

# RABBI · 2 · RABBI

**A selection of conversations between  
Rabbi Lisa J. Grushcow and Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

*From Rosh Hashanah 5776 to Rosh Hashanah 5777  
one year of reflection on Jewish identity and values.*



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*These texts appeared in the Canadian Jewish News  
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# WAKENING TO THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

By *The CJN* -

September 16, 2015

*Whenever the worst in humanity emerges, Jews are first in line to help out and can be counted on to display the best in humanity*

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## **RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN**

BETH AVRAHAM YOSEPH CONGREGATION, TORONTO

## **RABBI LISA GRUSHCOW**

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** Coinciding with the High Holiday season, the world has woken up to the Syrian refugee crisis. The awful death of three-year old Alan Kurdi, his brother and mother has left us with indelible images of the human costs of this tragedy.

Looking in the machzor, I see the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, with the words, "Who by fire, and who by water" and I think of those drowned trying to reach safe shores. It is not a new problem – either in terms of the current refugee crisis, or the history of human suffering – but it is addressing us with urgency this year.

I announced on Rosh Hashanah that our temple will sponsor a Syrian refugee family, just as we sponsored families when the Vietnamese boat people came. I hope that in this way, we can make a difference in the new year.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** My mother was one of the 10,000 children saved during World War II on the Kindertransport by the British. Although her parents perished, had it not been for Britain's compassion for a refugee, neither she nor her entire family would be alive today. So I certainly feel the obligation to welcome as many refugees as we can.

That said, our shul, in consultation with the Canadian government, will be working on sponsoring Christian and other non-Muslim refugees from Syria. These refugees' lives are the most endangered at present, since it's too dangerous for them to even be in refugee camps. They include Yazidis, Chaldeans, Armenians and many others.

I applaud your efforts and hope that *HaShem* allows us to "pay it forward." We can do no less.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote about the refugee crisis, and he, too, cited the Kinder transport. He then went on to say something that I think is essential: "I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbour, because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose colour, culture or creed is different from yours."

Like you, we will work with the government and other agencies to find a family to support. We will not specify a non-Muslim family, nor will we look specifically for one of any

particular faith. At times like this, I think it is our shared humanity that matters most of all.

God knows there are plenty of people who need help, and I believe God counts on us all to do it. There will be people affected by this long after the headlines have moved onto other topics. Together, may we have the passion and persistence to respond.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** The reality we all have to face is that no matter how many refugees Canada, Europe, the United States or any other country will be willing to accept, there simply is no way to absorb the more than four million refugees that are displaced and trying to find sanctuary. Until a solution is found on the ground to deal with ISIS, we simply have to triage the best we can.

One thing that the Jewish People are good at is making lemonade out of lemons. When people are in crisis, we are zealously the first in line to give *tzedakah* and help out. Whenever the worst in humanity emerges, you can count on our people to display the best in humanity.

May this new year augur blessings for the refugees and the entire world.

# DO WE NEED A JEWISH POPE?

By The CJN -

October 14, 2015

*We pray for a utopian period led by a messianic figure, but Judaism has survived and thrived by expressing itself in multiple forms, without a single leader or uniform approach*

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## **RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN**

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** With all the hype and media attention around Pope Francis' recent visit to the United States, I find myself musing about the state of our people, popeless as we are.

We don't even have a chief rabbi – Israel must have two chief rabbis, one for Sephardim and the other for Ashkenazim. And we certainly don't believe in rabbinical infallibility (just ask my congregants). Still, it's interesting to ponder: if there was a Jewish "pope" in some alternate reality, what would his message be? Would he be liberal or conservative? What colour would his (or her) yarmulke be?

Is there a message you think is universal enough for all Jews that the "Jewish pope" could successfully convey to the world about Judaism and the Jewish People?

**Rabbi Grushcow:** What a question!

I agree with you that our people certainly are not looking to grant anyone infallibility, nor should they. After all, even the high priest had to confess his sins on Yom Kippur, and rabbis, thankfully, are not even meant to be priests.

But when I think of moral leadership, I think of a rabbi like Sidney Shoham, may his memory be for blessing. He was a giant in the Montreal Jewish community for more than 50 years. He led by example. He was a superb pastoral rabbi, there for people in times of joy and sadness. He was a gifted teacher. And above all, he was a mensch, permeated by a love of other human beings and klal Yisrael. He beamed kindness. And, to me, a relative rabbinic newcomer and a female liberal rabbi, he, an Orthodox rabbi, extended warmth and collegiality. That's the kind of leadership I would want in a Jewish pope.

But I believe anyone worth the title wouldn't want it. And I also believe that our religion has survived and thrived by expressing itself in multiple forms, resistant to a single leader or a uniform approach. None of us know, in the long term, which way is the best way forward, which rabbi will be quoted generations from now and who will be forgotten.

And if we couldn't even agree on a gender, far be it from us to reach consensus on a message – or even the colour of a kippah.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** And yet, the traditional liturgy is replete with prayers for a future utopian period led by a messianic figure. Such a person is supposed to unite our people at the end of days, so that we truly feel like one nation instead of disparate tribes.

I agree that such a person will need to regard *ahavat Yisrael*, a genuine love for every single Jew, as the highest value, as well as compassion for every living creature. This Messiah is also supposed to lovingly welcome every human being to worship God and live a righteous life.

I think the person who came closest to being a Messiah for our generation was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and I'm sad that the void since his passing hasn't been filled with another leader possessing that same degree of vision, charisma and love.

We need to be more proactive in creating our future leaders and imbuing them with this kind of *ahavat Yisrael*. It should be the most important value inculcated into our children from a very early age.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** In the Reform liturgy, we have long since replaced the prayers for a single, human messiah with our hopes for a messianic age. As my mentor, Rabbi Robert Levine, titled his book: "There's no Messiah, and you're it." Each of us bears responsibility for getting closer to that messianic age, instead of waiting for someone else to come and save us.

Do we need to teach *ahavat Yisrael*? One hundred per cent. But for that love to be truly inclusive, it would have to recognize that the norm – and even the ideal – of our broader community is not exclusively Orthodox. It would have to recognize, and honour, that there are Jews making Jewish homes with non-Jews. It would give *kavod*, respect, to religious leaders across the denominational spectrum. It would celebrate different ways of being Jewish.

I'm not holding my breath. But I believe that another one of the most important Jewish values is hope. Perhaps our dialogue helps bring us one step closer.

# ORTHODOXY AND FEMALE RABBIS

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

November 10, 2015

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto

## **Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) just came out with a rejection of Orthodox women's ordination and any rabbinic-type titles or roles for women.

As a rabbi in the Reform movement, which has been ordaining women for over 40 years, I am in many ways an outsider to this debate and the beneficiary of the struggles of those who came before me.

However, I have the privilege of serving the Montreal Jewish community and am proud to have as colleagues here two Orthodox women who are also clergy. I see them serving faithfully within their understanding of Halachah, and, like most people who break barriers, they excel at what they do.

At the same time, no one is forced to hire them or agree with the halachic grounding for their ordination. Why is this seen as such a threat?

**Rabbi Korobkin:** I have no doubt that the Orthodox women who serve as clergy in Montreal are doing excellent work.

Women serve in various capacities in religious leadership roles throughout the Orthodox world. Our schools have female headmasters, principals and religious studies instructors. Our communities have *yoatzot Halachah* (experts in family purity law), Torah scholars and hospital chaplains (Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children's Jewish chaplain was the recently retired Gitty Edery, an Orthodox lady who served with great distinction for many years).

My wife and I serve our shul as rabbi and rebbetzin, and I can assure you that her role is just as vital of a leadership position as mine.

The latest resolution addresses the specific issue of conferring ordination. Orthodox tradition only permits this formal rabbinic appointment for men, just as Mormons only permit formal priesthood ordination for men. Changing ordination rules is viewed by many in our circles to be as much of a deviation from Orthodoxy as the removal of the *mechitzah* or the installation of an organ in the synagogue.

So I wouldn't characterize it as reacting to a "threat," but rather as a reformulation of Orthodoxy's commitment to *mesorah* (tradition).

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I hear you, and I understand that we work within very different understandings of Jewish law, but the Jews I know who are Orthodox and support the ordination of women also are deeply connected with, and respectful of, *mesorah*.

I also know that the role of rebbetzin is time-honoured and significant in many Orthodox communities. But why should a woman have to marry a man who is a rabbi to serve as

a spiritual leader? Why would one not want every spiritual leader to be trained and recognized as such (not to mention paid a salary)?

There is a tension here, of course. Judaism is about a tradition passed down for millennia, and the needs of the community usually outweigh individual needs. The answer cannot simply be that Orthodox women want to be rabbis so every other issue disappears. But it seems to me – again, with the humility of an outsider – that the Orthodox community is enriched by the spiritual leadership of all who have the ability and desire to serve.

My hope is that those who are in this debate will be able to go forward in a way that makes more room within the Jewish community, not less. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform – all are relatively recent groupings in terms of Jewish history, and none of us knows for certain which way is the best way forward.

It seems to me that there should be room enough for all of us in Jewish life, even with our disagreements.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** This is why many RCA members and officers – myself included – while agreeing with the substance of the resolution nonetheless voted against it. We believe that now is not the time to reaffirm our differences, but rather to find positive ways to work together amid our disagreements, even when those disagreements are about the very same *mesorah* we both wish to uphold.

My hope is that when the hoopla of this latest resolution dies down, Orthodox leaders will be able to more productively focus inward on the real social and religious ills of our communities, and then positively engage in outreach to the rest of the Jewish community to make *Klal Yisrael* more cohesive and strong. I look forward to sharing our common goals and strengths.

# STRIVING FOR LIGHT IN A DARK WORLD

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

December 10, 2015

*Putting Chanukah candles in our windows helps us share our values, which include helping others to see that the lives of all victims of terror have worth*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto

## **Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** Late last month, I travelled to Sharon, Mass., to pay a shivah call to the family of Ezra Schwartz, the 18-year old yeshiva student who was murdered by terrorists on his way to delivering snacks to IDF soldiers. His death hit hard for so many in our community who have sons and daughters studying in Israel. Ezra was all our sons and daughters.

His death was also marked by a moment of silence at a recent New England Patriots football game, since Ezra was a big fan.

In light of what happened in Paris, the world is starting to be more sympathetic to what Israelis regularly endure. I sometimes feel guilty about my schadenfreude, the satisfaction we sometimes get over others' misfortune. And yet it seems that unless the world is exposed to its own terror, it doesn't feel compassion for Israel's plight.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I think that the terrible attacks in Paris reminded all of us that we live in an inherently unpredictable world and that every country can be touched by acts of terror. I lived in New York City before, during and after 9/11, and I remember experiencing a similar sense of vulnerability and fear, empathy and resolve.

What makes terror so terrifying is that it undermines daily life. No one should have to be afraid to go out to dinner, walk through their city, go to their house of worship or send their kids to school. Israelis have been living with this vulnerability for years. We have a lot to learn from their resilience. But I don't think we can do much about the world's double standard vis-a-vis Israel, except to keep bringing forward the human faces of those who live there.

What is more within our hands, it seems to me, is to support victims of terror wherever they are, to recognize that all of us are vulnerable and to live each day with courage and hope, to bring more light and drive out the dark. I think there's a holiday about that.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik famously said that with the establishment of the State of Israel came the discovery to the world that Jewish blood is not *hefker*, or free (that, too, was part of the miracle of Chanukah). I think that he may have been overly optimistic, since nearly 70 years later, the world still views Jewish blood as *hefker*, or at least not as red as other victims of terror.

This makes me sad, not only because of the injustice and double standard, but because this makes it harder for our community to fully mourn without reservation when we read of tragedies anywhere else in the world. There will always be a part of me that thinks, "At least now they know what it feels like to be an Israeli."

So yes, we are very much a part of the rest of the world. But as long as the media turns its back on stabbings of Israelis, as long as the UN resolutions condemning Israel far outnumber those condemning any other country, it seems that the Jew will remain the perpetual outsider.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Our ancestors, in their wisdom, taught that the chanukiyah must be placed in the window, where it can be seen by the outside world. This has at least two messages: first, confidence in showing who we are, and second, sharing our light with the world. In the face of darkness, our role is to add to the light.

Personally, I don't feel schadenfreude over others' misfortune. Rather, what seems most important to me, in the simplest terms, is to acknowledge that there is great darkness in the world and to do our best to spread light.

Of course, I want the world to understand that Jewish lives are precious, along with every human life. But I mourn for all the victims of terror without reservation. I fear for a world in which civilian life and civil society are endangered. And I pray for a world in which light prevails over darkness.

To strive for a world of light and peace will require a joint effort. Let our enemies try to differentiate between Jew and non-Jew, or to claim that some lives have less value than others. We have a different task.

# CROSSING DENOMINATIONAL LINES

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

January 12, 2016

*Jews are part of one people above and beyond our differences, and we become a greater whole when we stop seeing our brothers and sisters as 'the other'*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto

## **Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** I'm leaving soon for the annual Wexner Alumni Conference, which gathers rabbis, cantors, educators, and Jewish community professionals from across North America and beyond.

One of the aspects of the fellowship that I value most is that it brings together Jews of all different denominations (and none). It's an opportunity for collegiality in the deepest sense and a chance to ask the big questions of Jewish life across the lines that often divide us.

Here in Montreal, I am grateful for my colleagues across denominations as well, and our ability to come together on the Montreal Board of Rabbis. What's your experience of cross-denominational relationships in Toronto?

**Rabbi Korobkin:** I'm also grateful for the opportunity to liaise with colleagues from the different movements. I find that while we may often disagree on how to approach religious issues, there is so much that we can work on together for the sake of the larger Jewish community.

Here in Toronto, there is a rich history of Orthodox rabbis having real and meaningful friendships with their non-Orthodox counterparts. In more recent years, however, this open corridor seems to have been sealed. Some in my community have even been critical of me for having this ongoing written dialogue with you, in their perception that by doing so, I'm "elevating" you and granting you "legitimacy."

Clearly, I disagree with their perceptions. Your legitimacy cannot be granted or rescinded by any person.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** It saddens me to hear of these attacks, and I'm glad you continue our dialogue regardless.

From the other end of the spectrum, I sometimes find that in Reform communities there can be over-generalizations about Orthodoxy. Most of all, I've encountered the assumption that all Orthodox Jews think all Reform Jews are bad Jews, or not even Jewish.

I try to teach that we are part of one people above and beyond our differences, and that it is better to encounter than assume. I wonder what, beyond our dialogue, we can do to encourage these connections.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Misperceptions abound. It's not just Orthodox versus Reform. It's Sephardi versus Ashkenazi, modern Orthodox versus haredi, Hungarian Jew versus Polish Jew, politically liberal versus conservative, etc. When we stop seeing our brother or sister as "the other," we are all enriched and become a greater whole.

Is there more we can do? Of course. One project some BAYT members do in December is to feed the homeless in collaboration with Temple Har Zion, a Reform congregation. But we can, and should, be doing more. The more points of access we can create between our various communities, the stronger we will all be.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Co-operation on social justice issues is a good starting point. I would also love to see ways for us to visit each other's synagogues, learn from each other's rabbis, study Torah together, and even share Shabbat, without falling back on the belief that there is only one right way. It's not easy, but neither is it impossible.

I'll be honest: growing up as a Conservative Jew in Toronto, we called Holy Blossom "the church on the hill." Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, where I now have the privilege of serving as rabbi, was sometimes called "the church on Sherbrooke Street" by other Montreal Jews. From the other side, "black hats" can be a term used in a derogatory way, which distances us from each other.

One more easy step could be following the mitzvah of *shmirat halashon*, speaking of one another with respect and care.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** How right you are! It's often been said that we paint the median line of the religion road exactly where we find ourselves – everyone to my left is inauthentic, everyone to my right is a fanatic.

I don't agree with your way in Judaism. But you are my sister, and that's what really counts. Changing the way we speak about our fellow Jew sounds so simple. Yet the temptation to disparage the other is a weakness to which so many of us succumb, even among the most observant.

I find that the people who speak the least amount of *lashon hara* are also the most secure in their own identity, religious or otherwise. Perhaps we, together with our readership, can be part of that small revolution for change.

# KEEPING THE NEXT GENERATION JEWISH

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

February 9, 2016

*What is the best way to secure the future of our people, and should we be worried about our long-term survival?*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto

## **Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** We've been engaged in this friendly dialogue for nearly two years, and I think you know me well enough to see that my objective is not to criticize other streams of Judaism. My question to you this week is thus out of concern for the future of our people.

It's no secret that both Reform and Conservative Judaism are on the decline in North America. Memberships are down, schools are closing, and the next generation is checking out. (Granted, Conservative Judaism appears to be declining more rapidly than Reform Judaism, but that's shallow consolation.) Moreover, many have suggested that Reform congregations are only able to maintain their current levels by accepting more intermarried families. Even the relatively small percentage of Orthodox who leave the fold are not largely joining Conservative or Reform congregations, but are instead going completely secular.

What is the end game? Is there any plan to stem the hemorrhaging of our tribe? How can we save these Jewish souls and keep the next generation part of the faith?

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Denominations are modern inventions. As I often teach, we have Napoleon to thank for the current configuration of the Jewish world. The act of making Jews citizens raised the question of how to be a Jew in a world that actually accepts us.

I'm deeply committed to Reform Judaism, because I think it opens important doors and has a compelling vision of Jewish life. We don't welcome intermarried folks because we are worried about our numbers – we welcome them because we believe they make the Jewish people stronger.

Will Judaism in 100 years have the same configurations and denominations? Almost certainly not. Will there still be different approaches and ideologies, communities and practices? Almost certainly yes.

In terms of the current difference between movements, I think a lot has to do with simple demographics – Orthodox families tend to be bigger, for example. But I'm not especially interested in a numbers game. I see exciting things happening in every part of the Jewish world.

Do we have to re-examine the synagogue model? I think we do. Should every movement do the *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, self-examination, to make sure we are serving the Jewish People the best we can? Absolutely. But am I worried about the long-term survival of Judaism? No. I trust God on that one.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Faith and optimism in the eternity of the Jewish People is a wonderful sentiment, and it certainly is echoed in the Psalmist's promise that "God will never forsake His people." But that's not really the point I'm concerned about.

We as rabbis have a responsibility to create viable and durable Jewish institutions and ways of life that guarantee a future. Orthodoxy utilizes a foundational paradigm that has never changed – that is, the system of Halachah. When Jews commit to a life of halachic practice – Shabbat, kashrut, etc. – there is a greater likelihood that their children and grandchildren will adhere to and identify with Judaism.

As warm and welcoming as your congregation is, does it have lasting power? How many multi-generational families regularly pray with you? When Conservative and Reform communities memberships are down and schools are closing, is it not perhaps time for an overhaul?

**Rabbi Grushcow:** We have many multi-generational families at our temple, as did my previous congregation in New York. In fact, this past Kol Nidre, four generations of women lit the candles together.

It is possible to take Judaism seriously without being within the framework of Halachah. It is possible to take Shabbat seriously without observing a traditional Shabbat. I see my congregants doing this all the time.

Although a sense of traditional obligation has its power, there is also something incredibly compelling to a Jewish practice that is chosen. That's what keeps people in, and brings people in. Many of them are drawn here precisely because their Judaism matters to them, but more traditional settings just aren't a fit with their values and their lives.

I say all this with respect equal to that with which you started this conversation. We both care deeply about Judaism. My own conviction is that the Jewish world is stronger because both our communities are here.

# TOLERATING DIFFERENCES AMONG JEWS

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

March 9, 2016

*Rabbis must address the denigration of other forms of Judaism and speak up against intra-Jewish disparagement whenever they hear it*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

Beth Avraham Yoseph Congregation, Toronto

## **Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, Montreal

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** I've just returned from England, where I had the pleasure of being the scholar-in-residence at a leading Reform synagogue.

My hosts, lay leaders in the synagogue, are very involved with progressive Judaism in Europe and worldwide. One of the topics of our conversation was the negativity expressed by more traditional Jews against more liberal ones. This is expressed in a wide range of contexts – anything from Orthodox rabbis refusing to stand beside non-Orthodox rabbis at official events to court battles to keep progressive synagogues from state recognition (which is very important in Europe), to disparaging remarks made at dinner parties.

Here is my question, posed with respect: why does it seem to be so difficult for those in the traditional camp to understand different ways of being Jewish? And why does it so often feel like open season on liberal Jews, even from those whose affiliation may be Orthodox, but whose practice is anything but?

My own feeling is that if someone is Jewishly connected, that's a positive for the Jewish People as a whole. If there were only one form of Judaism – yours or mine – there are many people who would fall away from Jewish life entirely. For that reason, among others, I am adamant about not speaking badly about other denominations, and I don't tolerate negative remarks against other Jews, but I'm not sure that practice is shared.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** It's important to distinguish between two things that you've conflated. One is the unwillingness of some Orthodox rabbis to work with Reform rabbis on an institutional level. The other is interaction and acceptance of individual Jews as kinfolk between the Reform and Orthodox communities.

Do haters and xenophobes exist? Of course. If you're looking for them, they can be found in both "camps." But by and large, I have not encountered the insults and disparagements of Reform Jews that you speak of within the Orthodox world. If anything, there is a desire among most Orthodox Jews who seek to engage those outside their immediate community and to be genuinely tolerant of others' expressions of Judaism while at the same time not shying away from their own pride in their Orthodoxy.

When it comes to institutional recognition of Reform Judaism – not Jews – that is a different kettle of fish. Some rabbis fear that giving recognition to Reform clergy also

lends credence to their religious and/or theological positions, including Reform's attitude to Halachah, which is untenable for Orthodoxy.

But I have rarely, if ever, heard an Orthodox rabbi insulting Reform Judaism from the pulpit. For most Orthodox rabbis, that battle was fought long ago – it's water under the bridge.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I find your response heartening, but I'm not entirely sure how to square it with the insults lobbed against Reform Jews that we hear from Israeli Orthodoxy on a regular basis. Perhaps this is simply a product of what happens when religion gets mixed with politics.

But I wonder: do Orthodox rabbis address the bad-mouthing of non-Orthodox Jews that goes on among congregants? I know it's not a one-way street, but I also know that I consistently try to speak up against any intra-Jewish disparagement when I hear it. I'm fortunate to have good colleagues across denominations here in Montreal, and I'm confident we stand up for each other. But how might we better address the denigration of other forms of Judaism that goes on outside the walls of the synagogue?

**Rabbi Korobkin:** True, there's always the occasional quote from a religious political figure in Israel bashing Reform Judaism. It makes for a titillating headline, but I just shake my head in dismay. Any invective among Jews is counterproductive, to say the least, and is reflective of the disunity that has prevented our redemption to date. But in the end, I would offer you the same fatherly advice that I offer anyone facing bullies: don't let the bully's intimidation daunt you or diminish your efforts. Instead of insulting back, prove the bullies wrong. Show the naysayers that your Judaism is sincere, holy, consistent and fully committed.

In that vein, I would humbly suggest that the biggest threat to the new egalitarian prayer section at the Kotel (and I'd love to be proven wrong) is not the Orthodox criticisms of it, but rather the possibility that it may not be attended in large numbers by passionate *daveners*.

# PURIM, PESACH AND THE PRESIDENT

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

April 7, 2016

*Donald Trump's presidential run mirrors the erosion of civility in society at large, and in the Jewish community too*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

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## **Rabbi Lisa Grushcow**

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** As an American, I am watching with great interest and consternation as the election of a new president gets closer. I am alarmed at the surprising popularity of Donald Trump. Is it understandable that a large number of Americans have become disenchanted by the status quo, by the career politicians and all their double-speak? Yes, and that is part of Trump's appeal of this brash and aggressive anti-politician.

I'm quite concerned about what a Trump presidency may mean to the fabric of our society. We've seen a frightening erosion of civility in the public sphere over the last few years and Trump seems to be the living incarnation of this pent-up fury.

We're witnessing the same kind of rhetoric and blind allegiance to a charismatic leader that appeared in the 20th century with various despots, and these regimes never ended well for the common citizen. And yet, perhaps what America needs now is a strong leader who has the necessary vision and determination to secure the borders and destroy terrorism once and for all.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Perhaps not surprisingly, you and I are not on exactly the same page in our political beliefs. But, like you, I am very concerned about the Trump campaign, and how easily charisma can turn into demagoguery. I am especially disheartened by what happened at the AIPAC convention, where thousands of Jews stood up and cheered as a candidate insulted a sitting president.

How have we reached this point, where those who support Israel are assumed to be entirely right wing? And is our memory so short that we don't relate to those minority groups Trump stereotypes and insults?

We live in difficult times, but that's true in every generation. The important question always is, how do we respond? Purim teaches us the importance of mustering our courage – as well as our sense of humour – as we work to undermine tyrants. Pesach reminds us of the Jewish conviction that we will move from slavery to freedom, and degradation to praise.

In our Reform prayer book, there is a line that reads, "We pray that we may live not by our fears but by our hopes, not by our words but by our deeds." The challenge is to live – and act, and vote – according to our hopes, rather than being drawn in by those who play to our fears.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Part of Trump's attraction is that he is playing to people's fears, but it's not that simple. Terrorism is real, and it's happening all around us. The Islamic State (ISIS) is getting stronger by the day, and both the current U.S. president and the Canadian prime minister seem to be ignoring, or at least playing down, this very real threat.

It's great to live by our hopes, but we need to realize that evil still exists in the world and to fight that evil with every fibre of our being. And remember: in order to defeat evil, the Jews fought and killed Haman and thousands of others anti-Semites in Persia.

Americans have seen less than satisfactory results from its current leaders. What impels so many to give Trump a second look is his resolve to make sure that evil does not triumph.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** For me, the great lesson of the Purim story is not the slaughter of the non-Jews at the end, which I think simply points to the incompetence of the king and the over-the-top nature of the story. Rather, I am drawn to the scene in Chapter 4 where Esther decides to risk her position as queen, and even her life. She is willing to use every resource she has to change the course of history.

There's no denying that ego is often a driving force behind leadership, but it should not be the primary force. I want our leaders to be those who feel called to serve, who are willing to risk their own safety and comfort for the sake of the greater good. I also believe that fighting terror will require a lot more than one or two good leaders.

It is not just political candidates but each of us who should ask ourselves what Mordechai asked Esther: "Who knows, maybe you came to your position for a time like this?"

# THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING THE SHOAH

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

May 5, 2016

*We must honour survivors, mourn the victims and proudly proclaim "Never again," all while continuing to grow a living Judaism*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** The Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel have been pillars of Jewish education for decades. We have taught our children that these two events are fundamental to their Jewish identities. But we are seeing less engagement with Israel in younger generations and an increasing distance from the experience of the Holocaust as well. I think we risk oversimplifying Judaism by restricting focus to these two aspects.

Emil Fackenheim wrote that the 614th commandment is to avoid giving Hitler a posthumous victory. But I don't think that the memory of the Holocaust in and of itself will motivate substantive Jewish choices. How can we make sure to hear the stories of the survivors and honour them, mourn the victims and proudly proclaim "Never again," all while continuing to grow a living Judaism?

**Rabbi Korobkin:** The last generation of survivors is gradually aging and passing on, and this has changed the entire paradigm of Holocaust studies. So it's not surprising that some of our youth might be less than enchanted with Holocaust studies. At the same time, new innovations are making the Shoah more relevant to today's youth. Projects like Facing History introduce the Holocaust through a contemporary lens of racism, prejudice and how evil stealthily and insidiously comes to prominence within society.

The dichotomy you present of choosing between remembering our past and moving forward with a living Judaism doesn't resonate with me. Not only is there no contradiction between the two, the very key to our future has always been through connecting with our past.

While Fackenheim may have overstated the role of the Holocaust in Jewish life, it is nonetheless a vital component. Not only do we honour the six million by remembering them, but we also provide more texture and context to the Judaism of today by connecting it to the world of European Jewry before the Shoah.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I believe deeply in the importance of the past to the present, and forward into the future. But your believing it and my believing it does not necessarily make it resonate with others, especially those who are farther removed.

Rashi, in his famous comment on the first verse of Genesis, asks why the Torah begins with stories. Why not simply begin with the laws? Because, he says, the stories give a context for the laws.

The most effective Holocaust education puts stories in the foreground. I am thinking, for example, of the survivors who share their stories with our *bnei mitzvah* students at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, or how our confirmation class learns about individual lives for our Yom Hashoah service each year. It doesn't mean we ignore the bigger context, which is critical. It does mean that we search for the lens that helps our students relate.

At the same time, the Shoah is one chapter in a much longer history. I want our students to know about Rashi and Gluckl of Hamelin, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai and Beruriah, Shabtai Zvi and Regina Jonas. I want our students to know the stories of Sephardi communities as well as Ashkenazi ones, and about Jews from Africa and Asia as well as Europe. We need to keep telling the story of the Shoah. We need to acknowledge evil to keep it from happening again – and not only to us, but to anyone. And we need to make room for many stories, so every Jewish child can see themselves in our past, and see their way into our future.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** I agree that we can't sacrifice the pantheon of Jewish history for the Holocaust. But as a child of a survivor, my view may be biased. The Holocaust is unrivalled by any other event in Jewish history because of the sheer magnitude of genocide and devastation to whole communities and cultures.

Its uniqueness to our history – indeed, to world history – demands that we treat it uniquely and with greater emphasis. So I'm willing to tolerate the rolled eyes of some millennials if it means that we might get through to others.

The Shoah's impact, both on our past and our future, is too important to consign to yet another iteration of Jewish suffering. As we see the new anti-Semitism of the 21st century intensifying, we can't afford to do any less.

# HOW TO APPROACH ASSISTED DYING

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

June 6, 2016

*Are Jews obligated to provide a moral compass, or should rabbis simply present Judaism's wisdom while knowing that end-of-life decisions will be made by individuals?*

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** We'd like to think that Jews agree on the most fundamental of issues – life and death. With the advent of the new Canadian bill regarding physician-assisted dying (PAD), however, it appears that even on such crucial matters, there's no consensus.

Traditional Jewish law is clear and unequivocal: while heroic measures are not always mandated for the dying patient, hastening a person's death in any way is tantamount to murder, even when it's viewed by society as a "mercy-killing" or putting the patient out of their misery. And yet, sadly, no united statement condemning PAD has been forthcoming from Canadian Jewish clergy.

While the Catholic community has been able to present a united front of condemnation on this issue, the Jewish community is divided between the traditionalists who would uphold Halachah and the liberals who would subscribe to society's new definition of compassion. It is times like this when the schism within Judaism appears to be more gaping than ever.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** We can't compare the Catholic community, which is a hierarchical religious system, theologically united (at least in theory), with Judaism. Moreover, I would argue that while traditional Halachah is clear on not hastening death, many circumstances that we now face are different than those our ancestors encountered.

My own strong belief is that God gives us life, and it is up to God to take it away. But for someone who doesn't believe in God, or who believes differently than I, my religious belief cannot be the determining factor. So what can, and should, we advocate for? First and foremost, fully accessible palliative care, as well as safeguards so that no one feels a duty to choose their death.

We should do everything in our power to ensure the sanctity of life. But we can't pretend there is a unanimous Jewish voice on this issue.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Slow and painful death has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time, and so it really isn't related to new circumstances. Still, I'm heartened that you agree with the premise that one's life is not the province of the individual, but is rather God's.

But the wrongness of euthanasia isn't just a "religious belief." It is a universal moral issue, one that has far-reaching ramifications to the future of society. Witness the slippery slope that we are already beginning to see in the area of health care, and that will eventually spread. Once ending a patient's life becomes socially acceptable, then a whole host of other actions, including providing incentives for suicide, become viable. The cheapening of the value of human life is what is at stake.

So instead of imposing our religious beliefs, we Jews have a mandate to provide a moral compass to society, especially when society's own compass is running amok.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I, too, am deeply concerned about the slippery slope this legislation creates. But having encountered this issue recently from a pastoral point of view, I think we need to recognize that people will make different choices.

I spoke to someone recently who was told that God would abandon him if he made certain choices about his life and his illness. My understanding is the opposite: that God is with us especially when we suffer or feel scared and alone. I also believe that God gives us more resilience than we can imagine, so we are obligated to teach the importance not only of life, but of hope.

Perhaps one of the things that distinguishes us is the liberal Jewish insistence on the ability of the individual to choose. Just as I am present for a Jew who has chosen cremation, honouring his or her final wishes, so, too, will I be present for those who choose physician-assisted death. Life and death are in God's hands, but we humans also are involved. Part of our moral compass is to ensure that whatever choices someone makes, they need not be alone.

People want to learn the wisdom that Judaism has to offer on these difficult questions. Let's take up our roles as advocates for what we believe is right, but let us also teach knowing that at the end of the day that these life-and-death decisions will be in individual hands.

# MAKING CONNECTIONS

# TRANS-TEXTUAL

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

July 1, 2016

*In a beit midrash, there are no rules of engagement, other than a commitment to study for the sake of Torah itself and to be open to ideas other than our own*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** I'll be in Jerusalem next month as part of the Shalom Hartman Institute's Rabbinic Leadership Initiative. One of the reasons I applied for the program is that I welcome the opportunity to study with other rabbis of different denominations. Doing so was a very meaningful part of my rabbinic formation as a Wexner Graduate Fellow, and I count Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist rabbis among my closest colleagues and friends.

Here in Montreal, we also have that inter-denominational collegiality. In fact, one of the other members of my Hartman cohort is fellow Rabbi 2 Rabbi contributor Rabbi Mark Fishman. He and I will not only be studying together this summer, but we'll also be serving as co-presidents of the Montreal Board of Rabbis this year.

It is sometimes surprising for congregants to find out about these sorts of close connections and mutual respect between rabbis of different denominations. But for most of us, our shared conversations are simply, and happily, part of the Jewish world we inhabit. So here is my question: if you and I could sit together and study a text, what would you want to study?

**Rabbi Korobkin:** The beit midrash – the Torah study hall – is the best place for two people to meet and share ideas. There are no rules of engagement other than that we both commit to study *lishmah*– for the sake of Torah itself – and that we are open to ideas other than our own. I've often found that studying a familiar text with someone who's never been to yeshiva provides the most insight, because that individual comes with a new set of eyes and no predetermined rules of how to study that text.

So what would I want to study with you? Here are a few possibilities: Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's *Kuzari*, a masterpiece of Jewish theology written by a Jewish poet and philosopher of the 12th century; chassidic texts, such as *Shem MiShmuel*, *Mei HaShiloach*, *Sfas Emes*, and *Sod Yesharim*, written by disciples of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, who had an intellectual approach to chassidism; *Orot HaTeshuvah* and other writings from Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, whose universalistic

approach would, I believe, be appealing to you; and, perhaps, some writings from Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin, who grew up in the yeshiva world of the early 20th century, left it for the secular world for a significant portion of his adult life, and then, after World War I, returned to his roots.

Which texts would you wish to study with me?

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I'd want to study the end of the tractate of Sotah, because I think it has interesting things to say about change. Similarly, I'd want to hear your thoughts on the famous passage in Baba Metzia 59b about how the Torah is not in heaven but in the domain of human beings. I'd want to look together at the story of Kamza and bar Kamza (Gittin 55b), about how internal dissension can lead to disaster, and at the passages regarding the disputes between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. I would also bring some of the modern texts which have been central to my own intellectual and spiritual growth – Dr. Rachel Adler's theological writing in *Engendering Judaism*, for example, and some of Rabbi Neil Gillman's work.

Last, but not least, I like the thought of simply studying the weekly parshah together. As congregational rabbis, this is probably the material with which we engage the most.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** The Talmud states that just as our faces are all unique, so are our ways of thinking. This is the tremendous benefit of "chavrusa," the study partner who opens our eyes to new vistas.

The irony is that embracing different perspectives is being shunned by our "enlightened" society. Today's world consists of "microaggressions," "trigger warnings," and "safe spaces." Some universities and organizations seek to shield their students or members from being exposed to ideas that run contrary to their idyllic intellectual bubbles. But that has never been the path for the student of Torah. We study Torah to find the truth, no matter how "painful" the pathway to that truth-finding might be.

That's why I welcome the opportunity to dialogue and study with those outside my "shtetl." I look forward to studying Torah with you in the future.

# ALCOHOLISM: A PROBLEM WE CAN'T IGNORE

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow -

August 8, 2016

*Alcoholism and other forms of addiction are just as prevalent among Jews as they are in other communities, and we actively do harm when we pretend we're immune*

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## **Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin**

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** Our shul will soon be hosting a Jewish Addiction Community Services (JACS) Toronto symposium. JACS serves anyone in our community who is suffering from addiction, be it to chemical substances – legal and illegal – gambling, sex, pornography or anything else.

I wish I could tell you that the statistics for Orthodox Jews are different from the rest of the population, but I can't. Unfortunately, addiction is as prevalent within our community as it is in others. The only thing that makes things worse for the Orthodox Jewish addict is that the addiction is so dissonant from an Orthodox lifestyle and ethic that it is too often ignored or covered up by the addict or the addict's family.

My hope in hosting this symposium is that by openly discussing the topic, we can open people's eyes to the symptoms of addiction, and also let addicts know that they aren't alone and help is available.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I agree that alcoholism and other forms of addiction are just as present within the Jewish community as outside it, and that we actively do harm when we pretend that we are immune. Moreover, I would argue that these two realities – the existence of addiction and ignoring addiction – are prevalent across denominations. Torah, strikingly, is not in denial: for example, we see the destructive drunkenness of Noah after the flood and its impact on his family.

I too have been privileged to witness the good work done not only by JACS, but Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Too often, AA is dismissed within the Jewish community as a Christian movement. But I know many dedicated Jews for whom it has rekindled their spirits and saved their lives. As rabbis, we can help by giving AA our "hechsher," and encouraging people to get help.

Too often, we aren't sensitive enough to the needs of those in recovery. I remember a groom who, when we were talking about the cups of wine under the chuppah in preparation for a wedding, asked whether grape juice could be substituted because of his addiction. As a result, now I always specify that either choice is fine.

We have grape juice available at kiddush, and we try to be thoughtful about how programs are developed and described (“Latke and Vodka” and “Torah and Tonics” are alliteratively appealing, but we need to be careful not to exclude). We do need to ask ourselves how much we highlight alcohol in Jewish life.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Our first step in helping the addicts in our community is to remind them that they are not alone.

The first of AA’s 12-step program is “we admitted that we were powerless over our addiction and our lives had become unmanageable.” The second step is “we came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” In a sense, any Jew who approaches God to do tshuvah (repentance) is acknowledging, “I’m addicted to bad behaviour, I want it to stop and I need Your help.” So the first step in breaking the taboo of addiction is to remind the addict that he or she is really no different from anyone else seeking to break free of their vices.

Additionally, defining addiction more broadly may prompt those who view themselves as perfectly healthy to examine if perhaps they’ve become addicts without even realizing it. It could be overeating, an obsession with social media or speaking lashon hara (gossip).

We’re all addicted to something unhealthy. The goal is to use the Torah and recovery techniques to bring us back to health.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** I want to emphasize the importance of your choice of words – “us,” not “us vs. them.” Addiction is a serious illness, with definable symptoms and treatments, and at the same time, there is a continuum on which all of us have habits we want to change. I think that our tradition’s teachings about idolatry are essential here. What do we organize our lives around? What choices do we make that are destructive? What do we worship in place of what really matters?

The struggle for a healthy body, mind and soul is one all humans share. I have found great wisdom and deep spirituality in those who have made the journey through addiction and into recovery. We have so much to learn from their voices.

# BURKINIS, *SHVIMKLEIT* AND MODESTY

By Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin & Rabbi Lisa Grushcow –

September 8, 2016

*How do we create a society that expresses its own values while making room for others?  
And just who are we protecting by forcing women to take their clothes off at the beach?*

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**Rabbi Grushcow:** The burkini controversy is in the news. Certain mayors in France have banned what they call, “beachwear which ostentatiously displays religious affiliation.” Clearly they are not talking about bathing suits with Magen Davids on them. For those of us in Quebec, this brings back memories of the debate around the Charter of Quebec Values, secularism, and the proposed ban on the wearing of religious symbols.

In contrast, I am reminded of the words of the Israeli consul general here in Montreal, who spoke recently at our Pride Shabbat service. He mentioned how Tel Aviv has a gay beach right next to an Orthodox beach, which is segregated by gender, and he cited it as an example of the diversity in Israeli society.

After a summer spent studying in Israel, these issues are very much on my mind. How does one create a society that expresses its values while making room for different behaviours and beliefs? Who gets to decide who is “us” and who is “them”? Is a secular society really protected by making a woman take her clothes off at the beach?

What Jewish teachings might guide us in thinking about how to approach these questions in terms of religious/secular pluralism and how we dress?

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Alexis de Tocqueville once said, “Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.” One of the cornerstones of western democracy is freedom of religion, provided that those religious beliefs do not impinge on the freedoms of others.

This new French ban is as theocratically odious in its form as the policies of those countries that ban bikinis. In the end, there’s no difference between the oppressive upholding of religious values and the oppressive upholding of secular values.

As it was during the Quebec Values controversy, this new ban is personal for people of all faiths. Many Orthodox women wear *shvimeit*, the Jewish counterpart to the burkini. And what about the non-religious woman who may wish to dress modestly at the beach? Maybe she has a scar she doesn’t wish to display, or has a poor body self-image.

This is such a bizarre and sad new manifestation of the cultural distortions that have manifested in the last few years. I'm proud of the fact that Israel has no tolerance for this kind of nonsense.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Agreed. Burkini bans aside, I'm curious about how issues of modesty play out in our own communities. I once wrote a responsum called *What Not to Wear: Synagogue Edition*, exploring what principles are relevant to what we liberal Jews wear in synagogue. What is most troubling to me is the traditional assumption that women distract and men are distracted; therefore there is pressure on women and girls, either to cover up or reveal.

I don't think legislation is the right path – personal choice is the cornerstone of a shared, secular society. But even in spaces like pluralistic Jewish schools, I am concerned that girls' bodies still are over-sexualized by teaching about what they can and cannot wear when they just want to be comfortable in shorts and T-shirts.

At the same time, I worry about the bat mitzvah girls who feel pressured into strapless dresses. And don't get me started on how much inappropriate attention is paid to what female rabbis wear! These issues always are played out on one gender more than the other, and I think we need to take that seriously.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** Wait a minute. You're suggesting that establishing dress codes in religious schools and limiting girls to modest clothing contribute to their "over-sexualization"? Sorry, but both history and data from modern studies indicate that teaching girls to respect their bodies by dressing modestly is proper and healthy. The real contributor to our over-sexualized society is the objectification of women as sex objects that began in the 1960s with the sexual revolution, and has only intensified since then.

I sympathize with a female rabbi who has to worry about what people – especially men – will be thinking about during her sermon, and especially when those thoughts revolve around her clothing and physical appearance. Then again, maybe the Orthodox policy of only having male rabbis in the pulpit has some wisdom to it!

# FINDING TRANSCENDENCE IN PRAYER

By The CJN -

September 29, 2016

*For many, it's rare to feel a connection to God, but it's possible if we focus inward with an open heart, and remember that quantity is more important than quality*

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## **RABBI N. DANIEL KOROBKIN**

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**Rabbi Korobkin:** We all struggle with prayer. The whole concept is really counter-intuitive. The notion that I can and should expect the God of the Universe to listen to my infinitesimally small and insignificant personal petitions is itself fodder for doubt and disbelief. And yet, as the Protestant philosopher Friedrich Heiler, wrote, "Prayer is not man's work, or discovery or achievement, but God's work in man." That the human being has an entrée to a Higher Being at all is both a tremendous gift and a testament to the greatness of the human soul.

More often than not, I don't feel the connection to God that I know I'm supposed to feel. And yet, there have been those rare moments of inspiration when I feel that I'm truly standing in front of God, that He's listening, and that He really cares about what I have to say.

I don't think I'm alone in struggling to find that magic moment in prayer. What advice can you offer to the prayer-challenged parishioner who'll be visiting your pews for the High Holidays?

**Rabbi Grushcow:** We make a mistake when we think of prayer simply as a means to an end – "I want this, please give it to me." But the notion of standing before God is still something that can change us, and the world around us.

I think often of how the verb *lehitpalel*, to pray, is a reflexive verb in Hebrew. It's meant to direct us inward. Some of us understand that to mean connecting with the Divine. For others, it's taking the time – all too rare in our society – to connect with our best and deepest selves.

Moments of prayer have helped me find clarity in my own life choices; have motivated me to put my shoulder to the wheel in helping others; and have maintained my relationship with God, even in times of loss or doubt.

But here's the thing: I believe in prayer as a spiritual discipline, not because I think I will always receive moments of illumination, but because prayer leaves the door open. It creates sacred space. I have sympathy for those who come in on Rosh Hashanah not having been in synagogue for months. It's hard to come in and open the prayer book and connect. I would say to them – and to myself – not to expect that every moment of the

service will be inspiring. Part of any practice – prayer, exercise, music – requires investment before you see returns.

Have patience with yourself. Have patience with your rabbi. Try to come in with an open heart.

**Rabbi Korobkin:** What I'm hearing you say is that prayer will mean different things to different people, and at different times. You echo the rabbis' words that "the Merciful One seeks out the heart." God doesn't want us to just show up at shul, He wants us to engage with Him. As the Rabbi of Kotzk used to say: "Where is God? Anywhere you let Him in."

When people ask me how to make prayer meaningful, I tell them that it's less important to always be at the same place in the prayers as the congregation.

Better to focus on a specific prayer that speaks to you, and spend as much time as you feel you need to meditate upon and absorb its words.

As with most truly meaningful things in life, it's quality, not quantity.

**Rabbi Grushcow:** Let me take the advantage of the last word to raise one more idea: the language we use to talk about God can make prayer difficult.

Referring to God exclusively as male feeds into the image of God as a bearded old man in the sky, dispensing punishments and rewards. Not only is this an alienating image for many people, it also misrepresents the theological diversity of our tradition.

In the Tanach, God is described as anything from a rock to a fountain, a warrior to a woman in labour. Somehow we have lost many of these metaphors. We would do well to recover them. There is beauty in the familiarity of the High Holiday prayers, but we risk forgetting that when we talk about God and prayer, we are talking about something real.