

Three Steps for the New Year

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5780 – September 29, 2019
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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It is fair to say that every congregational rabbi is expected to lead services for the High Holy Days. After all, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the primary moments in the year when the entire congregation joins together. Expectations are that High Holy Day services are more elevated than any other time of the year. Our prayer book is different, with the machzor reflecting the themes of seeking forgiveness and renewal. The music is loftier, with our wonderful cantor Miriam, our splendid pianist Amy, and our joyful adult choir. During the High Holy Days we sound the shofar, an animal horn that is only blown during this season. It awakens us to the urgency of these ten Days of Awe.

So with all these elements involved with the High Holy Day season, we can understand why congregations expect their rabbis to lead services on Yom Kippur. But I have a story to tell you of two rabbis who, in the same year, did not lead their congregations on Rosh Hashanah. Those two rabbis were my wife, Rabbi Eve Ben-Ora, and I.

It happened thirty years ago. In the late 1980s we lived in Colorado. I was the Hillel Director at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Eve served Congregation Emanuel in Denver as the Director of Education. I was expected to lead High Holy Day services at Hillel; Eve also led High Holy Day services as well as running the education programs.

But prior to the High Holy Days in 1989, we knew we faced quite a challenge. Eve was pregnant with our second child. By late September she was very very pregnant and could give birth any time. Thirty years ago Rosh Hashanah was scheduled to arrive just as it is tonight, on the evening of September 29. Lo and behold, our son Carmi decided he wanted to be born in time to hear the shofar.

On September 28, Eve went into labor and early in the morning of the 29, Carmiel Zvi Ben-Ora Schulman arrived. Need I say, there was no way Eve would be at shul that night and neither would I.

Fortunately we had prepared for that eventuality. I had folks at Hillel who would lead services in my absence. At Emanuel, the senior rabbi was prepared in case Eve was absent. And all went well in our respective places of worship.

As for me, I will never forget what it was like exactly thirty years ago looking out the window of the birthing center room at Rose Hospital, watching the sun set, and knowing it was Rosh Hashanah. I never felt so grateful, or so peaceful, in welcoming the New Year.

Having a baby right before Rosh Hashanah is a pretty dramatic way to usher in the New Year. I imagine that for many of you in the congregation, there have been times in your lives when the High Holy Days were particularly memorable.

Perhaps warm memories of Yuntiff are tied to your childhood. You recall how exciting it was to get all dressed up to go to shul with your entire family. How happy everyone seemed, greeting old friends warmly with Gut Yuntiff, everyone glad to reconnect with folks you have shared simchas with for many years.

Perhaps you remember a year in which a new child or grandchild arrived in your life and you felt so grateful and blessed. Maybe it was a year in which you were just married and you attended High Holy Day services together as a couple for the first time. For those of you who converted to Judaism, perhaps you recall how spiritually connected you felt coming to High Holy Days for the first time after your conversion.

Maybe there is a High Holy Day that stands out because of a sermon you heard. Or you remember the soul stirring singing of your cantor. Maybe you recall an instant of unexpected insight, when a prayer suddenly leaped out at you and you realized what that prayer meant.

There are many positive reasons why a particular High Holy Day might be memorable. But there could be any number of reasons why a Yuntiff sparks sad memories. How painful it was after a long and happy marriage, to be at services after the death of your spouse. Or how hard it was to come to Yizkor to remember a loved one who passed recently.

There may be other reasons why High Holy Day memories are sad or stressful. Perhaps you remember a time when you came to shul and you were angry at God and found no comfort in the words of the machzor. Maybe during Yuntiff you felt let down by your synagogue, feeling discounted or bitter that no one reached out to you to alleviate your pain.

Chances are many of us who come to this Rosh Hashanah evening service have a memory of some other Yuntiff that stands out in our minds. Having memories of past High Holy Days add layers and texture to these Days of Awe. Indeed recalling the past – both good memories and not – is central to the Jewish experience. One of the titles our sages give for Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaZikaron*; this is a day for *zikaron*, for remembering.

However, Rosh Hashanah is not just about remembering the past. While there is value in recalling our personal journeys, we are not called upon to wallow in nostalgia. Another title for Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Harat Ha'Olam*; it is the season for giving birth to a new year.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for looking forward. Beginning this night and continuing through Yom Kippur, there are ways we can infuse our High Holy Days with added meaning. There are specific steps we can take to move forward to begin this New Year with renewed spirit.

How do we accomplish this? I have three key suggestions.

During the High Holy Days, we are called upon to do teshuva. We seek to return to our better selves by thinking about the people in our lives asking ourselves, have I done something in the past year where I have caused someone harm? When we do identify an error we have made, we are commanded to do teshuva, to ask forgiveness from that individual.

That sounds all well and good in theory. But how many of us actually take the time to think about our past actions? So my first key suggestion is to give you a homework assignment. When's the last time you had anyone say that to you?! I want to offer you a very practical exercise for you to do. It was created by Dr. David Bernstein, a teacher at Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. Dr. Bernstein's exercise is very down-to-earth. Here are some sample questions he asks us to ponder:

Name two ways I can be a better son or daughter?

Identify three ways I can be a better roommate/partner/or spouse.

Here is another question: What are two things that I did this past year that I am proud of?

And another: What two things did I do I am ashamed of and don't reflect the real me?

This teshuva exercise can help each of us think concretely about our lives, what we are proud of and what we are not. It can help us identify actions we can take to right wrongs. I want to encourage everyone to pick-up this one page handout after services and take it home. Use it as a way to reflect on your actions and to think about specific ways you can bring about healing between yourself and those you care about.

Doing the work of teshuva is not easy. But with the help of this teshuva exercise your High Holy Days will be far more meaningful.

(Go to page 2: <https://www.bnaiemunahsf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016.9.19-Yom-kippur-booklet-US-letter-web-1.pdf>)

Here is my second suggestion – and it may surprise you. But I suggest that during our High Holy Day services, you give yourself permission to take leave of what everyone else is doing. This may seem counter-intuitive, especially since High Holy Day services are so carefully prepared and unfold in a set order.

But I know it can be challenging to stay tuned at every moment to every prayer, to every reading, and to every song. So I'm telling you: once in a while it's OK to go off on your own. Take a few moments for your own exploration. Maybe you will want to take time to linger over a reading. Or to look at a different section of the machzor. Or to just sit quietly to meditate.

There is something very positive about taking time during a service to center yourself. You may reflect about what you are feeling. You can go even deeper and inquire, what am I longing for? I encourage you to occasionally pause during a service in order to discern what is stirring inside your soul.

Rabbi Naomi Levy teaches that "our tradition tells us that the soul has its own yearning, its own longing for union with the Divine. If we ignore that yearning, we can have everything and still feel empty. That's why as a society we can have so much and still feel like there is a hole, an emptiness that can't be filled. This phrase from Psalm 63, *Tzama lecha nafshi* (Ps. 63.1) *My soul thirsts for You* describes this hunger" (*Making Prayer Real*, M. Comins, page 49).

If you can locate that longing for something greater in your life, it can serve as a key that unlocks your heart and enables your prayers to be filled with increased kavannah and deeper meaning.

Utilizing the teshuva exercise worksheet and taking time during services to locate your yearning are two key ways to enrich these High Holy Days. Here is my third suggestion. It is

something all of us can do during Yuntiff. It is simple and straight forward and it is this: make it a point during Yuntiff to meet someone you do not know.

Yes, I know that it's wonderful to embrace old friends. But it's also uplifting to make the acquaintance of somebody new. There are folks here tonight who are attending services at Temple Beth Torah for the first time. Imagine how hard it is for them to walk in our doors and perhaps not know anyone. Let us make it our goal to greet someone new and engage in a little conversation.

I guarantee if you look around the sanctuary right after services there will be somebody you do not recognize. Make it a point to go over and wish them Shanah Tovah – or Gut Yuntiff – or Happy New Year – anything to make a connection.

It may not seem that important to do, but actually I think it is at the center of what makes our congregation so wonderful. We are a *heimishe* community. We welcome everybody. But sometimes it takes a little effort to extend ourselves to somebody we do not know.

Dr. Ron Wolfson reminds us that if “we are to create Jewish institutions of relationships, we all must continually work on improving our ability to welcome others. It will not be enough to have greeters at the doors. The High Holy Day season is our annual family reunion, the largest gathering of our people. This year, spend three minutes welcoming somebody you don't know. If we all did it, we could change the culture of our community from transactional to relational, from cold and aloof to warm and welcoming. Tap into the Godliness within you and connect to the Godliness in others” (from *Jewels of Elul*, August 25, 2013).

During the High Holy Days, I encourage you to take these three steps toward making them memorable and meaningful. Pick up a copy of the teshuva exercise and engage in some soul-searching. Let it help you identify ways you can repair and strengthen your relationships to your family, your friends, your co-workers, and our community.

During these Days of Awe, give yourself permission to break away for a little while; to wander through the machzor, to concentrate on a word or prayer while the rest of the congregation continues down its path. Locate inside yourself what you are longing for. Doing so will help you find enhanced meaning during services.

Lastly, during the High Holy Days, greet someone new. Step out of your comfort zone and broaden your connection. You will enrich your life and strengthen the bonds within our congregation.

On this night of Rosh Hashanah, we are grateful for the memories of years gone past and our safe arrival at this New Year. May this night and the coming Days of Awe be filled with joy, with gratitude, and with hope.

May we be blessed to create new memories that will sustain us throughout our lives. L'shanah Tovah – may this be a Good New Year, a Blessed New Year, a year filled with shalom, with peace.