

Rosh Hodesh Elul: New Year of the Animals

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It's Elul: the month leading to Rosh Hashanah.

When most of us think of “the new year” Jewishly, we tend to think of Rosh Hashanah – the Head of the Year, the new year of years. But Judaism holds that a “new year” happens four times in four different spheres. The 15th of Shevat (Tu BiShevat) is the New Year for Trees, when historically every tree became “one year” older.¹ Later in spring, the first day of Nisan is the New Year for Sovereigns, when the regnal year began, and also the start of marking sacred time for Festivals (i.e. the first of all months, according to Torah). The first day of Elul is the New Year for Animals, historically for marking tithes of domesticated cattle and sheep. In Temple times, one tenth of cattle and sheep would be Temple-bound, offered to the Holy One as a sacrifice, a korban / קרבן (from the Hebrew root קרב / to draw near).

Each of these four New Years is a new opportunity to begin again. These “fours” are evocative of a sacred geometry of Jewish life – Jewish mysticism’s [four worlds](#), Pesach’s four cups (and four questions, and four children), Torah’s four matriarchs, the four archangels, and more.

We moderns don’t have a Temple-based system to tithe animals for sacrifices, but Judaism’s ancient New Year for the Animals is still worth reclaiming and updating. It can remind us that we’re all stewards of the Earth and all her life. It can remind us that we too are animals, part of the web of life. It can remind us of the special love we feel for companion animals – a heart-opening love we need as we prepare for the heart journey of Rosh Hashanah.

May these offerings for the New Year of the Animals help us to draw near to our animals, our traditions, ourselves, each other, and our Source.

—The Liturgical Arts Working Group at Bayit

¹ [Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1](#). The Mishnah is a code of Jewish law compiled in the first centuries of the Common Era. Together with the Gemara, written later, it makes up the Talmud.

For our beloved companion animals, whose love can show us the way.

כל חי All life

<p>נשמת כל חי נברך את שמך לפחות כך אנו אומרים ובכך להכריז על קרבתך בכל שאיפה, בכל פעימות לב, בשדה בו אנו מתרופפים יחד</p> <p>מתחת לשמי קיץ בלי לדאוג שהקיץ סיים יותר ממחציתו ובקרוב צלולים הם בטוחים להימתח. הנחתי שמיכה על הדשא. אנו מאבדים את עצמנו עין בעין, משקיפים פנים אל פנים כמו מי מנוחות</p> <p>לשובב רק קצת משהו שלפעמים אני שוכח ששכחתי והבטחתי בשנה שעבר לזכור. גרגור מרוצה עולה מגרוןך או שמא זה משלי? - ועורר מיקודי. איך זה שאהבתך נראית כל כך קלה,</p> <p>כל כך לא מסובכת, וכל כך משחררת? אפך רטוב השוכן בפרווה מזכיר לי באמת שאני לדודי ודודי לי. אם זה השורר הוא זה שאנו מאכילים, מה אם נאכיל את זה ראשון - האהבה שרק בחיותה מראה את דרך התשובה?</p>	<p>Breath of all life, We bless your name – At least so we say, Proclaiming your proximity With every inbreath, with every heartbeat, In the field where we laze together</p> <p>Under a summer sky blithely uncaring That summer is more than half past And shadows are soon sure to stretch. I lay a blanket down on the grass. We lose ourselves eye to eye, Reflecting face to face like still waters</p> <p>Restoring just a bit of something that Sometimes I forget that I'd forgotten But promised last year to remember. A contented purr rises from your throat – Or was it from mine? – riveting my focus. How do you make love seem so easy,</p> <p>So uncomplicated, and so freeing? Your wet nose nestled in fur reminds me that I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. If the one that prevails is the one we feed, What if we fed that one first – the love that Merely by living shows the way back?</p>
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R. David Evan Markus

Breath of all life... – Morning liturgy for Shabbat and High Holy Days. **Proximity ... in the field** – Elul is when we imagine God closer than distant, like a sovereign nearby in a field rather than a faraway castle (Ba'al Shem Tov). **Shadows** – For the “valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4) of Yizkor on Yom Kippur, exactly 40 days after *Rosh Hodesh Elul*. **On the grass** – Psalm 23:2. **Reflecting face to face** – Proverbs 27:19. **Like still waters restoring** – From Psalm 23:3. **Promised last year** – For Kol Nidre. **Wet nose ... fur** – For beloved animal companions on this *Rosh Hashanah la-b'heimot* (New Year for the Animals). **Nestled** – in Hebrew, השוכן (*ha-shokhein*), for *Shekhinah*, the indwelling Presence. **I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine** – Song of Songs 6:3, whose Hebrew acronym is אלול (*Elul*). **The one that prevails** – From a Lakota parable of two sporting animals (for two human impulses, our “good” nature and our “base” instincts). **What if we fed that one first** – B.T. Berakhot 40a (halakhic duty to feed animals before we feed ourselves). **The way back** – This *teshuvah* month, returning by and to pure love.

Sometimes I Forget



Illustration by Joanne Fink

Blessing For Buster

This is a blessing for my old orange cat, Buster,
On the occasion of Rosh Hodesh Elul,
Rosh Hashanah La Beheimot,
The New Year of the Domesticated Beasts.

Buster was an athlete in his youth.
He's named for Buster Keaton because
He was always leaping and levitating
And doing triple axels on the ceiling
And he never smiled.

Buster was also kind of a jerk.
Standoffish and emotionally withholding,
He ruined two sets of venetian blinds and
Every screen in every window.
He broke all my small breakables
And
Sometimes I would catch him
Staring at his brother,
Sweet fuzzy cuddly Sammy,
With this look in his eyes
That said,
"I have no choice, I must bite Sammy on his ass."
And then he would.
Intervention only delayed the inevitable.

Have you heard of family systems theory?
When Sammy died, Buster took his place:
He got cuddly and loving and slept on my face.

And now Buster is very old,
He's 22!
He misses the litter box more often than not.
He howls very loudly when he's hungry
And howls very loudly after he has eaten.
He falls over when he sneezes!
Sometimes Buster walks down the hallway and then stops halfway
And you can see him thinking,
What was I doing?
Sometimes he remembers and continues on,

Sometimes he doesn't and goes back to bed.
Man, I can so so so relate to this.

Buster is an inside apartment cat,
My captive all his life.
He never got to serenade the neighborhood,
He never got to have sex,
He never got to fight for territory,
He never got to crouch in the tall grass stalking his prey.
Buster only murdered three mice, that I know of,
When the neighbors moved,
And it's a shame because he was born to kill.
How do I dare to offer him a blessing
When I have been at best a benevolent tyrant
Thwarting his every natural desire?

For fifteen months during COVID
Buster was the only living being
I could touch.

Bless you, Buster.
I love you.
I'm sorry.
Thank you,
My old domesticated beast.
Please don't die and
Happy New Year.
Amen.

Trisha Arlin

On the first of Elul

We will blow the shofar,
 And I'll read Psalm 27
 And if we're lucky we'll go for a swim together on Lac St-Pierre
 Kilometres of soft water filled with life
 And say hi to the family of ducks that we've gotten to know (they have developed a fondness for 3 day old challah²)
 And put on our goggles and spot the beautiful sunfish and wee minnows, perch and trout,
 maybe even the prehistoric-looking snapping turtle that I mistook for a rock until it swam away
 And then come back to the surface and watch the great blue heron circle us overhead
 And dry off and take our dog Zoe for a walk
 Eat some lunch
 And then drive past rolling fields spotted with cattle or glowing with corn
 Up a steep hill past the Gatineau River
 To Écurie Knight Stables
 And we'll go inside to the standing stalls
 Where Joey, Sam and Niagara will be nibbling on hay
 And Rebecca always uses the pink brushes for Joey - hard and then soft
 And Jake makes sure that Sam's hooves are clean
 And as I brush down Niagara I smile at how the kiddos are so focused, so calm,
 So connected to these beautiful beasts that tower over them
 And I help them saddle up
 And then we ride
 Together in the ring with our instructor
 Rebecca a natural trick rider, hands free
 Jake in perfect jumping position
 I just love being there, connected
 Working on trotting with my feet out of my stirrups
 Remembering how once as a young girl about Rebecca's age
 I rode bareback on a horse named Prince
 In a field, where my great grandfather once had a cottage
 Holding on to Prince's mane
 Laughing in delight

That's what I pray I'll be doing
 The First of Elul אֶלּוּל
 The New Year of Animals
 The month whose letters stand for *Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li* אֲנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי
 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine
 Connecting, and, hopefully
 Connected.

R. Dara Lithwick

² NOTE: No ducks were overfed or had challah more than once :-)

Where We Walk

where we walk now
bugs jump up into the air
with every step we take
in high summer grass
up the mountains
we spot burnt stubbles
deer wandering through
leaping elegantly over our fences
some months ago
a small, half dead particle
made its way into our bodies
maybe from one of you
things are different now for us living
rabbits, crows, and magpies are skipping
up and down our new-ish sidewalks
every now and then
I discover someone more unusual
far away from us
Jain monks and nuns
are covering their noses to protect
the flies from accidental inhalation
I don't believe in these separations anymore
whatever we do
we do it to you, too
we live on the same planet
we share the same earth
our water is your water
we breathe the same air
bugs and bacteria
wander from us to you and vice versa
I never touched a wild animal
but I feel beaks, claws, and gills
pressing against my skin
I want to get up
rush toward you
and caress your bodies
broken and breathing
b'ruchim atem, yah, breaths and voices and bodies of life
swarming the earth
never stop

R' Sonja K. Pilz, PhD

We are animals too

God is as close now
as blood pulsing in our veins,
that animal rhythm.

Our bellies know animal hungers—
a salt imbalance disguised
as a yen for Pringles,

or the way stone fruits
or avocados or ceviche
can be medicine.

We make teshuvah
not despite our animal nature
but with it:

with bodies that crave
and hearts that yearn,
like God's, *know me!*

No one teaches animals
to resent their bodies.
Show me how to love mine.

As Zohar reminds me,
*there is no place
where God is not:*

even my asthmatic lungs,
my animal being,
my imperfect heart.

R. Rachel Barenblat

[A]s blood pulsing in our veins. The Qur'an (Surah Qaf 50:16) teaches that God is as close to us as our own jugular. In Elul, according to R. Schneur Zalman of Liady, "the king is in the field," e.g. divine transcendence, usually inaccessible to us, becomes intimately present where we are. **Like God's, know me!** One of my favorite mystical teachings holds that God birthed creation in order to be known. **[N]o place / where God is not.** From Tikkunei Zohar, לית אתר פניו מיניה / *leit atar panui mineih*, "there is no place devoid of God's presence."

Closing Blessing

In Elul we recite Psalm 27:

*Only one thing do I ask of You, Yah:
Just this alone do I seek,
I want to be at home with you, Yah,
all the days of my life.*³

As our planet circles our sun, our home,
Teeming with flora

And fauna, and societies spread throughout

The four new years together honour the interconnected web of creation

This Elul may our animal friends teach us to live in balance, honouring the Divine

At home with you, Yah.

In our deeds, in our prayers

Giving and taking and creating and sustaining

All the days of our lives.

R. Dara Lithwick

Shofar / Closing Blessing

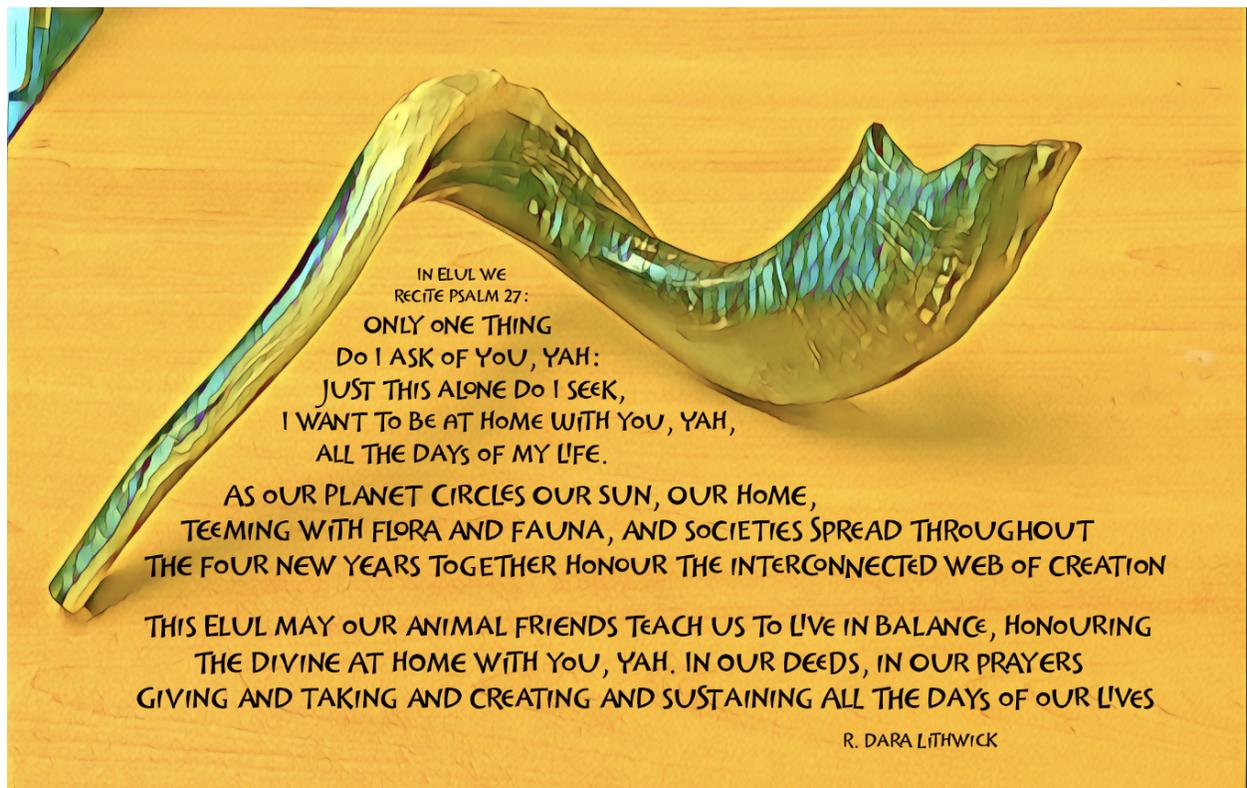


Illustration by Joanne Fink

³ Translation by Reb Zalman z"l.

Co-created by members of Bayit's Liturgical Arts Working Group, 2021.

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And our bios here: [Builder Biographies](#).