

Connection

Introduction

In the Rosh HaShanah Amidah, we pray: *Please, God, instill in us awe of all Creation, and make us into agudah ahat, a single group, so we can carry out Your will with a whole heart.*¹ This is what we do on Rosh HaShanah: we connect to each other as a group, and as a group we act with one heart. This is not something we can do alone. In almost all cases, we don't begin our prayers without first connecting ourselves to a group. Each time we say a blessing, we begin: *Baruch atah HaShem, E-lokeinu*: Blessed are you HaShem, **our God**. We describe God as *ours*, something we share with other people.

Each one of us is part of that “we”. Each one of us, whether or not we know each other yet, whether you are joining us today in the sanctuary or online, whether or not you read the prayers in Hebrew, whether you are new to GJC or you grew up here, whether you are Jewish or not; you, holding a baby; you, facing illness and uncertainty; you, excited about a new beginning; you, feeling alone; you, in love—without all of us together, there would not be a “we,” and we would not be able to say even one blessing. We would not be able to have Rosh HaShanah.

If you decided to observe Rosh HaShanah on Thursday instead, and you read every prayer, and you made teshuvah, and you sounded the shofar, it just wouldn't be the same, because no one would be with you. No one would be celebrating Rosh HaShanah at the same time.

I've been thinking a lot about how we celebrate Rosh HaShanah and why we seek this connection: what does it mean to be together today, and what does it mean generally to be connected to the “we” in Jewish community? Today I'll propose three frameworks we can use to understand the sacred connection we have to each other as “we,” and tell you what these frameworks mean to me. The three frameworks are difference, transcendence, and imperfection.

¹ This is in the *U'vkhein* piyyut in the Kedushah. See Mahzor Lev Shalem, 13, 87 & 126.

1. Connection With Those Who Are Different Makes Us Stronger

“Make us into agudah ahat, a single group.” When I first read that prayer, I didn’t know the word *agudah*,² so I looked it up. *Agudah* means a bundle, usually a bundle of plants, tied together after harvesting them. When we tie together palm, myrtle and willow branches to make a lulav for Sukkot, it is an *agudah*, a bundle. We can bundle ourselves together too: *agudah* also means a unit of people, a group bound together.

The ancient rabbis have a midrash, a story, about *agudah ahat*. It is based on the opening verse of the Torah reading last Shabbat, from parashat Nitzavim: “You stand, all of you, today, before God” (Deut. 29:9). The rabbis ask: when is ‘today’? They answer: “‘Today’ is when all of you will be in *agudah ahat*, in a single group. For example, if one has a lot of reeds, and one picks up the reeds one at a time, even a baby can break them one at a time. But if one bundles the reeds into *agudah ahat*, into a single bundle, a grown person will not be able to break them. So it is with the Jewish people: כשהן אגודים מקבילים פני שכינה. When they are *agudim*, gathered together, they receive the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence.”³

The passage in the Torah continues: “You stand all of you today, before God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, your stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer, to enter into the covenant of God.” Deut. 29:9-11. As the Torah says, all of these different types of people, of all ages, including non-Israelites who had joined the community, stood before God. This group of all different people together is the *agudah ahat*; this is the bundle of reeds, fastened together, stronger than any single reed on its own. What they are teaching is that being together in all of our human differences makes us stronger, in particular when we stand before God.

The idea that a group of people with different identities and different life experiences is stronger than each person alone does not seem surprising. And yet, questions about belonging—self-consciousness about whether one has a strong connection to the group—are a defining characteristic of American Jewish communities. At Germantown Jewish Centre, we bring together multiple modes of worship, people who identify with different movements within Judaism and who identify differently in terms of what it means to be Jewish, but our model is not the norm. Even here, as many of you have shared with me, it can be difficult to feel connected *ba’agudah ahat*, in one group.

I want to share with you about the primary way I experience difference in Jewish community. I am the first person to serve in a clergy role at GJC who did not grow up Jewish. As many of you know, I converted to Judaism as an adult, after my family had already joined GJC. I don’t often mention this when I’m speaking publicly, because there is a halakhic norm, a rule of Jewish law, that we do not bring up someone’s conversion status, in order not to

² See, e.g., Isaiah 58:6, *agudot* meaning cords, “untie the cords of the yoke”; 2 Sam. 2:25, *agudah ahat*, a single company to defend a position in war; Ex. 12:22, *agudah*, a bundle of hyssop used to mark the door for Pesach.

³ Midrash Tanhuma Buber, Nitzavim Siman 4, translation mine. The word for break is *lishaber*, from the same root as *shevarim*, the broken notes of the shofar.

embarrass or exclude that person.⁴ Instead, we treat all Jews as Jews without distinguishing. Mostly I appreciate this norm, because I don't want to be stuck in one story. But sometimes it has also made me feel that conversion is a topic to avoid or to feel shame around—although that is inconsistent with my experience. Becoming Jewish is one of the most powerful and joyful things that has happened in my life, and when I choose that conversation, I'm happy to talk about it.

As I said when I spoke to Men's Club and Women of GJC in June, there is nothing rational about deciding to become a rabbi in one's 40s if one already has meaningful work, if one has children to support, and if one has no previous formal Jewish education. I genuinely don't recommend it, unless . . . unless, as is true for me, Torah tugs at your heart deeply and won't let go; unless prayer is the nourishment that you didn't know your soul needed, until you couldn't begin the day without it; unless the most precious sense of connection you've ever felt, except within your own family, is to Jewish community: both to the people around you right now and to the centuries of tradition that precede us.

In today's Torah reading, Abraham says *hineni*, here I am, three times. Twice he says *hineni* to answer God, and once he says *hineni* to answer his son Isaac. Abraham is present to both the Divine call and to his child. Only by holding onto both does he manage to find the ram in the thicket, allowing him to keep his son safe. What God was asking Abraham to do was inconsistent with Abraham's family story, his love for his son, but he kept looking until he found the ram in the thicket. Even when it seemed impossible, he stubbornly believed that both were his story.

As the daughter of my wonderful parents Judy and Louis Pulzetti, each of them from Italian-American immigrant families (my mother was a Mancusi before she married), as my parents' daughter, I identify with Abraham. *Hineni*, here I am: Jewish, becoming a rabbi, present to God's purpose for me. *Hineni*, here I am, part of my family, born to non-Jewish parents whom I love and try my best to honor. *Hineni*, here I am, even when it seems impossible, stubbornly believing that both are my story.

I know I am not alone. I am just one of many of us: GJC members, people in our extended families, Jews around the world and stretching back in time to that moment in Deuteronomy we just heard, when the the non-Israelites in the community joined in standing before God *ba'agudah ahat*, in a single group.

⁴ See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 58b.

2. Connection Opens Us Up To The Possibility Of Transcendence

If we can agree that being together in connection across difference can make us stronger, especially when we commit to listening to each other's stories, that's a start. But it doesn't quite get us to Rosh HaShanah. Why are we all here together today? Remember the words from the Amidah, *Please, God, instill in us awe of Creation, and make us into agudah ahad, a single group*. We pray that we will come together in awe.

I believe that many of us are here today because we hope that being together in connection will help us sense that awe. We hope we will feel something outside ourselves, something sacred, something our souls crave: that one breathtaking second of clarity about something in our lives; a moment when we let our guard down and allow ourselves to feel *ahavah rabah*, the great love that envelops us like a tallit; a blast of the shofar awakening us to the awareness that our questions are human questions, questions that have come up in the hearts of Jews through thousands of years of shofar blasts. We could call this feeling awe or the possibility of transcendence. We could call it the presence of God. Whatever we call it, we know we are more likely to feel it when we stand together *ba'agudah ahad*.

I remember clearly when my wife Abby and I began coming to Rosh HaShanah services at GJC. At that time, I didn't understand much about what was going on in the service, but I did understand this: being part of this, with you, cracked me open to something outside myself. During those first few years, I was either pregnant or trying to be pregnant, struggling to manage my grief over multiple lost pregnancies. Most of the time, in the world, that struggle felt invisible. But here, on Rosh HaShanah, hearing the stories of Sarah and Chana, I would sit and cry. I cried every year. I realized that my yearning to create a family is reflected in some of the oldest stories in our tradition and is one foundation for Rosh HaShanah, the celebration of Creation. I saw my story in continuity with the stories of our ancestors, and that was tremendously connecting for me.

A few years later I learned to read Torah, and I was assigned the first aliyah on the first day of Rosh HaShanah. The first four words are *v'HaShem pakad et Sarah*: "God took note of Sarah." Gen. 21:1. By then I was interested in the verb, *pakad*, which can mean take note, account for, hold with care, and count. I was interested because I sensed this could explain what was happening to me on Rosh HaShanah, and because I assumed the first words of that Torah reading must draw our attention to something important.

I spoke about this verse to introduce myself to my classmates on my first day of rabbinical school. I told them, "The rabbis center this idea on Rosh HaShanah because they want us to hear the multiple meanings of 'pakad': God notices us and remembers our deepest yearnings; before God, we count; and in the course of our lives, including when we may feel the most bereft, our souls are held with Divine care."

For Sarah, the fact that God "pakad" her was life-changing, and this is the possibility Rosh HaShanah opens for each one of us. One of the gifts we give each other today is the time

and space to explore these questions: how are these words of Torah and prayer landing for me this year? What are my deepest yearnings? Do I count? It's hard to open ourselves to big questions. But without questions, how can we sense that there might be something outside ourselves seeing us, taking note of each one of us as we stand together, *ba'agudah ahat*, in one group? By giving each other permission to ask questions, here, together, we also open ourselves to awe of all Creation. We pray that we will experience Rosh HaShanah's promise of renewal *ba'agudah ahat*, in a single group.

3. Connection Is More Important Than Being Correct

On Sunday night, during our Erev Rosh HaShanah service, I spoke about the alert system set up by the ancient rabbis to announce Rosh Hodesh, the first day of the month. In the years before a fixed calendar, torchbearers waited on the mountaintops. When the rabbinic court declared Rosh Hodesh, a messenger would light the torch on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. This signaled to the person on the next mountain to light the torch, and the next mountain, and so on, until the light traveled from mountaintop to mountaintop, all the way to Babylonia.

Why didn't the people in each geographic area, or the people on each mountaintop, just look for the moon, and begin the new month when they saw it? The Mishnah teaches us that connection – everyone being together *ba'agudah ahat*, in one group, celebrating holidays on the same day – was important.⁵ In fact, it was more important even than the calendar's accuracy.

There is a story about Rabban Gamliel, the head of the rabbinic court, who once accepted witness testimony about the new moon, although the testimony itself was not strong. The witnesses had said conflicting things about what they saw, and it's possible they were one day early. Regardless, Rabban Gamliel accepted their testimony and proclaimed the first of Tishrei: Rosh HaShanah. One of his students was terribly upset and said that on the basis of Rabban Gamliel's decision to accept weak testimony, Yom Kippur would be observed on the wrong day! This student threatened to observe Yom Kippur on the next day instead, but Rabban Gamliel convinced him to observe it according to the day the court had proclaimed.⁶

This story is sometimes used to teach about the authority of the rabbinic court, or about the dynamics between teachers and students, but it is also about the importance of everyone celebrating Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur together. This story from at least 1800 years ago teaches us that it was more important that the whole Jewish community observe Rosh HaShanah at the same time than it was to be positive that Rosh HaShanah was observed on the correct day. When we act communally, when we act all together, we place a higher value on connection than on perfection.

⁵ In the years 921-22, there was a calendrical dispute between the Babylonian rabbis and the rabbis in the land of Israel, and communities celebrated Rosh HaShanah on different days. The fixed calendar we use today resolved this dispute. See Sacha Stern, *The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921-22* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

⁶ See Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2:8; Babylonian Talmud Rosh HaShanah 25a.

What does it mean for us to place a higher value on being together in community than on perfection? Remember, the first meaning I found for *agudah* is the *lulav*, the bundle of palm, myrtle and willow branches. The *lulav*, together with the *etrog*, the citron, constitutes the four species for Sukkot. The rabbis teach that the four species each symbolize a different type of person: one knows a lot of Torah and does a lot of good deeds; one knows a lot of Torah but does not do good deeds; one doesn't know much Torah but does many good deeds; and one doesn't know much and doesn't do good deeds. And the Blessed Holy One says, "bind them all together *b'agudah ahat*, in a single group, and they will atone for each other."⁷

When we connect with each other, each with our strengths and our imperfections, like the four species for Sukkot, we create the sacred balance this midrash describes. Connected to each other, we see strengths and beauty that we can reflect back to a person who struggles to see her gifts. Connected to each other, we support each other through challenges, and we forgive each other's mistakes. The midrash continues, in God's voice, "When you gather in *agudah ahat*, a single group, I will be elevated." Connecting with each other, with our imperfections and our strengths, allows us to lift up that which is sacred.

Because we now have a fixed Jewish calendar, it's not possible to misread the moon and celebrate Rosh HaShanah on the wrong day. But we have so many other opportunities to center connection over perfection. If you've ever joined us for online minyan, and if you've heard us unmute to say Mourner's Kaddish: it is the definition of imperfection. Zoom technology causes delays, making it impossible to recite Kaddish in unison. Household sounds chime in. Yet it's also one of the most beautiful possibilities for connection I've seen emerge at GJC during the pandemic. Every day, our members show up, creating a minyan so that mourners can say Kaddish. In the disjointed, digital flow of the familiar words, we're reminded that each mourner walks a distinct path, and no one experience perfectly matches up with another.

Conclusion

Today, we are connected to Jewish communities around the world. Just as the news of Rosh HaShanah spread from mountaintop to mountaintop, today, across the world's time zones, our Jewish communities gather one after another, praying mostly the same words, hearing the same verses of Torah, sounding hundreds of thousands of shofar blasts. Whether one stands in person in a sanctuary or sits at home connected online, all celebrating Rosh HaShanah today are part of a great concentric circle of Jewish communities, earnestly facing Jerusalem, gathering to celebrate the renewal of Creation and the renewal of ourselves.

Every day in Shacharit, in the morning service, we recite the blessing, "Sound the great shofar to herald our freedom; raise high the banner to gather all exiles. Gather our people from the four corners of the earth."⁸ Every day, we hold this hope that the sound of the shofar will

⁷ Vayikra Rabbah 30:12, commenting on Lev. 23:40.

⁸ From the tenth blessing of the weekday Amidah.

gather us. Today, we are here: we've gathered, from all of the places we call home, and we hear the shofar.

As this new year begins, may we gain strength through our connection to those who are different from us. May our connection to each other open us to the possibility of transcendence. May we remember that connection outweighs perfection. In reflecting our community's strengths with love and forgiving our mistakes with compassion, may we lift up that which is sacred. As Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum teaches, "May all pieces and parts of Torah borne by Jewish human beings and all people of faith encounter one another, until they come together, as One. May we all be partners. May it happen through us."⁹

Please, God, instill in us awe of all Creation, and make us into agudah ahat, a single group, so we can carry out Your will with a whole heart.

Shanah tovah!

⁹ Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, *Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2018), 277.