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Rosh Hashanah 2021

I have a confession: I have always loved the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

Whenever I hear “Amazing Grace,” I experience a sense of calm, comfort, relief, and peace. There is good reason that— with its universal themes of redemption and forgiveness through God’s mercy— “Amazing Grace” is performed over 10 million times each year.

“Amazing Grace” was written in 1779 by the Anglican clergyman John Newton. Newton was conscripted into the Royal Navy at the age of 11, and later became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. His spiritual conversion occurred during a violent storm off the coast of Ireland in 1748. Newton began to study theology and later became an abolitionist. “Amazing Grace” gained popularity in the United States in the 19th century, during the religious movement called the Second Great Awakening. Harriet Beecher Stowe added another verse to the hymn in her novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” and “Amazing Grace” became associated with the civil rights movement.

“Amazing Grace” is grounded in Christian theology and belief. In the late 18th century, “Amazing Grace” was part of a collection of hymns in which themes of faith in salvation, wonder at God’s grace, the love of Jesus, and joy in Christian faith are prominent. [[1]](#footnote-1) Although the popularity of “Amazing Grace” in the more than two hundred years since it was written has blurred its religious origins, it is—at heart—a Christian hymn. How could I, as a Jew, find comfort in a hymn so deeply rooted in Christianity?

During the last 18 months, I found that Newton’s hymn—with its message of God-given grace—has resonated deeply with me. I became curious about the meaning of “grace.” We might define “grace” as “unmerited divine assistance given to humans for their regeneration or sanctification,” a virtue that emanates from God.[[2]](#footnote-2) Because in Christianity grace is associated with the salvation of sinners, many Jews assume that grace is primarily a Christian belief. Yet the concept of grace—*chein* in Hebrew—has a long history in Judaism.

In the Hebrew Bible, *chein* is one of the attributes of God.  *Chein* describes God’s mercy, and in particular God’s compassion for the vulnerable.The concept of Divine Grace appears in God’s self-description to Moses on Mount Sinai:[[3]](#footnote-3)

וַיַּעֲבֹ֨ר יְהֹוָ֥ה ׀ עַל־פָּנָיו֮ וַיִּקְרָא֒ יְהֹוָ֣ה ׀ יְהֹוָ֔ה אֵ֥ל רַח֖וּם **וְחַנּ֑וּן** אֶ֥רֶךְ אַפַּ֖יִם וְרַב־חֶ֥סֶד וֶאֱמֶֽת׃

Adonai passed before him and proclaimed: “Adonai! Adonai! a God compassionate and **gracious**, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness…

The Book of Psalms contains numerous mentions of God’s gracious nature, as here in Psalm 116:

חַנּ֣וּן יְהֹוָ֣ה וְצַדִּ֑יק וֵ֖אלֹהֵ֣ינוּ מְרַחֵֽם׃

Adonai is **gracious** and beneficent; our God is compassionate.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the Talmud, divine grace is called מידת רחמים—the attribute of mercy. This quality is often contrasted with the attribute of justice: מידת דין. The Rabbis imagine God struggling to find a balance between these two attributes in creating the world, ultimately realizing that both mercy and justice are necessary for humanity to function.

"Thus said the Holy One, blessed be His name! 'If I create the world with the attribute of mercy, sin will abound; and if I create it with the attribute of justice, how can the world exist? Therefore I create it with both attributes, mercy and justice, and may it thus endure'"[[5]](#footnote-5)

Grace –*chein*—features prominently in our liturgy.

*Ahavah Rabbah,* the prayer that we say prior to the *Sh’ma* in our morning liturgy, asks God to be gracious to us (כֵּן תְּחָנֵּנוּ) as God was **gracious** to our ancestors in teaching them Torah. In *Sim Shalom*, the prayer for peace that concludes the Amidah in our morning liturgy, we ask that God grant us “peace, goodness, and blessing, **grace**, kindness and mercy.” (שִׂים שָׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חֵן וָחֶֽסֶד וְרַחֲמִים).

Our High Holy Day liturgy contains numerous mentions of grace, most memorably in Avinu Malkeinu:

אָבִֽינוּ מַלְכֵּֽנוּ

חָנֵּֽנוּ וַעֲנֵֽנו

כִּי אֵין בָּֽנוּ מַעֲשִׂים

עֲשֵׂה עִמָּֽנוּ צְדָקָה וָחֶֽסֶד

וְהוֹשִׁיעֵֽנוּ

“Our Father, our King, be **gracious** to us and answer us, for we have little merit. Treat us generously and with kindness and deliver us.”

*Chein* is unconditional love, writes Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg. We all have the capacity for *chein,* to be gracious and loving in our dealings with others. It is there, inside of us. It’s what comes to the fore when we step back, slow down, and stop trying so hard. *Chein*, Rabbi Burg teaches, is “a result of our deepest humanity, when we access the Godly part. It’s what our souls wish to be but also that which is so often checked by our egos, our fears, and our expectations.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, a tireless fighter for civil rights, was able to find grace in dealing with segregationists whose views on race were diametrically opposed to his. Justice Marshall, who established and became the executive director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, argued several civil rights cases before the Supreme Court, including Brown -v- Board of Education.[[7]](#footnote-7) Over the years, Marshall found ways to work with infamous segregationists. He recalled them, one of his law clerks wrote, “with respect, and even a kind of distant affection. People, he would say, are complicated.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

When asked what he thought of John W. Davis, the prominent lawyer who was his opponent in Brown v. Board of Education, and an ardent segregationist, Marshall said with a smile. “A good man. A great man, who just happened to believe in that segregation.” Marshall was able to grant grace even to someone who was on the wrong side of one of the most important moral issues of the last century. When given the opportunity on national television to condemn segregationists, Marshall responded in a measured way. This was not naiveté, his law clerk Stephen Carter writes. It was a mark of the genuine grace with which he viewed other people. And it was his ability to find that human connection, to “reach out across the greatest moral divide of the 20th century, that enabled the Judge to accomplish so much while maintaining his fundamental dignity and decency.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Even governmental and other public entities understand that, as human beings, we need grace. A recent law passed in Virginia provides a grace period to those with expired vehicle registration tags. The law prohibits police from pulling someone over and writing a ticket for a lapsed registration tag for four months after a registration has expired.[[10]](#footnote-10) There is a grace period in Maryland and other states for those whose driver’s licenses and registrations expired during the height of the pandemic.[[11]](#footnote-11) Many public libraries grant a grace period from fines when returning overdue library books. These grace periods are based on the understanding that—both during pandemic and non-pandemic times—life can get in the way of fulfilling obligations. If government entities can extend grace, so can we.

If there was ever a time that called for grace, this is it. The rollercoaster on which we have been living for the last 18 months shows few signs of slowing down. Although COVID vaccines have brought us a great measure of relief and protection from serious illness, we know that variants, coupled with the unknown nature of this virus, mean that we will continue to live in a sort of twilight zone for an undetermined amount of time. When “normal” returns, we have little idea of what it might look like.

While this unprecedented period has summoned our instincts of generosity and empathy, it has also at times highlighted—as Tsafi Lev writes— “our jealousy, our anger, our aggression, our survivalist selfishness.” [[12]](#footnote-12) These latter instincts contribute to our human desire to circle the wagons around our own loved ones, and to hold close resources that we believe to be ours. During the time through which we are living, it can be hard to tilt the balance in favor of our higher attributes. It can be a struggle to listen to what my grandfather called our “good angels” when we are living through a period that can call forth our instincts of fear and insecurity.

Grace can help us tilt the balance towards our good angels.

How can we extend grace, to others and to ourselves during this unprecedented time?

We extend grace when we give others—and ourselves— permission to be less than perfect.[[13]](#footnote-13) We can work to be more sympathetic to and forgiving of mishaps and missteps. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we make mistakes and that we are far from perfect.

We extend grace when we show kindness to others through our words and through our actions. We can operate from a position of positivity rather than criticism. We can be generous in how we view the myriad ways in which others are trying to cope during this very challenging time. We can be less judgmental of the choices that others make.

We extend grace when we respond to harsh words and rude behavior with calmness. We often cannot know what precipitates others to act in such ways. Extending grace means understanding that the other person is living as we are, during a time of enormous difficulty.

We extend grace when we ask for forgiveness. We do not have to wait for the High Holy Days to do this!

We extend grace when we accept a sincere request for forgiveness.

We extend grace when we look for opportunities to perform acts of kindness and when we approach interactions with a spirit of generosity, rather than cynicism.

We extend grace when we permit ourselves to be vulnerable. We strengthen our connections with others when we realize that we don’t have to appear “strong” and “brave” all the time. Letting others know how we truly feel can encourage them to do the same.

We extend grace to others—and to ourselves—when we diminish the number of “should haves” or “ought tos.” Living through a pandemic has taught us that there are not as many “should haves” or “ought tos” as we thought necessary.

In extending grace to others and to ourselves, we acknowledge and accept God’s gift of compassion and mercy.

יְהֹוָ֣ה ׀ יְהֹוָ֔ה אֵ֥ל רַח֖וּם וְחַנּ֑וּן אֶ֥רֶךְ אַפַּ֖יִם וְרַב־חֶ֥סֶד וֶאֱמֶֽת׃

Adonai, Adonai: May we emulate You who are compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness…

As a people we have lived through other dangerous and turbulent times. Your grace—given in love to us and that in turn we give others— has sustained us.

The hymn “Amazing Grace” reminds us that *chein—*God’s mercy and compassion—surrounds us, strengthen us, and guides us—if only we let it in.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares

I have already come;

‘Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home…

May grace continue to lead us home.

כן יהי רצון

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing\_Grace [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grace [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Exodus 34:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Psalm 116:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis Rabbah 12:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://bethambaltimore.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Burg-Chen-and-Nach-Burg-RHII-final-for-posting.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thurgood_Marshall> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/magazine/thurgood-marshall-stories.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://wset.com/news/local/new-law-gives-va-drivers-more-time-to-renew-registration> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://wtop.com/maryland/2021/05/mdot-announces-new-deadlines-for-drivers-licenses-and-registration/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2013/05/21/rescuing-grace/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Adapted from: <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/10971-give-grace-during-the-time-of-covid-19> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)