

## **A Personal Confession, or Why Judaism**

Kol Nidrei 5784

The High Holidays are an amazing part of the Jewish year cycle. These Yamim Nora'im, these Days of Awe, are full of power. During this time, we are encouraged to have increased awareness of the potential for personal transformation.

Much about this time of year touches my heart and spirit. For most of the year, I spend a lot of time not only in my work but also immersed in the logistical jigsaw puzzle of my family. I nearly always feel like I'm on the go, with no real time to stop and look around. At this time of year though, we are commanded to engage in personal reflection, to take a close look at who we are and who we want to become. I have come to depend on the High Holidays to tell me to stop, to set aside my regular schedule and instead reflect on who I am and how I am living.

I also love the feeling of anticipation of the new year. Back at Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about our ability to renew ourselves each day. Every year as the High Holidays approach, I feel myself getting excited about the year to come. Even something as simple as receiving a new Jewish calendar in the mail makes me feel a little giddy. It is a reminder for me to be open to holding all of the possibilities for the new year.

On a less philosophical note, I also enjoy much of the music for the High Holidays. Even when I struggle with the words of our liturgy, spiritually or just speaking them smoothly, the festival music speaks to and for my heart. Hearing the music, (**insert folk Avinu Malkeinu**), brings me into the spiritual space for the holiday.

And finally, I really do love the opportunity to connect with people during the holidays. As you probably know, the highest synagogue attendance of the year for American Jews is during these holidays. For the past two weeks, the phone here at temple has been ringing more than ever, with people looking to be a part of our community. Seeing people's renewed interest in coming here is truly uplifting. Plus, this is my first time leading High Holiday services in our sanctuary and having so many people present both here and online. I must admit that the sight of all of you in this space does give me a real sense of awe.

Given all that I just shared, you might think that I **really** love the Yamim Nora'im. In the spirit of confession, another focal point of this season, I have a truth to share.

I admit, before my community, that I actually do not love the High Holidays. Despite finding parts of the holidays profoundly moving, I also struggle a lot with them.

The High Holiday services have so many elements that are different from regular Shabbat or weekday services, that they don't feel entirely familiar and like

what grounds me for the rest of the year. It's not any one thing. It's a cumulative effect – a cumulative effect of all the special liturgical poems, all the additions that leave me stumbling over words I thought were familiar, and of everything that's different from Shabbat. All of those changes have an effect on me, and I can't say that I wholeheartedly like it.

Also, these holidays are far more formal than I generally am. For all that I love the white Torah covers and flowers, the formality makes me feel some distance from the very people who I'm so happy to see. Speaking of formality, there's also the dressing up.

Don't get me wrong, I actually do like wearing nice clothes and having an excuse to buy new clothes. However, there are times during the holidays when I feel like I'm playing dress up. Just like when a little kid puts on their parents' shoes and discovers how much larger their parents' feet are, I sometimes feel like I'm wearing something a little too big when I am in my festival garb. Nevertheless, I wear the special garments to help me set my own intention and to visually communicate the holiday mood, even though sometimes I feel not entirely myself while doing so. I find this feeling somewhat ironic since this holiday is all about figuring out who we are and who we want to become, yet here I am wearing things that I wear once a year.

A friend of mine compared the High Holidays to going on vacation. When you go on vacation, you might see some incredible and beautiful sights, but you

don't feel at home on vacation. Similarly, the High Holidays offer magnificent poetry and music, but they don't necessarily give me the "I'm home" feeling.

Given that the High Holidays are not my favorite of the Jewish holidays, and I suspect I might not be alone in these feelings, I would like to share with you a framework that has helped me appreciate what they do have to offer and to continue to engage with them.

When I think about any aspect of Judaism, including the holidays, I often think through the metaphor of relationships. We talk a lot about our relationships with other people or our relationship with the Divine, and we also have a relationship with Judaism.

Take a moment and think about someone you have been friends with or in some relationship with for a long time and with whom you have every intention of remaining connected. Picture them in your mind; remember how they move, how they speak; think about how you feel when you're around them. Try to remember a time when you were utterly delighted to be with them.

Now try to remember a time when you felt irritated or annoyed by something they did.

In relationships we have with other people, we experience things we like about them and things we don't like so much about them. To stay in a relationship with other people, we make choices about those things we don't like.

Maybe we ignore something because we decide it isn't a big deal. Maybe we tell

the person when something bothers us and we find a compromise, or the person changes their behavior. Maybe the person explains why they act a certain way, and we learn something new about them which helps us understand them better and thus grow closer to them.

For me, being in a relationship with Judaism is not all that different from being in a relationship with other people. Sometimes I find tremendous joy and delight from my Jewish practice – when my children were named and brought into the covenant, dancing at Simchat Torah, finally understanding a really challenging text in rabbinical school. Other times, Judaism is a source of comfort to me – when I sat with grieving families as a student chaplain at the hospital, when I mourned for two of my classmates. And sometimes, I find myself irritated by certain aspects of Judaism – such as the differences between High Holiday and Shabbat liturgy or the formality of the services.

Although I have mixed feelings about the High Holidays, my relationship to Judaism goes beyond any single holiday. Just like I don't end a relationship with another person because of one thing, or even several things, I don't like, I don't stop engaging with Judaism or even with the High Holidays on account of struggling with some parts. After all, I am part of the people Israel, the "God-wrestlers." We end our services with the prayer "Aleinu," meaning "it is upon us," and it is upon us to wrestle, to engage, to remain connected to each

other and to Judaism – even, and perhaps especially, when it is hard or we find it challenging.

Even though I don't love the High Holidays SO much, there is something in the Jewish calendar that does make my heart sing. Not too long ago, I saw on Facebook that one of my colleagues had labeled himself a "Rosh HaShanah Jew," and my immediate thought was "Wow... that's so not me, but... I sure feel like that about Shabbat."

Some of what I love about Shabbat is the same as what I appreciate about the High Holidays. Just as the High Holidays are a designated time to engage in reflection that I don't generally make time for the rest of the year, Shabbat is a time for something else I often don't make time for – REST! On Shabbat, I give myself permission, or sometimes I force myself, to set the work aside, to turn my attention to doing what I love, and of course to rest.

I also delight in the music of Shabbat and spending time with other people much like I do for High Holidays. I especially love singing with friends and family on Shabbat. The music tunes me into the spirit of the day, and the communal singing helps me to connect with the people around me. Spending time with loved ones and my community on Shabbat reminds me that I belong somewhere, that I am a part of something bigger than myself, and frankly that people care about me.

But Shabbat gives me a lot that the High Holidays just can't. First off, Shabbat by its very nature is more relaxed and easeful. When I am with my family on Friday nights, we have a nice leisurely dinner together after a week of running from one thing to another and having little time to check in with each other. When I am here leading services, there is a feeling of relief and relaxation as we progress through the psalms and prayers, and the smaller gathering allows for lengthier and more intimate conversations.

At the risk of stating the obvious, Shabbat happens every week rather than once a year. During the height of the pandemic, many people experienced a phenomenon which came to be called "Blursday." Blursday refers to the difficulty in determining what day of the week it is when all the days feel the same. Shabbat is a perfect antidote to Blursday. Even as we have moved out of the worst of the pandemic, Shabbat's regularity still comforts me. Like many people, I am a creature of habit, and knowing that Shabbat comes every six days is reassuring. No matter what happens in my week, I know Shabbat will be there with its familiar rituals and traditions.

What I am about to say next may sound unusual coming from a rabbi, but Shabbat is about more than one's spiritual life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of blessed memory wrote, "Unlike the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath is not dedicated exclusively to spiritual goals. It is a day of the soul as well as of the

body; comfort and pleasure are an integral part of the Sabbath observance.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Shabbat is a time when we think about our spiritual well-being, our tradition tells us to enjoy Shabbat in the physical world. In a midrash God asks us,

“Do you think that I gave you Shabbat for your detriment? I gave it to you only for your benefit.” Then “Rabbi Hiyya, son of Rabbi Abba said, Sanctify Shabbat with food, drink, and clean clothing and by enjoying yourself, and I will give you a reward. How do we know this? Because Isaiah the prophet said ‘and you will call the Sabbath a delight,’ and after that he said ‘then you will delight in God.’”<sup>2</sup>

At this point, I hope you can tell I love Shabbat. What would make Shabbat even better would be to celebrate it together with you in this coming year. If you already come regularly to Shabbat services, keep coming and consider coming at least one more time in the new year than you did this past year. If you haven’t had the practice of coming to services, I encourage you to give it a try. At the very least, it is another chance to connect with people in the community, and your presence will add to the delight for all of us.

Now that you’ve heard me go on about Shabbat, I want to be clear about the High Holidays. I am definitely NOT saying to not come back tomorrow morning.

**Please do** come back; the High Holidays are important. The High Holidays might not be my personal favorite of the Jewish holidays, but as I said earlier,

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel. *The Sabbath*. p.19

<sup>2</sup> Devarim Rabbah 3:1  
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Rabbi Ashira Stevens



parts of them are very meaningful for me. I'm absolutely invested in some of the key themes of the holidays such as: making teshuva - repentance, personal and communal renewal, and remembrance. I look forward to continuing to explore these ideas with you and support each other as we engage in this important spiritual work.

Over the next day of prayer and reflection, let's choose to remain in relationship – with each other, with our traditions. Let's be open to hearing or feeling something new in the words, music, and overall experience of Yom Kippur, and to deepening our connection with our community in this new year of 5784. May we all be blessed in the coming year with the gift of gaining a deeper understanding of our traditions and a closer relationship with this loving and holy community.

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