

## LET'S LOOK FOR A WAY OUT TOGETHER: The High Holy Days Over, Where to From Here

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Every year, like clockwork, the Jewish people—even those of us who insist we're not "religious"—reemerge, reconvene, and restore ourselves for the High Holy Days.

But why should this happen so predictably? What motivates so many of us to make this occasion a priority on our calendar, again and again, year after year? What do we expect to find in the synagogue during these few days?

We come for as many reasons as there are individuals, of course. But even though each of us has a somewhat unique motivation for coming to services on the High Holy Days, the list of reasons may not be very long. We come to work on ourselves, to work at becoming better people. We come to reaffirm our Jewish identity. We come to renew our membership in the Jewish community. We come because we want to see old friends and acquaintances. We come because someone arm-twisted or guilt-tripped us. And we come for reasons we may not fully understand.

No matter what the initial motivation, many of us will spend several hours attending High Holy Day services. Since in our day-to-day life we rarely have the luxury of wasting hours in a day, maybe we should consider this time in the same light—it's valuable and not to be wasted.

How can we productively use this time, even if we're full of doubt or cynicism about the usefulness of congregational prayer, Judaism, or God?

Since both of us grew into our adulthood without a Jewish education, we know personally how difficult it is to ascribe to God, Judaism, or a congregation the power to make a difference in our day-to-day pressures and hopes.

Entering middle-age we may find ourselves living with 12-year-old's ideas of God, prayer, repentance, ritual, etc. Imagine trying in middle age to live your business or professional life, your sex life, even your

avocation, or any other part of your life on what you knew at 12—yet that's what many of us do.

But if we're not going to believe in childish nonsense, what are we to believe in?

While there are no simple answers, one way we can begin as adults to know God, Judaism, and congregational life is to search for and act out the highest and best parts of ourselves in a more disciplined way, based on the tradition of wisdom that has sustained our people for thousands of years. We can take the time we're going to spend in synagogue to examine ourselves, to see if we're carrying around dead parts that depress us and drag us down throughout the year, parts that cause pain to ourselves and the people we love and care about. And we can use the time to see if Judaism offers any practical help to leave behind those parts of ourselves that are dead and destructive and to lift up the parts that are alive and loving.

Using the time this way is sometimes very difficult. Self-assessment in the harsh light of truth can be very painful.

So why should we do it?

Because like all investments in which gratification is deferred, *teshuvah*—turning our lives to heal ourselves—leads to exceptional rewards, both for those we love and us. When guided by Torah, evaluating and turning ourselves according to the attributes that our tradition ascribes to God, our pain is lessened by the goodness in realizing our highest potential.

What prevents us, then, from doing *teshuvah*?

In a word, fear. We fear not being in control. We fear admitting to ourselves that we are not the greatest power in our lives. We fear being judged by others with our defenses down. We fear that the realities upon which we have built our lives, the fictions we've told others and ourselves, if we don't hold onto them tightly, will destroy us somehow. We fear that we'll have to give up all the sensual and material pleasures in our lives. We fear admitting our fear.

Yet, ironically, we have little or no fear of God, thinking that we alone, among all creatures, can escape the consequences of our actions. Some of us reject God and Torah by accepting childish notions of reward and punishment. Children often believe that punishment is designed exclusively to correct *their* bad behavior.

What they (and we?) avoid is the recognition that so-called “punishment” is a natural, educative result of our behavior, built into the creation by God. It’s as unavoidable as drowning if we jump into the deep end of the pool and fail to move our arms and legs.

How are we to overcome our fears?

The requirements for overcoming fear are always the same when the conditions of our lives demand courage. We have to act on our faith—that is, do what’s right, despite our reason and experience. That’s the essential definition of faith, the *doing* of what we know to be right despite reason and experience which argue for the immobilization that follows from despair, futility, and powerlessness to do good.

And we have to find others, those with whom we can ally ourselves, to do what we’re called upon to do. Judaism has no expectation that as individuals we can discern the will of God and manage our lives to meet it. Throughout our lives we require teachers and, in turn, we are obligated to teach others what we have learned. There is no more compelling purpose for the establishment of a congregational community than to support and sustain its members in their efforts to learn how to live their lives every day in faithfulness to the vision and path of Torah.

Why is it that sometimes we seem to have the needed faith and at other times we don’t?

Faith is a function of hope. The more hope, the more faith. Hope grows in proportion to the possibilities we see for goodness in the world. Hope increases if we see others stand up for what is right, tell the truth, combat injustice, fight for freedom, work to make peace, and show kindness. If we see others increase goodness in the world, our hope is enlarged, and we have the faith we need to overcome our fear.

But who are these *others*? They are none other than *us* when we commit ourselves to do these things as a *family* and a *community*. Then we potentiate hope and faith far beyond our own personal power.

We may choose to remain alone and isolated, lacking in hope and faith, fearful of turning our lives. Or we may choose to join with others, build goodness together, increasing our hope and faith, allowing us to overcome our fear and do the *teshuvah* necessary to change our world.

In one respect we’re right not to fear God. The judgment that will be levied upon us will be a consequence, most of all, of our *communal* failure to take

advantage of this precious time, which has been designed and arranged for us to turn our lives together. Mostly what we have to fear is our own failures.

Where do we start if we want to turn, if we want to forsake the dead parts of ourselves?

Somewhere, somehow, we must find within ourselves at least a small voice of regret. That requires moments of silence, when we are neither talking nor listening to others, which is a legitimate function of prayer.

We can ask ourselves, what have I done this past year that was self-destructive of the goodness in me? Do I want to forsake that part of myself?

We can ask those we love, how have I hurt you this past year? We can listen carefully to what they tell us. Then we can take responsibility for our wrongdoing and do all within our power to make things right.

We can ask ourselves, what have I done this past year that lessened hope in my congregation and undermined the faith of its members? Do I want to forsake that part of myself?

We can choose *not* to allow the pain others have caused us to rule our lives, to define who we are and how we will react. Instead, we can forgive those who express a genuine regret and a desire to be reconciled.

We can support each other by joining in communal confession to sins that we, personally, have not committed. That way, none of us have to experience the shame of confessing our wrongdoing alone.

We can accept and support the *teshuvah* of our family, friends, and congregation members, instead of automatically pigeonholing those whom we’ve summed up and judged in the past.

We can affirm by how we treat other people in our community that all of us have the capacity to change, accepting them and ourselves as we seek to be, not as we have been.

Rabbi Hayyim of Zans, who lived in the nineteenth century, told a parable that comes to teach us about the role of congregational community in *teshuvah*:

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, unable to find his way out. Suddenly he sees another man approaching him. His heart is filled with joy. “Now I’ll get out of here,” he thinks to himself.

When they come face to face he asks the other man, “Brother, tell me which is the way out of this forest. I’ve been wandering about here lost for several days.”

The other man says to him, “Brother, I do not know the way out either—I’ve also been wandering here for many days. I *can* tell you this: don’t take the way I’ve been taking, for you’ll surely stay lost. But let’s look for a way out together.”