

זרמים
Zeramim

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Applied Jewish Thought*

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Dear readers,

We begin with death and end with birth.

That is, *Zeremim's* latest assemblage of articles overviews a wide expanse of Jewish life. After our last issue, a special issue dedicated to Judaism and the political in the 21st century, our third issue of *Zeremim's* second volume is a return to form, publishing pieces on a potpourri of subjects that reflect on the Jewish past in order to be present in the future.

Each Jewish year, *Zeremim* publishes issues during three seasons: fall, winter, and spring. Thus, this issue will be our last of 5778. Nonetheless readers will welcome 5779 having read Judith Hauptman's "A Talmudic Reading of the High Holiday Prayer *Un'taneh Tokef*," a study of one of the most famously haunting and enigmatic passages of Rosh Hashanah liturgy. In it, Hauptman provides a solution to the puzzle of the perplexing language that is often understood to be the climactic turning point in this *piyyut* (liturgical poem). And, as Hauptman argues, the poem's ultimate takeaway remains widely misunderstood in many prayer books.

Turning the hand of time to the beginning of the 20th century, Joseph H. Prouser examines a surprising case of clear prejudice expressed in a widely publicized address by the Jewish Theological Seminary's second president, Solomon Schechter. In "Quacks and Real Americans: Solomon Schechter's Anti-Mormonism," Prouser describes the America that Schechter came to know, colored by the rumors and current events that placed the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-day Saints at the center of heated debates, controversy and—evidently even within the confines of the Seminary—mockery. Though all persons are a product of their time, Prouser suggests that the intolerance exhibited by Schechter is a foul legacy that has yet to be mended by those who have taught and learned in Schechter's name.

Perhaps it is that words can hurt because of the power attributed to words. For the rabbis whose words filled the Mishnah, Martin S. Cohen argues, these very words were believed to effect changes as immense as the laws of physics. In "Rabbinic Self-Confidence: Bending the World to the Word," Cohen examines rabbinic dicta surrounding the physics of how ritual contamination spreads, highlighting teachings that contradict previous statements about how they understand physics to work. As the rabbis considered their words to be part of a

chain of the tradition Moses received in the wilderness, Cohen provides a meditation on what it must have meant for these early sages to assert the authority both to recover long lost laws (even scientific truths) from Sinai and, with equal surety, to expand upon these very ideas.

Steeping answers in precedents set long before the questions asked could ever have arisen lies at the core of rabbinic interpretation and innovation. Thus, Nelly Altenburger naturally grounds a responsum on gun control in the earliest sources of Jewish law and links them to medieval and modern halakhic codes. Altenburger digs deeper, exploring the wells of these Jewish teachings in light of the findings of sociologists and journalists in their researching the foundations of the space guns occupy in American culture. In “Jewish Law and Guns: A Modest Proposal,” Altenburger supplies guidelines for a responsible Jewish approach to a life where guns intrude unwelcome spaces.

We began the core of this issue with the frame of death—from contemplating mortality in *Un'taneh Tokef*, to delineating a Jewish attitude towards lethal instruments. The coda of this issue of *Zeramim* ends with birth—from the sages who imagined the Divinely created world evolving as a human fetus develops, to the reemerging ritualization of *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah* (“the joy of the house of the drawing [of water]”). In “Offering to the Foundation Stone,” Jill Hammer provides a modern prayer giving new voice to an ancient mythical foundation of the universe—bringing celebrants of Sukkot’s water-libation ceremony together with the very time and space where matter began.

With an expanding pool of readers, writers, and editors, the *Zeramim* editorial team is excited to present the latest issue of our journal. As a free online journal, we encourage you—our readers—to share and to discuss with your peers, students, teachers, and politicians the pieces in this issue you find most compelling. Between this latest issue and our back issues—catalogued by ISSN, indexed by RAMBI (The Index of Articles on Jewish Studies), and archived on our website—we hope that *Zeramim* leaves you with plenty of food for thought for the summer until we return in the fall.

With gratitude,

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Table of Contents

A TALMUDIC READING OF THE HIGH HOLIDAY PRAYER <i>UN'TANEH TOKEF</i> <i>Judith Hauptman</i>	p. 5
QUACKS AND REAL AMERICANS: SOLOMON SCHECHTER'S ANTI-MORMONISM <i>Joseph H. Prouser</i>	p. 19
RABBINIC SELF-CONFIDENCE: BENDING THE WORLD TO THE WORD <i>Martin S. Cohen</i>	p. 39
JEWISH LAW AND GUNS: A MODEST PROPOSAL <i>Nelly Altenburger</i>	p. 55
~ MIDRASH ZERAMIM ~	
OFFERING TO THE FOUNDATION STONE <i>Jill Hammer</i>	p. 79