

What Does Rosh Hashanah Have to Do with It?

Talk by Ed Feinstein

Delivered at Dor Hadash's Rosh Hashanah morning services on September 19th, 2020

L'Shanah Tovah Umetukah. My wish for the New Year is sincere. But, I utter those words with a heavy heart this morning as we mourn the passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a courageous champion of civil rights and a fierce bulwark against the never ceasing onslaught of attacks on equal rights for all. May she rest in peace.

In past years, while sitting in synagogue watching as it filled during the High Holidays, I'd often ponder why after so many centuries we Jews, affiliated with a synagogue or not, believers or not, even if they don't set foot in a synagogue during the rest of the year, make a point of showing up for services during the High Holidays. Even though synagogue affiliation and attendance for those not orthodox has steadily declined for years, the High Holidays remain the biggest draw of the year by far for synagogues worldwide. There has to be a very strong attraction, something that transcends even religion and belief, perhaps something primal, that draws us to these days.

I haven't discovered a fully satisfying answer to my question. But I don't believe it has much to do with the fact that we refer to this period as the "Days of Awe," or the "High Holidays." Nor do I believe it's on account of biblical command, or a **literal belief** in the poetry of the ancient prayers we chant only on these days, like one of my favorites—the thousand plus year old U'netaneh Tokef:

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—how many shall leave this world, and how many shall be born into it, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not, who shall perish by fire, and who by water ... who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented.... But penitence, prayer and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree."

Beautiful phrasing and a clear message, but how many shul goers really believe the literal correspondence between human fate and penitence and prayer.

Nevertheless, even an intermittent Shul goer like myself can feel a sense of comfort and peace when in synagogue during these holidays. I even stay for the Musaf, sometimes. I associate these holy days with the experience of being with extended family, catching up with Shul friends, Rosh Hashanah dinner, apples and honey, listening to the special melodies reserved for these services, and participating with the community in the agony and joy of the Yom Kippur fast. And each year, as the Holidays approach, I look forward to the break from the everyday, to a chance to contemplate the meaning of Teshuvah, and its relevance to me, and just as important, to the feeling of engagement and sense of renewal that the New Year, the fast, and even the confessional inspire.

But this year is different. I confess that I have not been able to summon the energy, excitement, and sense of well-being that I've experienced with the arrival of Rosh Hashanah in past years. And it's not because our holiday dinner is restricted to just the two of us, or that family gatherings are restricted to Zoom and the phone, or even that services this year are virtual.

No, it's the anxiety and concern about the state of our country and society that intrudes when I've tried to focus on the High Holidays. At the outset of this New Year, we are beset by a conjunction of existential crises, over which we, as individuals, seem powerless: the pandemic, the lives lost and those damaged, our muddled response to its challenges, climate change induced wildfires devastating the West, captured video of unprovoked police violence and even murder, a White House intent on exacerbating and exploiting the polarization of American society along social, political, and racial fault lines, apparently uninterested in healing those divisions. And the acrimonious debate over responses to the pandemic—who could have imagined the issue of wearing a mask to prevent disease transmission could spark such emotional conflict, and even physical altercation. And let's not forget we are approaching a national election in which the incumbent president has intimated he may not leave office if defeated—a first in this republic.

Many of us are deeply apprehensive that the shared understandings and institutions which undergird and protect our cherished American society have been so weakened and perverted by attacks from those in power, that their very existence is imperiled.

If that weren't enough, every day we are confronted and must find ways to deal with the immediate fallout of the pandemic. The fear of contagion to ourselves and the vulnerable we care for, constraints on our economic, personal and social lives, the need to adapt our routines to the new normal, all drain our energy. Many struggle with tedium and loneliness. Millions have experienced job loss, economic distress, food deprivation and homelessness. We are all experiencing pandemic fatigue. We just want this to be over. We just want to resume our normal lives.

So what does Rosh Hashanah have to do with it? How can a holiday focused on individual repentance and a return to God have relevance when our very society is threatened with such crises? Is there a role for Teshuvah in approaching these climactic societal issues, over which we, as individuals, have so little control?

In referring to Rosh Hashanah in "Ceremony and Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays," Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wrote, "The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself. That is what Teshuva is, an act of making ourselves anew. On Rosh Hashanah we step back from our life like an artist stepping back from his canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete." While Rabbi Sachs affirms that Rosh Hashanah is a time for inner reflection and analysis, he puts the emphasis on doing so in order to make the changes that will move our lives in a direction more in line with our beliefs and value systems.

While the High Holidays offer no panacea for the conjunction of issues we face, our teshuvah this year can include stepping back from the canvas of the past year and examining how the series of multiple stressors we have faced, and our reactions to them have affected us, changed us. Deep feelings and experience of sadness, anger, irritability, resentment, frustration, disengagement, ennui, impatience, hopelessness, loneliness, are all too common. They are natural reactions to the events of the past year. What affect have these had on the quality of our lives, health, relationships, our work (for those fortunate to remain employed) our participation in civic affairs, tzedaka, our activism in the causes of justice and positive social change.

Like the artist in Rabbi Sachs's metaphor, teshuvah offers us an opportunity to step back from the everyday, to reflect on the changes we need to make to repair and energize ourselves, not only for the sake of our personal lives and relationships, but also to actively engage in the great societal crises and struggles we will continue to confront in this New Year.

Gut yor, L'Shanah Tovah, I wish you all a sweet year, please stay healthy, wear your mask, and don't forget that your vote matters, more than ever this November.