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Erev Rosh Hashanah : Tikkun, Teshuvah, and Self-Care

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah U'metukah!

We are at the start of a new year, a birthday of creation, a time of possibility and renewal. I want to extend a shout out to my father in Montreal who is also celebrating a special birthday today. Happy birthday dad!

Once, when Rosh Hashanah fell on a Shabbat (like now), Hasidic 18th century Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev declared, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, You forbid us to write on Shabbat except in order to save a life. So write us down in the Book of Life, since otherwise even You may not write on Shabbat."¹

Hopefully this means that we are off to a promising start!

Seriously, though, a year ago who could have imagined, who would have wanted to imagine, that we would be welcoming in 5781 like this – from our homes, in our little boxes, zoomed out, trying to stay safe from COVID-19, all the while fires rage in the west and hurricanes threaten the southeast. And then there is our increased collective awareness of systemic racism and more...

The past months have been alienating for many of us, in many different ways: some of us have been isolated, alone in our apartments, some have been struggling to juggle our kids' schooling and work and more all from the kitchen table, some of us haven't been able to see family members because of distance or risk or closed international borders.

Let's take a minute and sit with that. This, here, is really hard, on a lot of levels. It's okay to feel it, to name it. To mourn what was and what could have been in an alternate world without COVID-19. To miss being in connected, physical community.

¹ From *Sefer Hachasidut*, cited in Abraham Yaakov Finkel, *The Essence of the Holy Days*, p. 16.

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And still, we are here, and we are together, albeit differently. We have adapted with our tradition, we have figured out new ways to stay socially connected while maintaining physical distance. We have figured out how to be holy at home. Sort of.

And while connections may drop or screens may freeze or we may lose our place, through the ether we are here and we are together.

I feel as though it isn't chance that this year, Rosh Hashanah, the new year, also coincides with Shabbat because goodness do we need some rest and some wholeness and the ability to turn the page on the year that has been!

Two interrelated themes are especially prominent throughout the High Holidays, that of **teshuvah** and of **tikkun**. I am going to unpack these throughout the next 10 days, through Yom Kippur.

Teshuvah literally means “returning” or reconciliation, and **tikkun** means repair or healing. Our tradition teaches us that in many ways **teshuvah** is the path to **tikkun**, be it at the individual level (**tikkun atzmi**), the familial and communal level (**tikkun klali**), and for the whole world (**tikkun olam**).

We need teshuvah and tikkun more than ever now... Let's frame it this way: how to reconnect and reconcile and heal through the various forms of disconnection, alienation, isolation that have become so present in the past year – COVID-19, wildfires, racism, violence (i.e. gun violence).

When we talk about doing teshuvah, particularly in the context of the High Holidays, the sense is often that of seeking forgiveness for ways that we have strayed from our best selves, ways that we have unintentionally or intentionally hurt others.

More deeply, though, **teshuvah** is about re-centering ourselves, recalibrating ourselves, finding balance in ourselves, to be able to then heal and spread healing and repair around us.

In fact, in order to heal and repair our world, **we** need to be able to be well, safe, and fulfilled. Otherwise we burn out – alienated from ourselves **and** from the others we hope to help.

Teshuvah is **self-care**. And self-care is not selfish.

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Teshuvah and tikkun start with us as individuals and expand out.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, first chief rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, offered a brilliant [teaching](#) on the shofar as a model for such teshuvah and tikkun:

Traditionally, before blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we recite the verse from Psalms: “From my **straits** I called out to God. He answered me, and set me in a **wide expanse**.” (Psalms 118:5)

Imagine the narrows of the Psalm verse as the narrow, private issues of the individual, and the expanse as the broad, general concerns of the community and the world. The shofar, then, with its widening shape, is a metaphor of the widening circle/cycle of reconciliation and repair. Again, we start with ourselves, right here and right now, and from there reach out to really care for the needs of our communities and our world.

In this metaphor, we start from the self, but we are not alone. As our tradition emphasizes time and again, we are social and communal beings.

In the words of the immortal Bill Withers, z”l: “If there is a load, you have to bear/
That you can’t carry/I’m right up the road/I’ll share your load/If you just call me.”

We are and will be here for you, for us, for each other.

And the “we” is intentional. It has taken a cross-continental village to make these services happen. We are bending time and space with Chazzan Daniela here live from Los Angeles. We have Paula and others leading us in song from home here in Toronto. We are so grateful to Vered and the choir for the beautiful offerings that will unfold. Matt is producing all of this in live time, which is an unbelievable undertaking. And special thanks to Natalie, administrator extraordinaire, and particular extra special thanks to the Board and the High Holiday planning committee who have put endless hours of sweat and some tears to bring this together. We have been doing our best to reach beyond technology back into the real world, delivering messages and gift bags as tokens of our connection to each other, helping navigate technology, and enabling us to share in community together one way or another.

We all need somebody to lean on, now more than ever. I am grateful that we have each other.

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Finally, last week's Torah portion, Nitzavim, which is always the Torah portion that precedes Rosh Hashanah, (and spoiler alert, we'll come back to at Yom Kippur), contains a core message of Jewish tradition, faith, and agency: We read ([Deut. 30:19](#)): "I call heaven and earth to witness you today: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse — therefore choose life!"

There is a beautiful challenge in choosing life – it's on us. **Aleinu**. We are called on to **cultivate resiliency**, to take the small baby steps of life we can choose every day, to be grateful, to breathe, to take care of ourselves and each other, to advocate, to march for justice, to gather safely in community, to get some sleep. This time of year especially, our tradition gives us a toolkit through **teshuvah and tikkun** to choose life, to literally **inscribe ourselves in the book of life and blessing**. May we all do so, and lean on each other as much as we can to get there.

Shana Tovah U'metukah.