

Preparing for Unusual High Holy Days

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Perhaps, like me, or even with me, you've been on a rooftop tour of Jerusalem's Old City. Otherwise, walking along rooftops is hard for Americans to picture. Ancient cities were densely packed, as the Old City of Jerusalem still is, and walking along those rooves was a typical way of getting around town.

Of course, the trouble with traversing rooftops is that a misstep could lead to a disastrous fall. Recognizing that danger, our Torah portion legislates: When building a new house, one must install a railing around the roof to prevent falls. If the homeowner fails to mount a safeguard, though, and somebody falls and is hurt, the homeowner is responsible for the damages.ⁱ

Some may imagine this law to be irrelevant in modern times, with most single-family homes separated in a way that makes walking from one to the other via rooftop impossible. Maimonides, though, taught: "There is no difference between a roof or anything else that is dangerous and might cause death to a person who might stumble."ⁱⁱ

We find ourselves approaching the High Holy Days this year in the midst of a global pandemic. We possess growing if still uncertain knowledge about how the potentially deadly virus spreads each time an infected person exhales. We do know that Coronavirus can be transmitted by a person who is suffering no symptoms. Therefore, Congregation B'nai Israel has erected a proverbial railing around our roof, if you will. We have all read about houses of worship where people gathered, singing and praying together, only to have dozens of people fall ill afterwards, some of them dying. Not all of these actions were irresponsible; some were very early, before any of us knew enough not to gather in person. Now, though, if we assembled, even for our most solemn holy days, and even one person were infected—or worse, died—Congregation B'nai Israel would be like the homeowner who didn't erect a railing: We would be responsible for the harm.

I am enormously grateful to our President, Amanda Ferguson, who appointed a Covid-19 Response Task Force; to that group's co-chairs, Dr. Carmen Arick and Liz Cohen, and to all its members. A great deal of thought is continually devoted to refining guidelines for how we worship and study meaningfully while keeping our congregation safe.

Just as remarkable and laudable is how supportive our entire congregation has been. Far from complaining that our decisions have been too restrictive,

congregants have expressed gratitude for our streamed services and programs. The first day of Religious School was outstanding, thanks to the creativity of Eileen Hamilton, the devotion of our faculty, and the loyalty of our parents and students. Attendance was all but perfect, and participation was even better.

I take none of that for granted. I am all too aware that some of my rabbinical colleagues have been forced to choose between job security and imperiling their own health and that of their congregants. Not every synagogue has carefully “railed the roof” like Congregation B’nai Israel.

A tremendous amount of thought and even more volunteer effort has gone into preparing our High Holy Day services. I joke that I’m like an accountant who has submitted all of their client’s tax returns in March. While opportunities to interact with one another will be live on both Holy Days, virtually all of our formal services have been pre-recorded in order to provide the most meaningful services possible in the atmosphere of our beloved sanctuary.

Still, these High Holy Days will be unusual. So much of our experience on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is about being in our Temple, all together, in community, in large numbers. We do well to acknowledge what we will miss. We are all experiencing countless disappointments, large and small, during this pandemic.

So yes, the experience of these High Holy Days will be different from most years. In so many ways, though, the spiritual work assigned to us throughout this preparatory month of Elul, and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, remains unchanged:

- Each of us is enjoined to engage in *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, accounting for our souls. This year’s unusual circumstances may provide us with more time for contemplation, an enhanced opportunity to look deep within. This month, and every day until Yom Kippur, we should set aside time to evaluate how we have fulfilled God’s *mitzvot*, partnering with our Creator in *tikkun olam*, through service to God and humanity. And we must be honest with ourselves about where we have gone astray.
- We know this Mishnah well: “For sins against God, Yom Kippur provides atonement. But for sins against another person, God does not provide atonement on Yom Kippur until we seek forgiveness from the person we have harmed.”ⁱⁱⁱ Let’s take the added time that this year affords us to assure that we do reach out to the people we have hurt. If they’re in our “bubble,” we can ask forgiveness in person—but even if not, FaceTime and Zoom enable us to engage in that important interpersonal work face-to-face.

- We are commanded, this year as always, to hear the sound of the shofar. Believe it or not, sages nearly two millennia ago considered the possibility that one might hear the shofar indirectly. No, they didn't imagine that we would be hearing it through the computer. Still, the Mishnah asks if a person has fulfilled the *mitzvah* of hearing the shofar if they aren't inside the synagogue. The answer? Even from a distance, so long as we don't merely hear the shofar's blasts, but pay attention, we have discharged our obligation.^{iv} We plan to provide the opportunity for everybody to hear the shofar in person, in the Temple parking lot on Rosh Hashanah afternoon. But even if you hear the shofar only through the stream, you will have observed the Holy Day appropriately so long as you don't merely hear, but also listen.
- We approach God throughout this season as *Avinu Malkeinu*, both almighty and merciful. We pray with the knowledge that God joins us in judging our actions. We also pray with the hope that God receives our repentance with mercy—which is to say, when we deserve it and even when we may not.

On these High Holy Days, we may feel as if we've been banished from our Temple. Our ancestors were exiled twice, when the Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. and again in the year 70 of the Common Era. Our own exile, though, involves no destruction—no Babylonian or Roman conquerors. Instead, we have removed ourselves from our Sanctuary in fulfillment of a *mitzvah*, building a parapet around our collective roof. Let us take faith in this self-imposed exile from words in this week's Haftarah, a promise by God to the exiles in Babylon through the prophet Isaiah: “Even if the mountains depart and the hills are removed, My love will never depart from you.”^v

May that be God's will.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 22:8.

ⁱⁱ Mishnah Torah, Murderer and the Preservation of Life 11:4.

ⁱⁱⁱ M. Yoma 8.9.

^{iv} M. Rosh Hashanah 3:7.

^v Isaiah 54:10.