of reward and punishment is not a helpful guide for living one’s life.”

Her way of dealing with the text is to take it out of the frame of a personalized God/shepherd who can determine our fate and simply focus on the picture inside: the image of death. “Who will live and who will die,” which is at the heart of this prayer and implicit in most prayers for the High Holy Days.

It is this confrontation with our mortality that makes *Unetaneh tokef* so unforgettable. Falk intersperses the traditional text with her own meditations in the following way:

In the traditional liturgy: *We declare the utter sanctity of this day/for it is an awe-filled day./A great shofar is sounded/and a voice of slender silence is heard.*

Then Falk adds: *The voice is one’s own – /a reed in the chorus,/a breath in the wind.*

The liturgy is humanized. Ultimately, it revolves upon the person’s own fragile voice, one of many, which, as everything else in life is evanescent, “a breath in the wind.”

But *teshuva*, *tefila*, and *tzedaka* diminish the harshness of the decree.”

Falk interprets *teshuva* as “turning inward to face one’s self.”

*Tefila*: Entering into prayer and contemplation.

*Tzedaka*: Giving to the needy as justice requires.

The emphasis is on the grappling with self, contemplation, giving to the other. Certainly, these are all values that are very much present in the traditional text, but concepts like “sin and judgment,” which she feels “can strike a discordant note, even for those who pray regularly during the year,” have been eliminated.

In the confrontation with death, at the center of *Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom*, Falk holds out a larger vision of continuing to exist in some greater whole.

*“Born in nature,/ and borne by nature,/ we die in its lap – and fold*

*“The whole lives on,/infinite in mystery, its manifestations numberless/*

*Seeing beyond our separate deaths,/we find ourselves in the greater whole,/our names embedded in its names,/its names embedded in ours.*

for many readers today, the theology of reward and punishment is not a helpful guide for living one's life

Falk's vision of creating a "Book of Blessings" for the High Holy Days, without reference to God, ruler or judge – all personages of a hierarchical order – can be a source of discomfort to the Orthodox or traditional Jew who approaches the High Holy Days with "fear and trembling" before a powerful, personalized God who can bring death and misfortune to those who don't follow His ways. For many, his presence is very real.

Falk does not feel that she can honestly relate to such a presence, much as those in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements who have edited prayer books have been challenged by the issue of a hierarchical God. Nor does she think the skeptical traditionalist is honest who assumes the attitude of "the suspension of disbelief," where, as in literature, the reader accepts the fiction, surrenders to its reality. (Falk is more than aware of this and discusses it in her "Book of Blessings" But she thinks it self-deceptive.)

And yet, "The Days Between" has much in common with the traditional *mahzor*, in that it captures a sense of the divinity. The intensity of the "flow" is experienced, whether it is called "God" "or" "the "wellspring of life." An atmosphere of sanctity is created for those seeking Jewish prayer, albeit from an inclusive, non-hierarchic, approach. "There is no 'God' in these pages," she writes. "But every page, I hope, evokes the sacred." And it does. Falk herself might resist calling this "perpetuity" and "wholeness" "God," but it is not unfair to say this is what many people experience as God.

This sense of sanctity permeates many



STEPHEN DAMON / COURTESY MARCIA FALK

Marcia Falk: The implicit compassion that *teshuva* entails for man truly captures the spirit of the 'Days of Awe'

other parts of the book's High Holy Day service, not only in the poems Falk has composed refashioning prayers from the Yom Kippur service, but in her creative approach to *Tashlich*, and her own meditations for each of the 10 days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

The *Tashlich* ceremony, based on the prophet Micha's verse, "You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea," is beautifully represented through an introductory poem by Falk, and poems suffused with water images by the Hebrew poets, Zelda and Leah Goldberg, and the Yiddish poet, Malka Heifetz Tussman (the Zelda and Tussman poems come from Falk's books of translations of these poets).

For the 10 days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, there are readings for each day, prose meditations echoing the rabbinic and kabbalistic preparation and direction of the heart toward prayer.

In the Yom Kippur service, Falk discusses the history of the Kol Nidrei service, but sees it as a preparation for Yom Kippur, whereas "we seek to be released from unfulfilled and unfulfilling expectations we have of ourselves so that we may be fully receptive to what unfolds." The *Vidui* repeated throughout Yom Kippur, in which one confesses and repents lists of sins committed, is replaced by Falk with a call for self-accounting, the underlying assumption of the "Confession." Throughout, a sense of

gravitas and sanctity prevails.

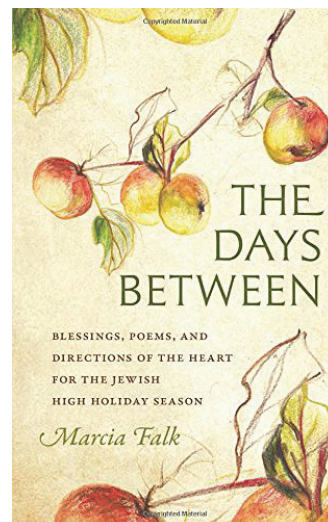
A very moving aspect of "The Days Between" is the *Yizkor* service, "Remembering the Lives," introduced by the poem "I Recall" and followed by the poems of "Grief and Consolation," which trace the process of mourning until the acknowledgement, "that we are, all of us, always dying. From the moment of birth, dying back into the world, out of which we were born."

The Yom Kippur service ends with the *Ne'ila* service, when the gates are closing and man's fate for the coming year is being sealed. Yet, in the spirit of the rabbis "that one can always do *teshuva*, that *teshuva* is an "opening of the heart," she brings the poem, "Closing Hour":

*May the heart open /even in the hour of its closing..*

And as all Jews emerge from Yom Kippur with the call of the *shofar*, and a sense of connection to the divine, the unity of creation, is presented in her rendering of the *Sh'ma*:

*"The divine abounds everywhere and dwells in everything./Its faces are infinite./Its source suffuses all. The many are One."* ■



**The Days Between:  
Blessings, Poems, and  
Directions of the Heart**  
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