

1 Tishri 5776 Erev Rosh Hashanah

Once upon a time. . .

not too long ago. . .

many people felt that. . .

going to Rosh Hashanah services. . .

was an obligation. . .

one that could be fulfilled by showing up. . .

passing time between the first moments of saying hello, kissing and hugging people, bantering with each other,

like so many of you did just moments ago. . .

then enduring a service that included listening to the rabbi and the cantor, counting the pages in the machzor until the end of the service, listening to an endless array of prayers in a language you may not understand, thinking about what's on television . . . only occasionally being engaged in those moments you actually understood what was going on.

This is not most people's way of being in the world--and it is certainly not the intention of what this time of year is meant to be.

Most of us, I would venture, would seldom intentionally put ourselves in situations where we feel disempowered, where our ability to understand never connects with what is being presented.

Still, for whatever reason. . .

the time you invest here, on Rosh Hashanah and then on Yom Kippur. . .

may feel like an obligation,

more than anything else.

And when the service finally concludes. . .

And you quickly move out back. . .

to return to a familiar of being. . .

Feeling like you did what you had to do and now it's time to get back to life as you understand it.

Now. . .

imagine if

tonight and the days following

will make you **fall in love** with what it means to be **alive** and in the world **here and now**.

Will be relevant to you, in your life.

Will be completely understood and accessible.

Will reach you in places you did not realize could be possible.

For a new experience awaits you,

tonight and in the days ahead

an experience that is designed to catalyze you in transforming **your life**.

What is this experience?

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It is the art of making meaning out of time.

Unlike the new year in winter, changing from the cold, dark days of December to the cold, dark, days of January,

the new Jewish year comes at a natural break. .

when our summer activities begin to recede. . .

and the rhythms of our lives evolve.

The Jewish new year--Rosh Hashanah--gives us all a moment to contemplate what has transpired in the past year as we consider our hopes and aspirations for the future, the hours, days, weeks and months that will be the new year.

The art of making meaning out of time.

It took considerable religious innovation to get to this moment.

The Torah gives us only the slightest of hints as to what we are here for:

*B'chodesh hashvi-ee bechad l'chodesh yiheh lachem shbaton zichron troah meekra-kodesh. Kol melechet avoda lo taasue v'heravtem eshe l'Hashem.*

*In the seventh month on the first of the month you will have a complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts; You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to the Eternal.*

The innovation came from the rabbis who created the Mishnah, the blueprint for what life could be like for Jews after the destruction of the central place for Jewish worship, the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE.

They tell us in the Mishnah that the tiny hint from Leviticus is the new year for years.

They figured backwards to get to the dating for our present new year, five thousand seven-hundred seventy-six.

Now modern dating techniques allow us know that the world is billions of years old and the earth and our universe are but a small part of the overall arc of creation.

Still, our ancients, without modern knowledge of how old the world really is, relied on the phases of the moon, just as we do today. They could see that the moon cycled through its phases regularly.

When you look up at the moon tonight and see the moon in its first phase, you are seeing what our ancestors experienced.

Even more innovations from the Mishnah:

that the blasts on the horn (remember the terse Torah text) will be on the shofar;

that the shofar must be kosher for us from specified animals;

that the loud blasts on the shofar are *tekiah*, *t'ruah*, *shevarim*.

Here we are, nearly two thousand years later, bringing these innovations to life.

And much more.

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The mishnah also led to more elaboration in the Talmud and the further comments of later generations. Many ideas for what we would do on Rosh Hashanah were created, such as what Torah we are reading today and many of the medieval *piyuutim*, the poems in dense Hebrew.

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Still, when it comes to making meaning . . .

Sometime along the way much of the juice of Rosh Hashanah was lost in translation.

The profound ideas of the early rabbis gave way to a sense of obligation, in our time,

of being in services, longer than any other services you might attend during the year,

with strange music,

and strange prayers,

in a language you partially understand or not at all,

and concepts about God with which you may disagree.

That experience of Rosh Hashanah needed to change for the Jew in the pew if meaning was once again to be part of the experience of marking time with a new year.

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Tonight:

Let me invite you

to make meaning out of your investment of time in being in this place, in this time.

Before you tonight you will experience a myriad of hooks--prayers, music, poetry, reflections, meditations--

each and every one designed for you to connect with what matters in your life and to create new memories of what being in this space may mean for you.

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Tonight:

You are here, in our familiar surroundings. . .

for a special purpose. . .

to be touched in mind and body.

You will, I hope, find prayers made new for you. A prayerful experience means you should linger on prayers that are particularly resonant for you. Don't worry about staying with us. . .you will catch up. . .or not. Allow yourself to be moved.

You will, I hope, hear music, much of it familiar, some of it new. You will hear the cantor's voice, and you will hear the voice of the congregation. You will sing along and you will take the music in. All of this music is meant to touch you in the deepest recesses of your being.

You will find poetry, ancient and new, for all times and moods, capturing the ineffable nature of being in language. Allow it to work.

You will, I hope, let your mind wander, having thoughts about your life, and about those you love, who is here with you and who no longer walks in life.

Tonight and the days to come will be an experience not to count lightbulbs or how much longer there is until the end of worship,

but to places of conscious exploration of who you are, reflecting on your being and your values.

Let that be your immersive experience tonight and over the following moments that we are together.

Allow these experience to be all it can be for you, wherever you are.

Know that there is no one right experience to have, and no two of us will share the same experience.

Use each and every one of the resources of these moments together

to find your way into yourself

to the places that only you know,

and only you can go,

to find

what in you

that is why we are here

Take any or all of the many pathways open to us  
at this holy gathering.

To create meaning out of the gifts of our lives.