

Book review of "When God is Near" by Rav Amital

When God is Near

by **Rabbi Yehuda Amital**

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Reviewed by Rabbi Ari Kahn

When reading any book written by someone you know (or knew), and most especially books written by one's own teachers or mentors, we can often hear their voice as we read the printed words, and we are transported back to the classroom or *beit midrash*. However, reading **When God Is Near** is more complicated: Rav Yehuda Amital spoke and taught almost exclusively in Hebrew, and in the time I spent at Yeshivat Har Etzion I do not believe I ever heard him speak any other language. Nonetheless, despite the barriers of time, place and translation, while reading this volume of Rav Amital's *sichot* (talks), I was able to hear his voice, and not only the teaching voice Rav Amital used when he addressed us in the study hall, but his voice as *shaliach tzibbur*, leading his beloved Yeshiva in prayer. In a certain sense, the latter may be the more important voice, for Rav Amital was, in the broadest sense of the term, a *shaliach tzibbur*, and it was this same role, this calling and sense of responsibility, that he strove to pass on to his students and followers.

While Rav Yehuda Amital's name may be familiar to the English speaking public the world over, I suspect that his *torah* is not as well known; perhaps this is one of the many unfortunate byproducts of the divide between religious Zionism and its close relative in the diaspora, modern orthodoxy. While these two communities face different challenges, the points of similarity between them make the present work (and others like it) all the more important to the observant English-speaking community outside the Land of Israel. Admittedly, few American Roshei Yeshiva will dedicate a key lecture or lesson to those who are not present in the room, as Rav Amital did regarding *talmidim* who were absent due to active military service. However, the underlying orientation, the educational message, the challenge presented by Rav Amital's *sichot*, should speak to every Rosh Yeshiva, and student: To raise students who serve the larger community and are engaged with the world beyond the parochial confines of the *beit midrash*.

When God Is Near is comprised of lecture notes and transcriptions of short pre-*selichot* – Rosh Hashana, and Yom Kippur talks, Rav Amital gave in Yeshivat Har Etzion. Each of these *sichot* shimmers with the introspection and holiness of the Days of Awe, while at the same time allowing the reader a taste of Rav Amital's personal *torah*. As a whole, this book is about responsibility. It is about personal greatness. Its foci are man, God and change. At various junctures, the reader may get the sense that Rav Amital was addressing himself, or perhaps allowing us to share his inner world. Those who were privileged and fortunate enough to have attended a *shiur* or *sicha* can still hear his voice speaking through the text; others may simply draw inspiration from the tremendous insight and wisdom each chapter holds. In either case, Rav Amital's greatness as a teacher is unmistakable: In each *sicha* he attempts not merely to impart information, but to mold and inspire his students, and to pass on to them his own passion for *Torat Yisrael, Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael*.

Rav Amital proves to be a sensitive reader of texts, whether the text in question is biblical, rabbinic or liturgical - but that is only the point of departure for many of these *sichot*. His vivid imagination and ability to paint a picture for his audience are, quite literally, inspiring. Indeed, Rav Amital actually explains the basis for these flights of imaginative fancy (page 171): In **The Kuzari**, Rabi Yehuda Halevi encourages us to visualize the significant events of Jewish history, including the Revelation at Sinai and *Akeidat Yitzchak*. Rav Amital rises brilliantly to this challenge, and throughout **When God Is Near**, he shares with us what he sees: deliberations between biblical characters, scenes that he imagines taking place in heaven, and so much more. Similarly, his insights are often illustrated with scenes from his own past: the Europe of his childhood, or the war years, his experiences as a lone

survivor and his participation in the great drama of building a new country in a very old land.

In the chapters that comprise ***When God Is Near***, *teshuva* (repentance) is transformed from an individual concern into an issue of community responsibility. Unlike those who take great pride in the unprecedented numbers of Jews currently studying Torah, Rav Amital laments the unprecedented number of Jews who are distanced from Torah or who have rejected Torah outright. Despite having been born into a Hasidic Hungarian-Jewish family, Rav Amital fell under the influence of Rav Kook from a very early age; remarkably, Rav Amital managed to acquire and hold on to Rav Kook's writings throughout his years in Nazi labor camps. Rav Kook's concept of *teshuva* as a national goal, and not merely as a personal quest, was a major influence on Rav Amital, who would not allow himself to be satisfied with life ensconced in his Yeshiva when so much disbelief was ravaging the Jewish community just beyond the walls of the beit midrash. In this context, Rav Amital draws upon a daring teaching of the Hasidic master Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin: If a person's self-identification or identification by others is Jewish, this is sufficient reason to allow their conversion – even if their acceptance of mitzvot is lacking (page 214). The collective Nation of Israel includes all those “to whom the name Israel is applied,” and the holiness of the Jewish People falls equally on those for whom the sobriquet “Jew” is their only connection to Judaism. Rav Amital stressed that the purifying power of Yom Kippur is available to these Jews as well, even though their knowledge and practice may be limited when compared to that of the Yeshiva student. Rav Amital's message is clear: The privileged and entitled Yeshiva student should feel a deep sense of responsibility for the larger community, and never feel superior to other Jews simply because circumstances provided him with better Jewish education. Our introspection on Yom Kippur, then, must encompass the collective, with all its disparate elements, and we must pause and consider whether or not we have met our responsibility to the Nation of Israel. Additionally, we are called upon to take stock of our behavior as citizens of the even-larger collective: As human beings, we must take responsibility for the world in which we live, and universal concerns such as the eroding ozone layer and pollution are raised as well. God assured us that He would not destroy the world with a second flood, but we are given no guarantees that the world will not be destroyed by our own greed, carelessness or stupidity (page 149).

For the most part, the chapters of ***When God Is Near*** are undated, an unfortunate editorial oversight in a work so firmly rooted in the author's personal vision. Thus, for example, the many discussions of *Akeidat Yitzchak* leave the reader in need of a chronological anchor. Rav Amital wonders aloud about Avraham's emotions, thoughts and words as he made his way toward the holy mountain, his beloved son at his side. What personal *akeida*, we wonder, haunts each of these *sichot*? Is it the loss of his entire extended family, or of European Jewry as a whole? Is it the loss of his beloved students, killed while heroically defending the Land of Israel and its people that colors his analysis of the *Akeida*? In one particular essay, Rav Amital contrasts the willingness of the father to sacrifice his son and the willingness of the son to be sacrificed - with the “*shaheed*” (suicide terrorist). He reports searching through midrashic literature, to no avail: He could not find even one midrash in which either Avraham or Yitzchak are assured of a share in the World to Come that awaits after the *Akeida*. Rav Amital then goes on to express theological disappointment with those who believe in an abstract, non-corporeal God on the one hand, but whose vision of heaven is obsessively tangible, physical, “a place where they can realize their wildest and ugliest fantasies,” (Page 157) on the other. Had this essay been placed in historical or political context, the message would have been far more poignant to the reader.

I admit that I am unaccustomed to reading Rav Amital's words in English (although this is not the first volume of his teachings that has been translated). If I were to quibble, I would complain that at times the translation in ***When God Is Near*** is a bit formal: Often, a phrase or verse that is used as the starting point for an essay would be more easily understood in the original Hebrew. Though there are occasional transliterations, they are too few and far between. In fact, it would have been far more helpful to quote biblical verses and quotations from the liturgy in Hebrew; even for the average English-speaker, these basic texts are far more familiar in the original.

Despite these minor complaints, this is an important book. Rav Yehuda Amital was a great teacher, and the leader of a large and important community. He charged his students to take responsibility. He taught them to be independent, he groomed them to lead, and he charged them to be holy and to sanctify God's Name – and never to desecrate it. Unfortunately, Rav Amital's voice is largely unheard in many of the communities that have the most to gain from his teachings, and those who are unfamiliar with his work would do well to learn his *torah*, hear

and heed his unique voice, and accept his challenge: Dare to be great.