

We Need to Be Together

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5781

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In the fall of 1988, Katie Bauman, now Senior Rabbi of Touro Synagogue in New Orleans, welcomed the New Year with her family in this Sanctuary. I, on the other hand, was the student assistant rabbi of that historic Crescent City congregation at the time. The Senior Rabbi then, David Goldstein, gathered the pulpit party in his study, minutes before the first service of the High Holy Days was to begin. His office, now Rabbi Bauman's, is unique: A door leads directly from the Rabbi's Study onto the *bimah*. Rabbi Goldstein barely cracked that door, and he peered out to gaze upon the full sanctuary. "They're back," he exclaimed, his face shining with wonder and awe.

Saying "they're back," Rabbi Goldstein did not mean to draw a distinction between the large Rosh Hashanah congregation and the more modest group that would gather each Shabbat. Instead, he was inspired by the faithfulness of a Jewish community whose members would put aside their secular routines and return to their synagogue home at this holy season.

The rabbi of my early childhood had often derided "twice a year Jews." By contrast, Rabbi Goldstein taught me to treasure every member of whatever congregation I would serve, and to rejoice each time a congregant or guest would cross the synagogue's threshold.

Tonight, as we are all too acutely aware, we are not gathered in the same place. Indeed, I say "tonight" loosely, because I am recording this sermon weeks before Rosh Hashanah. While you and I are watching on Rosh Hashanah Eve, the Temple is closed and locked—the Sanctuary dark, except for the eternal light—as we assemble, each of us in our own homes, to welcome the New Year.

We Reform Jews may not be deeply concerned about the technicalities of Jewish law; but in 2020, nobody needs to explain to us why our sages decreed that we should worship in groups—at least ten Jewish adults, they said.ⁱ When we gather to affirm, *Shema Yisrael*, surrounded by tens or hundreds, proclaiming God's oneness in a single voice, we experience the power of God and community, as if the two are inseparable.

Even tonight, from a distance, I asked you to join me in reciting those sacred words. How I wish I could hear your voices join mine! Some fortunate among us recited the *Shema* in the presence of loved ones, hearing at least a few voices along with that mine through the speakers. Others hear only the sound of their own voice,

an echo that they've come to know all too well in the last six months. For some, praying aloud with the livestream will feel too awkward even to give it a try.

You may be surprised to learn, then, that a 16th century Jewish law code urges us to come together, even from a distance. Our sages knew well that an epidemic could prevent a community from gathering. They could not, however, imagine that we could come together via electronic means. Bill Gates would be pleased, though, by the word that connects the middle ages to our own times: “window.”

Rabbi Joseph Caro ruled that a person could be counted in the *minyan*—that is, in the quorum of ten required for Jewish worship—even if not in the same room, as long as they could participate through a window. The view didn't have to be close or direct, for Caro specified that the outside worshiper would be included, “even if [the window] is several stories high” and even if it's very narrow. That “outside” worshiper **counts**, just as much as one who is inside the Sanctuary.ⁱⁱ

Caro doesn't only mean that the person worshiping outside the synagogue gets credit for praying. His ruling suggests something much more important: If only nine people are inside the worship space, the person outside is **needed** in order to complete the quorum required for **any** of them to worship. That really mattered to our ancestors: The *Barechu*, our call to prayer, and even the *Kaddish*, so essential to mourners, were “not recited with fewer than ten people.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Separately, Rabbi Caro rules that people who cannot pray “in the synagogue with a congregation” should nevertheless pray at the same time that the community is worshipping.^{iv} You might have noticed that we did not make our Rosh Hashanah Eve service available for streaming before 7pm this evening. Yes, people may access any service later, if they wish. Still, our hope is that, by praying simultaneously, we may experience Rosh Hashanah **together**.

At this time of physical separation, **we need to be together**, now more than ever, in any way that we possibly can.

Among our prayers, we look forward to a post-pandemic world. We are eager for news of a vaccine. Of a time when we may venture out of our various forms of quarantine—and back, in time, to this sanctuary, in sacred community. I look forward to that moment—when I can peer into this room as Rabbi Goldstein looked out at Touro Synagogue, and exclaim, “They're back.”

In early July, as part of the Central Conference of American Rabbis' High Holy Day intensive—via Zoom, what else—colleagues were given a writing exercise. Dutifully, I wrote, pushing past the awkwardness. I came across those

words by accident, more than a month later, and found words that I wanted to share with you. I reflected back to a now-dashed fantasy from early in the pandemic, updated with a dose of harsh reality—but still, with a prayer for the future:

I dreamed of a homecoming Shabbat

A picnic

After an outdoor service in our amphitheater.

A return to normal.

Now, I'm less certain.

Yes, we will come back.

But not all at once,

And certainly, without a picnic

Any time soon.

And “normal,”

When it comes,

Will not look like “normal” looked before.

But we **will** come home.

We need to be together. Let us learn from this time that there really are new ways to gather, and that those new methods can provide meaningful togetherness. And let us bring this new learning with us into the future, as we return to the old ways, the cherished ways, of joining not only our hearts but also our hands **together**.

We need to be together tonight, and tomorrow, and on Yom Kippur, even if through our “windows.” Worshiping at the same time, we **are** worshiping together.

We need to be together. When conditions permit, first in small groups, then larger ones—and one day, in a full Sanctuary—we will see and hear one another pray and sing and study together in the same room. We **will** be back.

Amen.

ⁱ Mishnah Megillah 4:3, Mishnah Soferim 10:6, *inter alia*.

ⁱⁱ Joseph Caro, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 55:14-15. Text and teaching provided by Orit Malka, Shalom Hartman Institute.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mishnah Soferim 10:6.

^{iv} Joseph Caro, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 90:9.