

The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holiday Season

by Marcia Falk

(Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014), 260 pp.

If, like me, you find that the High Holy Day prayers focus too much on repenting for our sins and not enough on our opportunities for renewal, then you will welcome Marcia Falk's latest contribution to our liturgy, *The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holiday Season*. Almost two decades after publishing her groundbreaking *The Book of Blessings*, Falk has created, not an alternate *machzor*, but "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 others" (p. xxii).

Falk's approach to *t'shuvah* echoes that of the venerable Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, when he writes: "Those faults ought to be regarded as the seeds of virtue, in that they represent the trigger mechanism of the journey back which enables us to rebuild our personality and our past. You should regard the faults as something constructive like the beginning of a new and beautiful story."¹ *The Days Between* is filled with lush images of nature, gently guiding us toward a recognition of our blessings and our interconnectedness, as we are encouraged to reach for our better selves.

Between *The Book of Blessings* and *The Days Between*, Falk developed her own version of the *mizrach*, traditionally "a decorative plaque hung on an eastern wall of the home, indicating the direction to face in."² Utilizing her own beautiful pastel art work in conjunction with her innovative prayers, she designed a new form of *mizrach* to lead us "not to a geographical place but toward our inner east, providing a focus for meditation, contemplation, and the prayer of the heart."³ In the same way, *The Days Between* provides an opportunity for nonjudgmental introspection and for appreciation of the world and self as they are.

For example, she interprets and expands the conclusion to the *Un'taneh Tokef* "Who shall live and who shall die" section as follows:

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-róa hag'zerah

These diminish the harshness
of the decree.

Ut'shuwah

Returning to the inner artistry
that gives each life its form,

seeking to become
one's truest self

Ut'filah

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-róa hag'zerah

We become present
to the fullness of our lives

and untether ourselves from the fear
of what lies ahead (pp. 31, 33)

This is actually one of the few traditional prayers in the *machzor* that Falk reinterprets. For the most part, *The Days Between* contains original poetry, blessings, and prayers by Falk and Falk's translations of a few poems by other women. The book features Hebrew and English that is nonhierarchical, and imagery and themes drawn from the biblical and Rabbinic traditions. This material can be used in the home or the synagogue. *The Days Between* is laid out in five parts: Parts 1 and 3 focus on the themes of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur; Part 2 offers daily poems for the days between; Part 4 is a brief, self-contained service; Part 5 is an analysis of the *Un'taneh Tokef*. At the core of the book are three themes: *t'shuvah*, in the sense of "turning the heart" (p. xx); *s'lichah*, including "self-forgiveness" (p. xxiii); and mortality.

Falk's approach to death is anything but terror-filled. As she explains: "As individuals we die, each of us, without exception. But the whole of life does not perish. When we are able to see beyond our separateness and feel our enduring connection to that whole, we find a deeper sense of self. Death, too, accrues new meaning" (p. 219).

Given our renewed interest in spirituality and meditation, I think *The Days Between* is an essential addition to how we understand and approach the Days of Awe. Once again, Marcia Falk has provided us with fresh insights into the themes of our liturgy in lyrical and inclusive language.

Note

1. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Strife of the Spirit* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1988), 100–101.
2. <http://marciafalk.com/mizrach1.html>.
3. Ibid.

SUZANNE SINGER (LA03) has been the rabbi and educator of Temple Beth El in Riverside, California, since 2008. Previously, she served as a rabbi at Temple Sinai in Oakland, California. Before becoming a rabbi, she was a national public television producer and programming executive for which she received two Emmy awards.

The Veterans of History: A Young Person's History of the Jews
by Mitchell Silver
(Brookline, MA: Boston Workman's Circle Center for Jewish Culture and Social Justice, 2014), 328 pp., Selected Bibliography