

# TOMORROW-MINDED

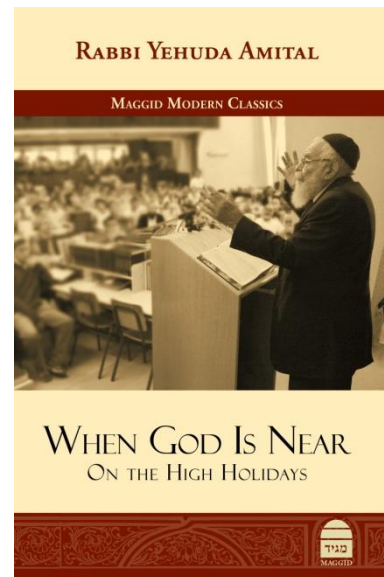
*Make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. ~Yehezkal 18:31*

## **Calling Upon God In Truth – Rav Amital on the High Holidays**

September 11, 2015 by [levidmorrow](#)

*When God Is Near*, Maggid Books' newly released anthology of High Holiday sermons by Rav Yehuda Amital zt"l, is an important step in making the teachings of R. Amital accessible to the English speaking public. The sermons are masterful glimpses into the thought of one of the leaders of Religious Zionism in the 20th Century. They contain the unique blend of erudition, intellectual sharpness, and emotional sensitive that characterizes all of R. Amital's torah. The book is divided into several sections, with each containing sermons on a specific topic: Selihot, Rosh HaShanah, Shabbat Shuvah, *Akedat Yitzchak*, Yom Kippur, and Ne'ilah; each with it's own themes and focuses. The section on Ne'ilah, for example, focuses on the opening of not just the gates of heaven but also, and more importantly, the gates of the heart. *When God Is Near* is a treasure trove of ideas and inspirations for the holidays.

Appreciating the book requires appreciating the book's format; Rather than being a book, it's a collection, and it collects not essays but *derashot*, sermons. This has several important ramifications. Though the derashot are overall short, with the largest around 9 pages in length, they cannot be raced through. Each one traverses a number of biblical and rabbinic texts and explains the text through innovative homiletics, typical of the classic rabbinic sermon. Further, the sermons do not attempt to discuss a single topic or fully convey a single idea, attempting instead to inspire the reader, to evoke an emotional response from the audience. Consequently they are short, and the texts of a given sermon are often only loosely related. The meaning of the texts lies not in their explanation, but in their internalization, as the reader thinks over the explanations and ponders them at length after reading them. However, the somewhat meandering feel of each sermon can leave the reader feeling like they don't have a solid grasp of R. Amital's derashot and his approach to the holidays. In service of this, *When God Is Near* has a phenomenal afterword, by R. Amital's son-in-law Rav Yehuda Gilad, discussing many, though not all, of the philosophical and educational themes in the sermons.



The themes discussed in the sermons are representative of R. Amital's unique approach to religious life. There is a strong emphasis on humanity, on the moral sensitivity that makes us human, even when it seems to run against the grain of piety. For R. Amital, piety that ignores morality is cruelty. One section of the book features discussions of *Akedat Yitzchak*, "the Binding of Isaac", with a focus on the struggle that must have been going on within both Avraham and Yitzchak, a struggle often manifest in the religious life of all Jews. However, R. Amital does not suggest letting the struggle consume a person, but rather suggests a certain simplicity, not despite complexity but in light of it, in our approach to faith. Without ignoring the problems we struggle with, we can embrace God and faith wholeheartedly. This simple faith cannot, however, come at the expense of those around us. The religious man is a man of the community, not in addition to, but as part of, being a man of God.

What I found most compelling, however, is a feature which is not discussed in the afterward, namely, R. Amital's creativity in reading and interpreting rabbinic sources. Many of the sermons, particularly those in the section on Selihot, focus on the tension between the life of an individual and their existence as a member of a community. In this context, R. Amital discusses, in several sermons, a midrash from masekhet Rosh Hashanah (17b).

And 'the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed...' R. Yohanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say! This verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself like a leader of a congregation (*sheliah tsibur*) and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.

The gemara here describes God telling Moshe that in order to be forgiven, the Jewish people ought to recite God's thirteen attributes of mercy, originating from Shemot 34:5-7. These attributes are the subject of another famous rabbinic midrash.

Just as He is called 'merciful,' so should you be merciful; just as He is called 'gracious,' so should you be gracious ... just as He is called 'righteous,' so should you be righteous ... just as He is called 'pious,' so should you be pious. (Sifri, Devarim 11:22; also Shabbat 133b)

This rabbinic text asserts an obligation of *Imitatio Dei*, imitating God, in connection to God's attributes of mercy. R. Amital's sermons quote this midrash (though, notably, the book does not give a textual source), and then take it one step further, extending the obligation of *Imitatio Dei* past the biblical text and into the previous midrash, requiring a person to metaphorically "wrap themselves like an agent of the congregation (*sheliah tsibur*)," to suppress their ego and take upon themselves the responsibility of working on behalf of the community. On the High Holidays, argues R. Amital, we thus stand before God as individuals, confronted with our personal actions and responsibilities, and as agents of the community, seeking its betterment and conscious of how our actions affect it.