



Achot¹ Ketana



Many media channels asked me to offer my perspective on this past year: social rifts, demonstrations, economic uncertainty, education crisis... in short, what is going to be?

After some thought, I chose to talk about those who did not have time to go out to demonstrate, or see the social rift, or estimate the economic uncertainty. Those who united all of us this year – the sisters.

With incredible sensitivity, the 13th-century poet, Rabbi Abraham Chazzan Gerondi, chooses to open the Sephardi Rosh Hashanah prayers with the spine-tingling *piyut*, *Achot Ketana* – “Little Sister.”

With infinite gentleness, he relates to this fragile hour, the interface between the past year and the new one, the time of the changing of the guard.

He captures the moment when, with tired hands, she hands over the keys to her replacement. Seconds before her watch comes to an end, she briefs her: who needs special care, who will

live, who will die after a long life and who prematurely. She will become the *achot ketana*, the little sister, of the one who comes after her. She is exactly a year older than her replacement, who does not yet know what awaits her.

The *paytan* movingly chooses to pray for the one who has finished her watch, more than for the one who is taking over now, fresh and alert. He salutes the little sister, the past year, for faithfully helping us breathe, for giving us life, for connecting sunset to sunrise to sunset to sunrise, for having nurtured us so much. Thanks to her, we have grown another year.

They took off their weekday clothes, washed, disinfected themselves and donned white clothes. They entered the sanctuary when no relative was near a patient breathing his last breath, and thus they would count his final breaths: one, one and one, one and two... they did not experience Seder Night or Tikkun Leil Shavuot. They received endless complaints, cried about being suspected of misdemeanors,² and yet continued, with selfless devotion, their *Seder Avodah*.

This year, the sisters were our *shofar*, our *Unetaneh Tokef*. They were the answer to so many of the sick – the prayer, the charity, they were the “who” who nursed the “who by pandemic.”

In their stifling white suits, they were our replacement, they were our atonement, they were our substitutes.³ What for us were statistics were real people for them. When the conflagration was burning outside, they roamed the wards, like angels of peace.

It seems to me, that as the shifts change between the past year and the new one, we should pray for our angelic and weary sisters. And pray for the world that the curses cease, and that finally, we may all have an easy shift.

אַחוֹת קֵטְנָה תְּפִלוֹתֶיהָ
לוֹחֶשֶׁת עַל מַטּוֹת מִטְפָּלֶיהָ:
“אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לְמַחֲלוֹתֶיהָ
תְּכַלֵּה שָׁנָה וְקִלְלוֹתֶיהָ.”

*Little sister, her prayers
Whispering on her patients' beds:
“Please G-d, please cure her diseases
End the year and its curses.”*⁴

1 The word *achot* (אחות) in Hebrew means both sister and nurse.

2 Paraphrased from the *Seder Avodah* on Yom Kippur.

3 A reference to the *Kapparot* ceremony.

4 Paraphrased from the original *piyut*.

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