

Why You Should Go to Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah This Year : Parashat Vayelech

“Why You Shouldn’t Go to Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah This Year.”

That is the title of an article that appeared a few years ago in The Forward, long before the pandemic, written by Rabbi Jay Michaelson, a writer, activist, and provocateur of sorts. You might not be surprised to hear that I was none too pleased to see such an editorial in the pages of our Jewish press, even if Rabbi Michaelson’s essential message was somewhat more benign than it first appears.

“Instead of attending kitschy mass performances that even your rabbi probably finds uninspiring,” writes Michaelson, “Choose a different holiday from the Jewish calendar, one that you don’t currently observe, and commit to it instead. Sukkot is coming up soon, and most rabbis (including this one) love it. Or Tu B’Shvat in winter. Or maybe Shabbat – it happens every week.”¹

I am all for expanding our congregation’s participation in holiday celebrations and, if I were to voice in, I’d probably suggest Simchat Torah which embodies our deep love for learning or Purim which is just plain fun or, absolutely, Shabbat which is truly the cornerstone of our week here at TIC with its deep sense of community and connection. And if I were absolutely forced to choose, I might prefer that a person who was going to select but one Jewish experience for the entire year go with an Israel trip, or a family retreat, or an Introduction to Judaism class rather than showing up for shul on three particular days. As Michaelson rightly points out, there are elements of the High Holidays that make them less than ideal for the casual participant in Jewish life – the length of worship, the emphasis on Hebrew, the formality and size of a service that at other times feels heimish and intimate. There are challenging

¹ <http://forward.com/opinion/349500/why-you-shouldnt-go-to-synagogue-on-rosh-hashanah-this-year/>

themes of judgment and anthropomorphic images of God sitting up in the heavens with an open book which do not necessarily resonate; there are difficult prayers like the *Un'taneh Tokef* with its sobering emphasis on who shall live and who shall die.

“In contrast [to the High Holidays],” Michaelson continues, “[other Jewish celebrations] are refreshingly life-affirming. Sukkot is a holiday of harvest, joy, environmentalism, companionship, paganism, cyclicity, agriculture, and community. Passover is a holiday of freedom, liberation, spring, nature, debate, and making history new each year. The Sabbath is a time of rest, non-doing, mindfulness, holiness, community, and family. “None of these has much to do with [the] guilt [that seems to permeate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur].”²

Sukkot happens to be my favorite holiday and I’m all for Passover and Shabbat too – they lift up important values, they celebrate family and community, they’re filled with time-sweetened traditions and delicious food. But I think that Michaelson is really giving the High Holidays short shrift when he encourages us to skip them this – or any - year. Here are three reasons why I think that the Days of Awe still have meaning and power in our current day and age.

1. We Could All Use a Fresh Start – Michaelson may see the High Holidays as being about guilt but I see them as being about opportunity. In fact, the word *chet*, often translated as “sin” in Jewish circles, more accurately means “missing the mark” – it suggests that we didn’t quite get it right this past year but that by adjusting our aim, steadying our hand, and trying again we might just get closer in the year to come. *Teshuvah* – the sacred return that is at the heart of this season – is not about self-flagellation or impossible notions of perfection or humiliation and shame. In

² Ibid.

fact, one of the reasons that we annul our vows on Kol Nidre night is that we recognize that we are all but human and that fallibility is a fact of life. Rather, the High Holidays are about having time to sit and be introspective, to reflect on essential questions, to honestly evaluate the people we have become and the people we most wish to be. The High Holidays are about starting fresh, repairing relationships, asking for and being granted forgiveness, taking stock of our lives, and investigating the state of our souls. Particularly given the frenetic and unrelenting pace of life under which most of us operate most of the time, I – for one – am grateful to have designated time and space in which to do this sacred work. I feel not guilt but possibility.

2. Community, Community, Community – Michaelson is right that stepping into High Holiday services for most of us feels far different from coming to TIC on Shabbat or other days. The room has been enlarged, there are unfamiliar faces amidst the well known ones, the dress is fancier, the vibe is fussier, there is far more pomp and circumstance. But included amongst all these extra people, some of whom we may not know, are others that we do and that we see but a few times a year. There are the parents and siblings and cousins and nephews of dear friends who perhaps join us from other places around the country each time this year. There are the young people whom we watched grow up and then move away now back, giving us the opportunity to hear of their adventures, delight in their accomplishments, and meet their significant others. There are our own friends, neighbors, shul buddies, and colleagues; there are the melodies that our uniquely this congregation's and time-honored traditions like the processional of past presidents on Kol Nidre night. This is our home and extended family; once in a while it's nice to have a reunion with the whole *mishpacha* present.

3. The Stir of the Shofar – On this last point, Michaelson and I are finally in agreement as he describes the blasts of the Shofar as “the epitome of Jewish magic and ritual.”³ In his words, “Where the prayer liturgy is prolix and verbose, the Shofar is wordless. Where the theology of Rosh Hashanah is a mess, the primal call of the Shofar can be a shattering experience, packing thousands of years of history and pre-history into one, inchoate cry. Where Rosh Hashanah is a day of infantilizing mediation, the Shofar is vivid and immediate. It calls to you, personally.”⁴

Okay, so maybe we’re only partially in agreement. But in addition to believing, as does Michaelson, that there is a poignancy and power to the Shofar that is often difficult to capture in words, I also think that the Shofar represents another essential element of the holiday – the brokenness and wholeness that is a part of our human experience. Many of us will know that the middle notes of the Shofar are meant to mimic the wailing of the human spirit – the three broken calls of *shevarim* bringing to mind a moan or sigh and the nine, pinched blasts of the *terua* intimating a sad sob. These mournful tones are surrounded by the more hopeful and full sounds of the clarion *tekiah* – we move from wholeness to brokenness and then back to wholeness again. We should all go to synagogue this Yom Kippur because we could use a fresh start and we should all go to synagogue this Yom Kippur because we value community. But we should also go to synagogue this Yom Kippur because the year just ending has had high peaks of joy, low furrows of sorrow, and everything in between. The sound of the shofar that we will hear once again at Ne’ilah is cathartic, reminding us of both the beauty and struggle contained in the human condition.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

And so, in conclusion, I say this: go to synagogue this Yom Kippur. If the service feels long or overly-heavy with Hebrew or out of touch and far too formal, feel free to try and help it better suit your needs. Read the English. Fall out of step with me and the Cantor and peruse the pages slowly; *Machzor Lev Shalem* has some incredible marginal notes and readings. Bring your own materials with you to shul – poetry that stirs your spirit or a Jewish text you’ve wanted to dive into or a few questions for reflection that you can think about during these quiet hours together. Let yourself get swept up in the music or be moved by the liturgy or find meaning, perhaps, in a *kavannah* (spiritual frame) shared from the *bimah*. Revel in sitting next to your kids, in watching your grand-children follow along a little bit better than they did year before, in greeting friends you haven’t seen in a while. Enjoy the blessings that come from being part of a community.

Sukkot, Tu B’Shvat, and Shabbat are pretty great. But there is just nothing quite like the High Holidays.

I look forward to seeing you again on Tuesday night in shul!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Annie Tucker