

AS WE APPROACH THE HIGH HOLY DAYS this year, many of us will engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*—taking account of our actions over the past year. As individuals dedicated to bringing about change and building a better future for our own country and for Israel, we are continually striving to fully realize our own power, to find our own voice and to live in accordance with our values. Thankfully, Judaism gives us this unique opportunity to process, to repent, to renew our energies and to steel our resolve in committing to the important work that lies ahead.

As an organization, J Street is undertaking our own *cheshbon hanefesh*—reflecting on the record of our movement this past year and on our goals for the coming year. We protested the Israeli government's demolitions of Palestinian villages; we spoke out about the nation-state law, which erodes Israel's foundation as a tolerant, democratic and pluralistic state; we fought for humanitarian aid to the most disenfranchised Palestinian communities; and—here at home—we opposed President Trump's cruel immigration policies.

Today, we are fighting for important victories in the midterm elections that will enable us to build a bulwark against the administration's most reckless inclinations going forward.

We are keenly aware of the work that lies ahead and of the ways in which we must grow and improve in order to achieve it.

I'm honored to share with you three powerful reflections on the core concepts that define the High Holy Days—the ideas of *cheshbon hanefesh*, *teshuva* (repentance) and *b'tselem Elohim* (made in the image of God). Written by thoughtful and dedicated leaders in our pro-Israel, pro-peace movement, these short pieces explore how these Jewish concepts inform and reinforce our work.

I hope that these voices will challenge you—and inspire you to act. With so much at stake, each one of us can and must join in the struggle for peace, tolerance, democracy and a better future for the US, Israel and the world.

—*Shaina R. Wasserman, National Director of Rabbinic and Community Engagement, J Street*

ON ROSH HASHANAH we will recite the words: “Today the world was created, today the world was born.” The liturgy will remind us several times that we celebrate the birthday of creation. But based on one interpretation, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the sixth day of creation rather than the first. According to this idea, what we celebrate is not the creation of the world, but the creation of the first human being, the creation of humankind.¹

The creation of the first human is clear; humans were created in the Image of the Divine—*b'tselem Elohim*. Each of us—no matter our religion or nationality, our views, our wealth—is created in the Image of the Divine, and no person is less human than others.

This past spring, I spent a few months in Israel and crossed over the Green Line several times to join other activists. Once, I traveled with a group to the village of Auja, in the Jordan Valley, beyond the Green Line. We were there to accompany and protect Palestinian Bedouins as they grazed their sheep. These shepherds are regularly threatened with removal orders by the Israeli military, initiated by an adjacent illegal outpost referred to as “Omer's farm.” These orders are based only on the settlers' desire to drive the Bedouin away. The presence of volunteers helps the shepherds get a few hours of grazing for their flocks.

The first few hours that morning were calm, until a settler from the outpost saw us and called the Israeli Army. Soldiers arrived, with no legal order, telling the Bedouins to leave, saying, “You don't belong here.” When we approached the soldiers politely to ask for a military order, they ignored us. Our Bedouin friend was clearly afraid, and we walked back with him to his village.

It was very painful to see the fear in that man's eyes. He was relieved we were there and grateful. He appreciated that we treated him as a human being. Sadly, that was a rare occurrence for him.

To see the state-funded illegal outpost alongside the stark poverty and

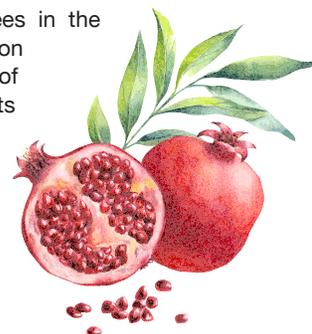
resources-deprived Palestinian village was a hard reality check of what the occupation looks like. It was hard to see the Divine in the Jordan Valley. I am grateful to the volunteers that I joined that day who live the notion of *b'tselem Elohim* with each visit. They will not allow the basic belief that all humans are created in the image of God to be forgotten.

—*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman, Temple Beth Zion, Brookline, MA*

ONE OF THE ROOT STATEMENTS of Torah that echoes throughout rabbinic tradition is the statement that all human beings are created *b'tselem Elohim*. The full meaning of that term has gradually emerged over the millenia. To be in the image of God means to have infinite worth. It applies to all of us, regardless of ethnicity, color, religion, gender or nationality.

On the personal level, that means connecting with compassion to every human being with whom we come into contact. On governmental and judicial levels, it means recognizing that every person possesses (or ought to possess) equal rights—equal justice, equal opportunity and equal freedom. And it means ensuring that every person has sufficient food, housing, clothing, education and medical care. That equality also entails respect for each person's culture

and language. J Street's stand on refugees in the United States specifically—and on immigration in general—reflects this deep understanding of human rights. The same standard explains its concerns in Israel, where J Street opposes the nation-state law, which eliminates Arabic as one of the official languages of Israel. In seeking full equality of rights for Arab Israelis and decent treatment for



¹ Pesikta d' Rav Kahana 23:1

Palestinians, J Street is demonstrating its commitment to seeing every person as *b'tselem Elohim*.

Elul and the High Holy Days are a season for *cheshbon hanefesh*, an inner accounting. One of the things I think about is whether I have met each person in a way that has allowed me to encounter them as a full human being and not just in the roles they are in. Another is the ongoing effort amidst the charged world in which we live to free ourselves from racism, ethnic triumphalism and other forms of bias.

As a deeply committed Jew, I also struggle with how to help the Jewish people be a voice of righteousness around the world and particularly in Israel, where all too often inequality and callous disregard for minority rights rear their ugly heads. One of the reasons I am glad to be part of J Street is that it helps me strengthen my resolve and stand up for what I believe to be just.

Only when my inner life and the world we live in reflect our highest values will my task of *cheshbon hanefesh* be complete.

~ **Rabbi David Teutsch**, Co-Chair, J Street Rabbinic & Cantorial Cabinet

THE RABBINIC CLAIM that we are all created *b'tselem Elohim* is, ultimately, a tragic one. Every small cruelty attests to our refusal to live up to the demand inherent in the rabbis' assertion: If we truly understood that each person was a reflection of God, how could we ever consider harming one another?

In one of my favorite childhood books, a young hero defeats a despotic wizard-king with a spell that makes the latter aware of all the pain he has caused. He suddenly realizes that each of his countless, anonymous victims was a *person*. He goes mad with anguish.

In our world, there is no spell we can cast to force power-holders to recognize the divine humanity of those they are harming. Events in Israel this past year – the Nation State law, village demolitions, heightened racism – have demonstrated that the Israeli government is perhaps further than ever from recognizing Palestinians to also have been created *b'tselem Elohim*.

Nelson Mandela stated that “[t]he oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.” When we fail to see God in others, we become blind to our own holiness, too. This Rosh Hashanah, let us pray for *teshuva* – a turning – that allows Israelis and Palestinians to see each other face-to-face. “[T]he face,” wrote Emmanuel Levinas, “is what forbids us to kill.”

~ **Aron Wander**, Northeast Organizer, J Street U

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J Street National Conference

October 26–29, 2019

jstreet.org/conference



J Street organizes and mobilizes pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who want Israel to be secure, democratic and the national home of the Jewish people.

Working in American politics and the Jewish community, we advocate for policies that advance shared US and Israeli interests as well as Jewish and democratic values, leading to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



חֶשְׁבוֹן הַנֶּפֶשׁ

CHESHBON HANEFESH:

AN ACCOUNTING OF THE SOUL

Reflections on the High Holy Days 5779

