
Reviewed by David J. Zucker, Independent Scholar, Aurora, Colorado

“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.”

Years ago someone punned on the serious and soul demanding period from before Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, labeling this time the Daze of Awe. From the Saturday night Selihot prayers before Rosh Hashanah, through the New Year itself, with Shabbat Shuvah, and then the multiple services on Yom Kippur, one can feel or be in a state of daze: some are bewildered, others bemused, and still others baffled. To help her readers more successfully navigate this special period, Marcia Falk has offered a book of poetry, meditations, and essays that address, echo, and resonate with many of the great themes of the Jewish High Holiday season.

As she explains in the Introduction to the volume, Falk intends “*The Days Between* [to be] a companion for travelers on the to-and-fro journey of Aséret Y’mey T’shuvah, the Ten Days of Returning—inward to the self and outward to relationships between self and other.” (xxii) One of the strong features of the book is that it offers the reader a perspective that is inclusive, and non-hierarchical. Again, in Falk’s words, “There is no ‘God’ in these pages—but every page . . . evokes the sacred.” Repeatedly, her words are “steeped in biblical and rabbinic themes and imagery.” (xxii-xxiii) She has written newly created prayers and poems in Hebrew and in English.

The book, following an Introduction, features five major divisions: Rosh Hashanah; then comes the section Window, Bird, Sky, (Daily Psalms and Directions of the Heart for the Ten Days of
Returning); Yom Kippur; Entering the Gates (Service for the High Holidays); and finally, Revisioning *Un’taneh Tókef K’dushat Hayom*. As shall be noted below, for Falk, and for many of us, this particular prayer is one of the most challenging in the liturgy during this time.

Falk touches on many of the key elements of the High Holidays. In the Rosh Hashanah chapter she devotes material to *Sheheheyánu*, *Tashlikh*, and the Shofar calls of *Shofarot, Zikhronot, and Malchuyot* [her re-ordering of the traditional listing] which she subtitles Calls, Recalling, and Callings. The materials in the second chapter, Window, Bird, Sky – Daily Psalms and Directions of the Heart for the Ten Days of Returning, are intended to support quiet openness and inner reflection. She writes “Birds, flying in and out of view. We see them, then we don’t.” (67) This evoked for me the words of the prophet Jeremiah where he contrasted the instinctive ways of the animal world, and the human reluctance to turn/return. “The stork in the sky knows her appointed time, and the dove, swift and crane the time of their migration, but my people pay no heed to the law [of God]” (Jer 8:7). Subsections of the Yom Kippur chapter include *Kol Nidrey: All Vows, Yiskor, Kaddish, and N’ilah: Closing of the Gates*. The fourth chapter, Entering the Gates (Service for the High Holidays) is Falk’s arrangement of High Holiday prayers. “This service is composed of elements from the first three parts of the book, arranged into a structured sequence for use as an alternative to traditional synagogue services. Except where indicated, each element is appropriate for both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” (161) The following poetical expression of one of the themes of the *Un’taneh Tókef* prayer provides a flavor of what Falk offers the reader.

*Ut’shuvah*
Returning to the inner artistry / that gives each life its form, / seeking to become / one’s truest self

*U’tfilah*
Being alive to the unending flow / within and around us, / holding dear / the transient beauty

*Utz’dakah*
Knowing that we are, all of us, /
flesh and blood / and our fates are intertwined— / sweet with bitter, bitter with salt— / and that the fruit of kindness / is kindness, / and good deeds / are its fulfillment / Ma’avirin et-ró’a hag’zerah / We become present / to the fullness of our lives / and untether ourselves from the fear / of what lies ahead. (173)

The fifth chapter is an essay focusing on the Un’taneh Tókef K’dushat Hayom. Falk explains that it deals with “God’s absolute sovereignty over all creation and His power to determine all destinies [concepts that] are encapsulated in the line that has become iconic of the Days of Awe: ‘On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.’ The reference is to the ‘book of life,’ in which God inscribes our fates for the new year. This pronouncement introduces a catalogue of pairings that constitute what may be the most fearsome lines in the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgies: How many will leave this life and how many will be born into it, who will live and who will die, whose life will reach its natural end and whose will be cut short . . . The list goes on, enumerating in stark pairs of opposites the benign and dreadful possibilities awaiting us. At its conclusion, however, the emphasis shifts. We are told that we can affect God’s judgments of us by means of t’shuvah (repentance or, as I [Falk] render it, ‘returning’), t’filah (prayer), and tz’dakah (charity or good deeds).” (207-208) She goes on to point out some of the difficulties of this most famous part of the liturgy. “The idea that reward and punishment follow causally from our actions is, on the face of it, neither credible nor helpful in the search for life’s meaning. Nor is the image of God as judge a useful companion in that search. Yet attempts to soften the theological stance of Un’taneh Tókef by downplaying its inherent determinism and emphasizing our part in influencing God’s decisions leave the dilemma intact: Why are so many good people struck down and so many bad people allowed to thrive? Indeed, the suggestion that we have power over our ultimate destinies only highlights the contradiction between the fairness that the piyyut seems to promise and the reality we face every day.” (209) In her reordering of
this prayer, Falk suggests these words:

Ut’shuvah / Turning inward to face one’s self
Ut’filah / Entering into prayer and contemplation
Utz’dakah / Giving to the needy, as justice requires
Ma’avirin et-ró’a hag’zerah / These diminish the harshness of the decree. (216-217)

Falk then concludes with the observation that “Nothing—no words, no poetry however eloquent—can fully extinguish the pain we feel in grappling with the inevitability of suffering and death. But living one’s life with integrity (t’shuvah) and with thoughtful appreciation (t’filah) and with acceptance of one’s responsibility for others (tz’dakah) can ease the difficulty and diminish the hardship (ma’avirin et-ró’a hag’zerah).” (219)

This is a thoughtful, and thought-provoking book. One quibble I have with Falk is her decision to retain the traditional language of a personified or gendered God. She explains that this reflects the language of the texts being quoted, not the perspective of her book (26) but it continues to jar. That point notwithstanding, Falk grapples with a wide range of issues that faces those engaged with the Days of Awe. In her creative poetry, she wonderfully weaves in biblical and rabbinic writings, giving new voice to those words. In a good way, she invites and provokes the reader to think anew what these words mean, and what they could mean.