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## Holy 'Work'

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### Abstract (Summary)

No longer only those outside the tradition say so. I recently brought my complaint directly to Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, Calif., whose new book, "For Those Who Can't Believe," addresses boredom and alienation head on. Rabbi Schulweis is among the pre-eminent liberal Jewish thinkers. As one who wants to bring the "heroic" nature -- the rebel, the outsider, the questioning mind — back into the tradition, the rabbi himself has become a rebel of a sort in rabbinic circles, fighting what he clearly sees as authoritarian tendencies that limit even what rabbis can say. Thus, when he fills his book with evidence that God applauded biblical figures from (Abraham Heschel] to Moses for challenging God's own authority, it's clear that he's taking his own message to heart.

"So many of us come to synagogue on the holidays as judges," Rabbi Schulweis told me. "How did the rabbi do, the cantor, the choir? How was the sermon, too long, too short, too irrelevant? How were the chairs? The air conditioning. Every aspect, every ingredient is judged except one. We never ask, 'Did I do my part well?'"

"Studying biblical text is great, but if read to the exclusion of personal meaning it becomes external and irrelevant. When Buber said, 'All life is meeting,' he meant that everything is personal. It's not narcissistic to ask about how to pray. In fact, it is the very purpose of the Holy Days."

Holy 'Work'.

### MARLENE ADLER MARKS SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH TIMES

The magnetic power of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as days of spiritual renewal pulls thousands of twice-a-year Jews to synagogue long after every other vestige of community identification is gone. Yet for many, the fatigue of disappointment is evident even before the holidays begin. Push-pull, approach-avoidance. In the rhythm of this season we can feel why Abraham Heschel called this the Age of Suspicion: even what we own we cannot let ourselves fully embrace.

Yet, despite the numbers who vow each year never to go back, hope, optimism and the tug of conscience, habit or tradition finally win the day.

I always feel a tremendous personal risk when writing about the problems of observing the Jewish New Year, the charge of treason that arises even acknowledging the bray of discontent. Because, beyond assigning blame, what can possibly be my goal? But when I am in this critical mode, I remember my own early beginnings, filled with ignorance and desire. And I am reminded that those who say they are most turned off to the holidays may not know much Hebrew or philosophy but, to quote singer/song-writer Paul Simon, they know what they know.

The truth is that getting the most out of what can be lifechanging days of prayer and introspection is hard work and the uninitiated are not helped by a liturgy and a format medieval in more ways than one.

No longer only those outside the tradition say so. I recently brought my complaint directly to Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, Calif., whose new book, "For Those Who Can't Believe," addresses boredom and alienation head on. Rabbi Schulweis is among the pre-eminent liberal Jewish thinkers. As one who wants to bring the "heroic" nature — the rebel, the outsider, the questioning mind -- back into the tradition, the rabbi himself has become a rebel of a sort in rabbinic circles, fighting what he clearly sees as authoritarian tendencies that limit even what rabbis can say. Thus, when he fills his book with evidence that God applauded biblical figures from Abraham to Moses for challenging God's own authority, it's clear that he's taking his own message to heart.

His point is that if we knew what divergent models of non-conformity and self-confrontation the tradition contains, then none of us would be asleep on the Holy Days regardless of how boring the sermon might be. The rabbi's assumption is that the alienated Jew is potentially a hero -- as long as he or she doesn't cling to the status of alienation.

"So many of us come to synagogue on the holidays as judges," Rabbi Schulweis told me. "How did the rabbi do, the cantor, the choir? How was the sermon, too long, too short, too irrelevant? How were the chairs? The air conditioning. Every aspect, every ingredient is judged except one. We never ask, 'Did I do my part well?'"

My part is to take my work seriously — prayer in Hebrew is *avodah* (labor) -- and to use the time set aside for self-contemplation and questioning. Get beyond fault finding: Even if prayers seem totally irrelevant and the rising and sitting give leg cramps, there is still work to be done: The resurrection of conscience, the rediscovery of the holy within ourselves, the commitment to do better in the future.

How to do it? Rabbi Schulweis distinguishes between "irresponsible" prayer, which asks for magical intervention, and "responsible prayer," which leads to knowledge. Prayers for magical intervention -- for good grades without study, for reversal of terminal illness -- can lead to disillusionment and alienation because, of course, they will fail. Prayers for hope and to heal wounded hearts can inspire and energize.

Learning how to pray and how to acknowledge fault without being masochistically self-destructive is a central challenge of the day. When I asked Rabbi Schulweis for the most radical questions one can ask on these Days of Awe, he told me:

Why am I here?

How am I unique from anyone else?

What do I hope for and how do I intend to use talents I've been given?

What is my dream and what motivates the way I live?

"I used to ridicule the Jew who asked what these prayers mean to me," he said. "But the to me should not be mocked. Is one who feels disharmony in life and who struggles for meaning and zest narcissistic? Creating a peoplehood through the individual requires finding a spiritual life.

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personal. It's not narcissistic to ask about how to pray. In fact, it is the very purpose of the Holy Days."

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