

From 36,000 Feet - A Very Long Holiday
Yom Kippur Morning
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If you were to look at the Days of Awe from 36,000 feet, you would see something that you may never have seen before. You see, the Days of Awe are not simply Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They are really a 53 day period beginning at the start of the month before Rosh Hashanna.

First is Elul. Elul is the month of preparation. The rabbis saw in the month's letters an acronym for the Alef, Lamed, Vav and Lamed: Ani L'doi v'dodi li - a phrase from the Song of Songs which means 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.' It speaks of the love that God has for the Jewish people and that the Jewish people have God. This follows the general idea that the Song of Songs is not simply a love song between two people, but rather a love letter between and God and us. And with

the passing of Elul into Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that love is crystalized once again as it is every year.

And then we enter Rosh Hashanah with its shofar and its symbolism of regeneration and growth and the beginning of reconciliation between God and the Jewish people and God and each other. The sweetness of the honey and the tartness of the apple remind us of the dual nature of our relationships. And, to extend the metaphor, the sweetness of the honey covers over the tartness of the apple in the same way that forgiveness and repentance covers over the mistakes that we have made, the conclusions we have made about others and transforms our toxic relationships into sweeter ones.

Then ten days later, Yom Kippur comes around with its message that life is finite and that the days are growing shorter. It is no coincidence that the holidays happens in the autumn as the days themselves grow shorter. We hear the liturgy, we pray the

prayers that God grants us more life and we look inside ourselves, our heshbon ha-nefesh, our taking account of our souls, and inevitably ask ourselves the question, ‘What has my life become?’

After Yom Kippur there is a five day gap before Sukkot. And Sukkot is still considered part of the Days of Awe. And its message can be found in the dual nature of the holiday. On one hand there is the mitzvah וְשִׂמְחֶתָּהּ בְּחַגֵּךָ אֶתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ ‘And you shall rejoice in the Festival, you and your son and your daughter and your servant’ and, on the other hand, the choice of Ecclesiastes as the choice Megillah which is both the strangest book of the Bible and its most potent. It speaks of the reality that all life ends and that, despite the fact that ‘vanity, vanity all is vanity, the short book ends on a surprisingly upbeat note: “Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. ⁸Let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment. ⁹Enjoy

happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days.”

From the beginning of Elul to the end of Sukkot there are 53 days. That is a lot more than the three days we call the Days of Awe or the High Holidays. And in those 53 days a model for our life emerges. How appropriate that on this day we contemplate the meaning and direction and impact of our lives, we should look and reflect yes, on how we got here, but then ask ourselves, ‘Now what?’

The Sages called these days the Days of Awe, the Yamim No-raim. But they had another term for this 53 day period: HeChag - The Festival of Festivals. To them, it was one long period of holiness.

Their insight led me to my own insight that I think I could only have come to in the midst of a pandemic and in my 62 year of living. It is this: this long period of time is really an overview of an entire life and how it ought to be lived. Just as King Solomon is said to have written the Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in his middle age, and Ecclesiastes at the end of his life, so too do we see our lives - past, present and future - laid out in these holidays.

Elul is our childhood. It is our conception and birth. In the same way we enter the world with wide eyes and great expectations, Elul awakens us to our possibilities and to the relationships that make life so meaningful.

If we are fortunate, Rosh Hashanah is our youth when we see the world as a honey-covered apple filled with happiness and raisin-

filled challah. It is our sweet time. The moment of our first love. The moments when our futures lie before us filled with promise.

And Yom Kippur is our middle age. We sense the things we have done - both good and bad - and, if we are honest, begin to heal the damage we have done over the years. We see the shards of the relationships that may be irrevocably shattered and we try to regroup and start again. Socrates is said to have said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' Yom Kippur is the formal Jewish way of examining our lives and it often happens each and every day.

And finally there is Sukkot. Sukkot with its themes of life's fragility and life's finality, the importance of joy and the importance of knowing that it will all end.

From Elul to Sukkot we see before us the portrait of each of our lives and the abiding question as I mentioned before - and it is the most important question to ask ourselves, 'Now, how to live?'

We are asking this question in the middle of pandemic which has more resonance than perhaps any other year. Unatane Tokef is no longer theoretical: who shall live and who shall die takes on a whole new depth these days of COVID.

So concerned are we that we have created entirely new formats of teaching, learning, praying, shopping, and everything else. I feel like Father Mackenzie in the Beatle's song, 'Elanor Rigby' who, according to the lyric, was 'writing the words of the sermon that no-one will hear.' I am not sure if that is entirely true but speaking to an empty sanctuary in an empty temple on Yom Kippur sure feels that way. And for whom is our Cantor singing? Again, we aren't sure. We can only pray that our distance today

assures our sharing of moments together tomorrow. But in this day of virus and social distancing and fear, how can we be so sure. And the question we ask in the normal times, 'What now?' takes on a much deeper meaning.

Maybe to answer that question we have to trust our tradition. Remember, our faith is one of forward movement and hope in the future all the while using the reality of the past to guide us and sustain that faith. We are people borne out Exile from the Land of Israel, pogrom and Inquisitions throughout Europe, expulsion from almost every single country in Europe at one time or another, an almost 400 years and almost 40 manifestations of Crusades throughout Europe. And that's just the older history. Of course the Shoah and the wars that Israel has had to fight and the current anti-Semitism have given us lessons in faith in the future. And yet, despite it all, what is the Jewish response? Simply this - to echo the words of Ecclesiastes of Sukkot: ⁶Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the

evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed, the one or the other, or if both are equally good.”

I am amazed and awed by those who have experience profound grief and sadness and how so many of them not only rebuild, but flourish. It is as if tragedy compels them to create. The Jews were exiled to Babylonia: we created the Babylonian Talmud which is used to this day. We were locked up in ghettos: we created the prayerbook. And we almost perished in the Holocaust and we built a country out of sand, sun, and dreams.

And when it happens on a personal level, it is an affirmation that people have a capacity to still look ahead. It is almost as if those who suffer can see something that most of us can't. Those who continue to live see joy despite the pain. Maybe that is why we say, 'May her life be a blessing' after someone has died. The blessing of a life elevates us on top of their shoulders to see be-

yond a horizon of pain and darkness. Their blessing allows us to see the glimmerings of the rising sun.

These are the glimmerings that Sukkot inspires in us and why Sukkot, not Yom Kippur must come at the end of these Days of Awe but, at the same time, why Yom Kippur must happen when it does and how this day points us to the ultimate question of 'Now what?' For on Yom Kippur, today, we admit what we have done and what we must do - but Sukkot tells us as the days are getting shorter and the nights grow more chilly, that now is the time to taste the joy that life offers for ourselves and rebuild the hope that touches generations.

There is a wonderful story in the Talmud that touches upon this dichotomy. Akiba was among the greatest of teachers we find in the Talmud. He was compassionate, empathic and wise. The legend says that Moses asks God to show him what Akiba's fate

will be. Without warning God shows him Akiba's fate. He would be tortured to death by the Romans for teaching the Torah.

Moses is moved to cry out: "Sovereign of the universe, such Torah and such a reward!" to which God replies: "Be silent, for such is My decree." There is no ending to the story and there is no explanation for Akiba's suffering or God's decree. The legend remains silent about this. But Akiba is chosen as the character as a reason. He cannot be brushed away. He was the most influential man of erudition and pastoral skill that Judaism produced. He prepared for the future of our people even though he lived during the worst persecution of the Jews during the first century of the common era. He is admired not for his martyrdom, but for his faith that those who come after him, every Jew alive today, can grasp holiness and faith for ourselves. His suffering was his Yom Kippur. His joy in teaching Torah was his Sukkot. Because of both, we are here today as Jews. Will each of us be able to say that when we look back at our lives from 36,000 feet? And if not, why not and if not, is there still hope? Akiva began

learning at 40 when the life expectancy was 45. He changed the world. We can, too, if we choose. Today is the day for choosing.

The Torah portion for Yom Kippur is Nitzvavim: you stand here today all of you. It is recited when Moses nears the ends of his life. Moses reminds us of who we are, where we came from and how we got here. But this portion is not solely about the past. It is about the future and the joys and future that will come from building the Land.

On this Yom Kippur, that is what I find myself praying for. I pray for the wisdom to know my mistakes and the courage to correct the path. I pray for the strength to forgive those who have sinned against me and I for them for my sins. But that is only the beginning of Yom Kippur. Because when it is all over I want to be able to cover my life with the honey simple, sweet joys that give life

richness and inspires and leaves something to build for the next generation.