

Rabbi Rebecca Richman

Erev Rosh Hashanah Talk 5781

Renewal: How to Show Up to This Rosh Hashanah

Back in April, after my fourth walk of the day to our neighborhood park, I came home, handed my toddler off to my partner and declared, “I need a few minutes to myself.”

I did what I often do in times of unknown: I planned. I began listing the hours of the day, starting with the glorious hour of 5:30AM. I mapped out Netta’s naps and mealtimes, bath time and bedtime. In the remaining spaces, I chunked out time for “sensory experience,” which could include things like garden time, playing with blocks, or cooking. I made a time slot for music, and one for “adventures,” because I was determined that we would see more than the 1-mile radius around our home. I marched out into the living room and announced, proudly, “We have a schedule!” Josh, rightfully, burst out laughing.

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I don’t know what ever happened to that schedule. In reality, these past six months have been a constant navigation, an ongoing attempt to make an impossible situation feel manageable.

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In the spring, to some, it felt impossible to imagine that we wouldn’t be able to gather together for the High Holidays. Remote? No, no way.

But here we are, Erev Rosh Hashanah, rolling into 5781, ready or not.

This year, there is a lot we are missing. We are missing the smells of early autumn leaves falling outside the entrance to the synagogue. We are missing the light, pouring in through the windows; the sounds of the shofar, beating on our eardrums, vibrating through our feet. We are missing the taste of kiddush together, honey dripping from our fingers. We are missing physically bumping into each other in the hallways, hugging our friends, shaking hands with people we are just meeting. We are missing the familiar, and it stinks.

So how do we “do” the High Holidays this year, when most of us are unable to be in the sanctuary? How are we supposed to approximate a “real” experience, in a way we’ve never collectively done before?

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There's a story in the Talmud, told by Rabbi Yosei. **I was once walking along the road when I entered the ruins** of an old, abandoned building **to pray**. When he finishes, he greets Elijah, who had come to guard the door of the ruin. Elijah asks Rabbi Yosei: **My son, why did you enter this ruin?** Rabbi Yosei answers: **to pray**, of course. Elijah responds: **You should have prayed on the road**. But Rabbi Yosei explains that he was afraid that he would have been distracted. Elijah understands but suggests that Rabbi Yosei **should have recited the abbreviated prayer**. Rabbi Yosei concluded: **At that time, I learned that one may not enter a ruin; that one need not enter a building to pray, but may pray along the road; and I learned that one who prays along the road recites an abbreviated prayer** (Berakhot 3a:12-13).

Prayer should not endanger us, and it would be dangerous if we were all together. Instead, we can pray "on the road." Who knew that the kitchen could be a sanctuary?

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I know that this year's High Holidays will not be normal, so I'm taking a few extra steps to help me feel more grounded and connected. I'll share them with you - maybe, something will resonate.

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One - I have a fixed spot for prayer.

Have you ever sat down in shul and had someone come over somewhat awkwardly and say, "Um, sorry, but that's my seat?" Worse, have you discovered that someone else was sitting in your special spot?

It's called a *makom kavuah*, a fixed place. And it's not just about being curmudgeonly. Our tradition teaches us that setting aside a special spot for prayer can help reduce distraction and make you feel more comfortable.

So, this year, I have set up a High Holiday spot in my home. It's nothing special, just a space where I have my computer, some water, and a little table covered with a white tablecloth for my Tallis and my *mahzor*. I'm by a window, so I can be reminded of the world I'm living in, its beauty and its cries for change in this new year. The setup is imperfect - but it's my *makom kavuah*, my fixed, my personal sanctuary.

Two - I'm facing east.

In the Talmud (Berakhot 30a), the rabbis teach that we should all orient ourselves in prayer toward Jerusalem. People in the east should face west, those in the west should face east.

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If nothing else, facing a specific direction can offer some guidance in a new, potentially awkward, physical prayer space. If you're in the United States, the answer is easy: Find east. Face there with the rest of us.

While I stand by myself in prayer, I feel just a little bit more linked with each of you, knowing that we are all oriented toward the same place.

And, three - I'm dressing nicely.

There's a principle in Judaism called *hiddur mitzvah*. The idea is that we don't just do the bare minimum of an obligation. Instead, we make it beautiful. It's part of why we make our sanctuaries look nice, why we decorate our sukkah, and why scribes use a nice looking feather to write sacred texts.¹

I have a special pair of High Holiday pants. They're cream-colored linen. When I pull them out, I feel immediately transported, nostalgic and connected. Even though nobody can see them, I'm wearing them, to help get me in "the zone."

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I recently saw a post online² that said:

I don't know which [holiday] it is:
We're wearing masks like it's Purim;
Everyone is walking around with cleaning wipes like it's Pesach;

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You're not alone if you're feeling lost or confused as we begin Rosh Hashanah. I certainly feel strange. So I'm taking extra care of my physical set up, orientation, and presentation to help me feel ready for prayer and connected to my community.

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¹ Shabbat 133b:5-6

² The author of this poem is unknown. It was posted on the website of Reform congregation Synagogue Beth Yam of Hilton Head, SC.

May our hearts be open to all that is possible, even in this unfamiliar constellation. May we experience moments of connection, even distant. And may our blessings for sweetness and renewal in this new year be received and manifest for us all.

Shanah tovah u'metukah - a good and sweet new year.