

Surviving Success

This is my 13th High Holy Days at Temple B'nai Chaim and observing the second day of Rosh HaShanah is a tradition that goes back at least that long for our congregation. I'm not sure how far back it goes beyond that and I know that it is not observed in every Reform synagogue. What is really unusual though is that there is a second day of Rosh HaShanah celebrated in Israel. Holidays that are celebrated for two days in the Diaspora are usually celebrated for only one day in Israel.

This second day safety buffer outside of Israel called *yom tov sheni shel galut* was established by the Rabbinic court because our ancestors were concerned with how long it took for the pronouncement of the new moon to travel from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. It was the sighting of the new moon by two witnesses that started the new month, not a preset calendar. Most Jewish holidays fall later in the month, so it is easier to determine where in the lunar cycle we are. But in the case of Rosh Hashanah, it falls on the first day of the month of Tishrei, and spotting a new moon can be tricky. Therefore an extra day was added so as not to accidentally miss the day. This is called *yom arichta*, a term which means an "elongated day." Thus the two days of Rosh Hashanah are counted as one long day.

What I find so compelling about the second day of Rosh HaShanah in Georgetown is you. I am always curious about people who come for the second day of services here, especially when it falls on a regular work or school day, like today, a Tuesday. I know that taking an extra day off is a hardship which comes with consequences including missed classes and assignments, docked pay, using up vacation time or disappointing customers, coworkers or bosses. At the very least, it is an inconvenience to the normal flow of life. And yet here you are. In fact we have a whole second day crowd, which interestingly has been growing.

People I've spoken with have told me they like the fact that the second day service is held back in our own sanctuary; others have said they enjoy the slight variation in the music and liturgical selections. Some come because they grew up celebrating two days and this just feels right. Regardless of your personal reasons for coming on the second day, it is nonetheless a small act of rebellion when it comes to the rhythm of our normal lives. Lingered an extra day is the equivalent of loitering which we know is not allowed and is dangerously close to trespassing. Yet, here you daredevils are, gathered together in your *tallitot*, armed with your *machzorim* defying the relentless pace of life, just to sit a bit longer.

But that is the paradox of Rosh Hashanah. On the one hand, it is a time of holy submission. God is portrayed as a King, a Judge, a Father and we bow to that higher authority, humbly praying for forgiveness and seeking God's favor in the new year. On the other hand, this holy day is the epitome of our arrogance. Right in the middle of the back to school rush, in that awkward transition from the sluggish summer to the full on fall, we come to a screeching halt. We drop everything and mess up everyone's calendar. We're going to wipe the slate clean and right now is the time for a fresh start.

Let's go with this rebellious streak. While we are upsetting the rules of the game, let's take it a step further and look at some of the other norms we are flouting. By time we are young adults we understand what our society expects of us to be successful. As Terry Hershey writes, "We live in a culture which assumes that : Busyness is a virtue and a sign of importance. Time spent waiting is wasted time. Going anywhere without a cell phone or a way to be reached is inconsiderate. New is ideal, and bigger is preferred. Multitasking is a spiritual gift. Call waiting is essential because the person calling me may be more important than the person I am speaking with now.

It is true that many of these assumptions are helpful when pursuing a high powered career, but there is a price to pay when they become the prevailing way we live all the time. During these Days of Awe, we are asked to look at our lives. But from which angle should we view them? Rabbi Alan Lew writes:

"There are several volumes entitled the Book of Life on our shelf, but we want to be sure we pull down the one that will be useful to us. Reading the Book of Our Successes, the book of the way we have presented ourselves to the world, the book of the prizes, the family car, the six figure income, the trophy spouse- this book will tell us nothing we don't already know. After all, we wrote this book. This is the book we spent our life energy writing so that people would think highly of us, which is to say, so they would fear us and envy us. This isn't the book we need to read."

In fact, it is the illusion of our success that can blind us to what we really need to see at this time. We learn that not only is the Torah itself precious, but each letter inked in black is essential. In addition, every little crown and orthographic peculiarity is a treasure house of learning, and beyond that, even the white spaces between are holy. There is a whole other Torah contained in those white spaces that we never read.

That is the scroll we strive to read now. Bachya Ibn Pekuda, an 11th century sage wrote, "Days are scrolls, write on them what you want to be remembered." That's fine for the letters. But the spaces in between are all the things that got recorded that we never intended to write. These spaces are full of our mistakes and dysfunctions, our disappointments and failures, our petty rudeness and our deepest deceptions. This is the story that is so painful to read. So we avoid it by moving at a frantic pace, numbing ourselves with our vice of choice, and creating a resume life focusing on our achievements and awards.

But the pain is still etched on our hearts and takes a heavy toll on our lives. If we don't turn to it sooner or later it will be too late. So we lengthened our day today. We defied nature's twenty four hour limit on a day, and made it actually forty eight hours so we could have more time to sit and be not busy, to contemplate the truth of our lives. In our not busy state we can inhabit those white spaces that are filled with the pain of living, the pain that we have feared. And if we can move past the fear and sit long enough, we run into our denial and avoidance, so we sit longer. And if we are still even longer, we begin to inhabit the pain. This suffering is our instruction as to what we need to do next. But we have to stay long enough, and pay close enough attention to learn these lessons of transformation. Is it grief or anger, is it despair or boredom, are we feeling guilt or fear? What's going on inside?

Over the next ten days , we can read our white Torah by the light of compassion streaming through the open gates of heaven. When we come to the last day of awe, on Yom Kippur we read in the black letters of the Torah, from Deuteronomy, “See, God says, “I have set before you choices, blessings and curses, life and death, choose life.”

And this, writes Rabbi Lew is “the simplest and most frightening truth about all this business. Anger is a choice. Boredom is a choice. Fear is a choice.....The great drama of this season is the drama of choice. The power of choice is immense. We can choose to let go of anger, boredom, fear, guilt, impatience, grief, disappointment, dejection, anxiety and despair.”

But we start by taking this sacred pause, which you have chosen to lengthen today. What a wonderful way to begin the new year, by sharing a space of communal savoring as collectively we each endeavor to read those blank spaces in our lives.

Sometimes it happens that at the beginning of a child’s journey towards becoming a Bar Mitzvah, a parent will approach me and say, “I can’t really help my child, I don’t know how to read Hebrew.”

“Oh but you can help,” I say, “you can read your child! You can read if your child needs discipline or encouragement, does he need your approval or does he need to know why this matters. There is so much you can read; the Hebrew letters are the least of it all. And we have others who can help with that part.”

At the beginning of this new year, let us recognize that we too can read what we need to help ourselves for it is etched upon our hearts in places only we know and in language only we understand. God grant us the ability to read this sacred text too, and may we gain the insight to see past our success to a life that is more deeply rewarding.

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