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ROSH HASHANAH

Marcia Falk's open-heart approach

The poet's new book offers "blessings, poems and directions of the heart" for the High Holidays

by David Holzel
Senior Writer

Time, says poet Marcia Falk, is both linear and cyclical.

"There is the idea of moving forward and that every moment is not repeatable. So you must live with as much presence as possible," she says. And there is circularity, "the sense that you always have another chance. You can plant your pansies again if they didn't work out last year."

*Our lives are stories
inscribed in time
At the turning of the year
we look back, look ahead, see
That we are always
in the days between...*

As Falk writes in *The Days Between*, her new book of "blessings, poems and directions of the heart for the Jewish High Holiday season," the paradox of time becomes especially clear at the New Year – "We are aware of being one year closer to death. And yet we are given a chance to start fresh."

Falk is the author of *The Book of Blessings*, a recreation of Jewish prayers from a "nonhierarchical, inclusive perspective." After it was published in 1996, she turned her poetic and translator's eye to other aspects of Judaism, including the High Holidays.

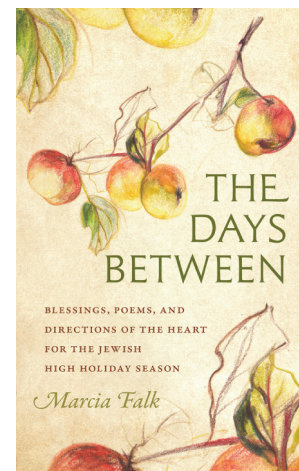
"It took quite a while for this new book to emerge as a poetic whole that would do for the High Holidays what *The Book of Blessings* did for Shabbat and daily prayer," she says.

In *The Days Between*, Falk, who lives in Berkeley, Calif., provides poems and poetic interpretations of the High Holiday liturgy in both English and Hebrew. And although she also offers commentary on the holiday prayers and rituals, she says she's aiming for the heart, not the head.

"I want to do it as a poet," she says. "I could write an op-ed, but an op-ed can't move people the same way that poetry can."



Marcia Falk: "How do you stay open and aware all the time?"



Falk approached her task as "a Jew, a feminist, as somebody who has been going to synagogue her whole life. Someone who cares about the prayers and knows what they mean."

Because she knows the meaning of the Hebrew prayers, she also knows when she doesn't believe what they say. Take the long liturgical poem *Unetaneh Tokef Kedushat Hayom* – "We declare the utter sanctity of this day." Read on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it offers the chilling imagery of a God judging souls as if they were sheep and determining "who shall live and who shall die."

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

Instead, she emphasizes that in the *Unetaneh Tokef*, the linearity and circularity of life collide.

"The High Holidays in general focus on life and death," she says. "This is the place in our liturgy where we focus on our mortality. 'Who will live and who will die' raises the question of what life means altogether."

The poem famously offers a kind of

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antidote to the sentence of death. It says that *teshuvah* (“turning” or “repentance”), *tefillah* (“prayer”) and *tzedakah* (“righteousness” or “charity”) will “avert the evil of the decree.” For Falk, this is a process that begins by “turning inward to face oneself” and ends with turning outward to face “our responsibility to, and relationship with, others.”

By doing so, the evil of the decree, “our fear of death, is assuaged by the feeling of living a full life.”

Falk says she envisions the New Year as “10 days of striving to keep the heart open to change.” She describes the results in “Opening the Heart”:

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften...
The gate to forgiveness
opens*

Yom Kippur begins with *Kol Nidrei* (“All Vows”), a declaration annulling all oaths and vows from this Yom Kippur to the next. Falk points out problematic aspects of the legal formula (“One might ask what it actually means to vacate a future vow now”) and writes that it is *Kol Nidrei*’s “hauntingly beautiful” melody that makes it indispensable to the Yom Kippur service. She recasts *Kol Nidrei* as “a different kind of preparation for prayer”: the opportunity for the worshiper to let go of “unfulfilled or unfulfilling expectations we have

of ourselves.”
*All vows –
all promises and pledges –
that we have made to ourselves
and that no longer serve
for the good –
may their grip be loosened
that we be present of mind and heart
to the urgency of the hour.*

“There are things we promise to ourselves that are not working for us,” she says of the expectations from which *Kol Nidrei* can offer a release. “May we loosen the grip these things have on us.”

Falk says one of the book’s themes is “going from a closed state to an open state – it’s hard to do that. How do you stay open and aware all the time?”

Yom Kippur ends with an image of closure: The final service, *Ne’elah*, refers to the closing of the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem, but has come to stand for the closing of the gates of repentance and forgiveness as the sun sets and the holiday ends. In “Closing Hour,” the gate is the human heart.

*May the heart open
even in the hour of its closing
for the day draws to an end.*

“The process of being open,” she says, “leaves one open to forgiveness of self and others.” ■

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Viral confessions

The High Holidays remind us that as long as there are people, there will be sin. Hopefully there will also be the urge and opportunity to confess.

The G-dcast new-media studio had that in mind last year when it launched eScapegoat, a whimsical app that lets users confess their sins of any size. Now, once again, confessions such as “I stopped at McDonald’s instead of Kosher food” and “I lie about my past to make it more exciting” are trending on eScapegoat’s Twitter feed.

This year, G-dcast has come out with “Mini Goat” for organizations and synagogues to use to gather members’ sins. About 50 groups have signed up, according to G-dcast.

eScapegoat is based on the ancient Yom Kippur ritual in which the high priest confessed the Israelites’ sins on the head of a goat, which would then be sent into the wilderness and to its death, taking the sins

with it.
But eScapegoat turns the traditional confessional – you should excuse the expression – on its head. Whereas Yom Kippur requires a public confession of everyone’s sins, in the social media confessional, anonymous individuals confess sins and everyone reads them.

There’s another difference: In the scapegoat ritual, the destruction of the goat erased the people’s sins. But because the internet is eternal, sins confessed online are destined to bounce between servers forever.

Still, these all-to-human admissions — “I lied about a medical condition to get out of work to take the dogs to the groomer” – may open up a new way to allow us to forgive ourselves. ■

*For the app, visit escgoat.com. For the Twitter feed, see twitter.com/sinfulgoat
–David Holzel*

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