

# **To What is the World Being Reborn? *Hayom Harat Olam***

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**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781 -- September 19, 2020**

Recently, I happened to see a beloved lifelong member of OZ whom I have missed, along with so many others who have not been in our Zoom services and programs. “See you on the holidays,” I said, almost tearfully. But he told me sadly that he won’t see me on the holidays; he does not Zoom. I asked if I could help. “No,” he said, “I don’t have a computer.” It’s not that he couldn’t get a computer if he wanted one; it’s that it is not his thing.

Another beloved lay leader uncharacteristically declined an honor in our high holiday services. With a heaviness in his voice he shared that he was not sure what he would be doing on the holidays -- maybe joining other family members in their community’s services. Our virtual services are not like the ones we are accustomed to enjoying in person and that is very disorienting.

Another beloved member, while helping me to plan our services worried about the changes we were imagining. I explained: based on the lessons we have learned through six months of virtual services, plus lots of member feedback and brainstorming with many colleagues around the country, we had decided to cut our services back to what seems to be the essential segments and prayers of our High Holy Day services. Other liturgical poetry/piyyutim added to the core prayers over the centuries were, *this time*, not essential, so they were cut. “Will this be the ‘new normal’” he worried? The prospect of so much change has been daunting and worrisome.

My husband Bob, along with a few other wonderful volunteers, volunteered to be a tech buddy for anyone needing to learn how to use Zoom. After I heard snippets of the conversations from Bob’s hours of Zoom training, I came to understand how challenging this experience of virtual services could be and I began to worry about how well some of our members would be able to remain connected. Overnight, everything had changed. I heard the stresses of this time from some of our members. Hard as we

are trying to keep our services, classes and programs alive and engaging from our homes, we know it isn't the same. That loss is very real for many of us. I have heard distressed and distressing comments like, "Zoom gives me a headache." OR, "I hate Zoom," OR, "Zoom doesn't feel like services." Some shared that it doesn't work for them because we can't sing together.

Too many of us feel disconnected, isolated, disoriented, unfulfilled. Even those who have regularly connected with our Zoom services and programs, expressing their enjoyment of those experiences, feel the loss of human connection. One member came to our synagogue cemetery prayers before Rosh Hashanah and recited kaddish for a friend. But since they did not have family members buried in our cemetery, I asked, "Why come for kaddish?" The answer: "Because the cemetery visit in advance of Rosh Hashanah was the only in-person high holiday event."

Today, even while we embrace the joy and possibility of Rosh Hashanah, of a New Year, I acknowledge and honor the sadness and grief for what we have lost this year. I know that this sadness may accompany very real worry for the future.

Sharing these thoughts with a colleague, he tried to lighten the mood with a story: "... from another era of restaurants with in-person dining: a server approaches a group of Jewish diners, after the meal is complete. While clearing plates, the server looks at the group and asks, without a trace of irony: '*Was anything okay?*'"

At the same time that some of us are worrying, others of us are rejoicing. I do not wish to feed the fears that come with change. But here it is: Some of our members are so taken with the benefits of this new reality that they tell me they hope we will never return to the same formats as before the pandemic.

We have learned that there can be great benefits of virtual services. Even as some b'nai mitzvah and baby namings have been postponed, we have had many life cycle events that are suddenly accessible to out-of-town family and friends who might not

have been present had the events been in person. Similarly, many of us have shared yahrzeits at minyans with family and friends from around the country. Shabbat and weeknight services that seemed difficult or impossible to attend for those living at a distance or homebound are suddenly accessible for those who use Zoom. OZ members who reside in other states, or who winter in warmer climates, can now be with us as if they are here. We have met prospective members who could log-in for services even before moving to VT. And remarkably, though I could not make hospital visits during pandemic times, Zoom helped to make the connections for us. Basha attended services from her hospital bed after elective surgery, keeping up with us during her recovery at home.

During this challenging time of isolation, we have found ways to create opportunities for intergenerational participation, with the ability to enjoy the comfort of home while being together virtually. And it has been heartwarming to get to know other Vermonters who have been joining us nightly to say kaddish during their time of mourning. This would not have been possible if it had required driving a distance for a 30-minute weeknight service. And during stormy nights or slippery roads, we can still be virtually together. We are all here, as best as we can, and together.

Over the years we have collaborated on special events with Temple Sinai, but this year we found new opportunities to grow our partnership. Because we are virtual, we could bring our two communities together for prayer, learning, singing and celebrating. Cantor Steve and I have enjoyed the innovative ways we have been creating synergies with our colleague Rabbi Edleson and the Temple Sinai community. These shared experiences have been enriching and fulfilling.

In our time of increasingly hostile partisan divide, I have been worried about the ways that our culture has come to elevate the individual above the collective. It just cannot be all about *me* -- about what **I** want, what **I** need, what **I** believe. This time of

pandemic distress has reminded us all how much we rely on each other in making sure we can **ALL** be ok. Midrash records a story that resonates at this time:

“A group of people were travelling in a boat. One of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath himself. His companions said to him: "Why are you doing this?" Replied the man: "What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under my own place?"

Said they to him: "But you will flood the boat for us all!"<sup>1</sup>

So it is true about keeping the boat afloat -- we need each other, especially now. Cantor Steve and I have received numerous heartfelt, loving messages of appreciation from so many of you. One recent note captured it all:

“Thank you Ohavi Zedek, a voice of hope, a beacon of light and a steadiness and warmth that is so welcome during these difficult times. L'Shana Tova to all of you who make OZ so important in our lives.” Rebecca Sherlock and Mike Strauss

Certainly, your messages nourish our spirits during this time of isolation. Thank you. But more, it reminds us again and again of the gifts of community.

One of the most memorable and inspiring prayers, repeatedly recited during our holy days, is ***Hashiveinu/Return Again***:

השבִּינוּ יי אֵלֶיךָ חַנּוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֵדָם

Take us back, Adonai, let us come back to You.

Renew in our time the days of old.

*Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.*

*Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are*

*Born and reborn again.*

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<sup>1</sup>(Midrash Rabbah, [Vayikra 4:6](#)), from the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Rashbi, who lived in the Holy Land in the 2nd century C.E., a disciple of Rabbi Akiva. The Zohar is classically attributed to Rashbi.)

But what are we being reborn to? That is a confusing question at this moment of so much distress around us, among us and between us. What will we be; who will we be when this is over?

My friend and teacher Yossi Klein Halevi loves to glean insights of the Jewish themes in contemporary Israeli music. This summer Yossi shared a series of contemporary Israeli songs popularized in response to Coronavirus. One example is from Israeli pop singer *Hanan ben Ari*. In a stunning music video, the words are set to stark images of vacant city streets, empty commuter trains and bare escalators.

The song is, ***Ga'gui'im L'vnai Adam, Longing for Human Beings:***

We thought we'd won it all,  
We'd built towers to the sky  
[a clear reference to Babel]  
Who needs human beings?  
No second flood  
will come in our time!  
We will never, ever fall;  
Forget it, we'll be fine on our own.  
We're smart, we know it all  
And nothing is above us.

Until you came along  
And infected us,  
And drove us mad

And confined us  
and confused us

And terrified us  
Who are you?

Oh, how you've brought back  
sanity  
And a longing for human  
connection  
Suddenly loneliness torments  
We can't fly  
from place to place anymore.  
The parks are all closed  
Weddings with hardly a soul  
We almost lost ourselves  
We almost stopped feelin

עוד מעט זה הכל ייגמר  
ואני מבקש אם אפשר  
שבבוקר אחרי שתלכי  
לא נהיה שוב אותו הדבר

Soon this will all be over  
And I'm asking, if I may  
That the morning after you leave  
Let us not be the same as before.

**“*Lo Nihyeh Shuv Oto HaDavar; Let us not be the same as before.*”**

Who will we be when this is over? Hanan Ben-Ari sings our prayer, for something ***better*** yet to come.

What does it mean that today the world is reborn, as our Rosh Hashanah Machzor proclaims? *Hayom Harat Olam*. Our machzor translates this as “*Today the world stands as at birth. Today all creation is called to judgment.*”

During a very turbulent time in the summer of 1963, Rabbi Norman Lamm penned a sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Rosh Hashanah 5724 to mine this phrase for its potential to redeem us from great travail.

“Each of us possesses wonderful native abilities and marvelous inner resources. Either we can...{remain forever with our greatest human treasures locked up within our hearts and never brought to fruition}, ... or we can joyously proclaim “*hayom harat olam,*” that today we shall express those capacities into reality, for today we shall fulfill ourselves by giving birth to *a new and fascinating world.*

... The shofar summons us to break the bonds of **habit** and **indifference** that keep our vast treasures locked up and our repositories of goodness and faith impounded within us, to transform ... into the living immediacy of the Mahzor’s *hayom harat olam*. **It is the call to release and emancipate our talents, our abilities, our greatness.**”

Our world, and our Jewish community is in the midst of a new beginning, and we are becoming forever changed during this pandemic. What will remain when we re-emerge? This is our kavannah for this Rosh Hashanah. How can we remain connected, whole, spiritually alive in ways both old and new? How can the creativity and resilience of this unprecedented time carry us forward so that our talents and our abilities can shine?

A few examples come to mind: For each funeral that has allowed family and friends from all over the world to join by Zoom, we learn the value of virtual connection, in addition to the in-person experience. For each Shabbat service where we offer a traditional *musaf* and an alternative *musaf* of story and poetry, we realize we can do more once we come back together in person. Each service, now shortened to accommodate a different attention-span experience on the screen, leads us to wonder, “what is most essential, and what is not?” And still, the value and ease of offering alternatives provides a window into how to effect those changes without undoing traditions that so many hold dear. Our Zoom experience of gathering for prayer will stay with us as streaming and other virtual gateways, in addition to the invaluable experience of being together, for those who are able.

I pray that those who dislike or can't connect with us on Zoom will find ways to remain connected with us as best they can until we settle back into our new normal. I can't wait to hug every one of them, and you. I pray that we will emerge as a community renewed when we are finally able to gather in person. I believe this will happen, as we “return again.” I pray that we will bring our best and most helpful new tools and modalities of

connection along with us, as we re-light the flames of community in our sacred space and gatherings.

An oft quoted story from our tradition, is, “*Gam Zeh Ya’avor.*” It also appears in Sufi literature. The Jewish version goes something like this: The wisest of kings, Solomon, decided to challenge one of his ministers. The king instructed him to search for a ring that could turn a happy person sad, and a sad person happy. King Solomon doubted the minister would be able to find such a thing. Still, the intrepid minister set out. The minister traveled the kingdom, but to no avail, Returning to Jerusalem, he found himself in a shabby neighborhood where there was a market. He noticed a man selling some odd pieces of jewelry spread out on a threadbare rug. Desperate, the minister explained to the merchant what he was seeking – a ring that could “make a happy man sad, and a sad man happy.” The merchant smiled, and handed him a ring with the inscription: “*Gam zeh ya’avor*, This too shall pass.” The minister returned to King Solomon, and presented him with the ring. Smiling at the thought of winning the challenge, King Solomon took one look at the ring and was immediately humbled.<sup>2</sup>

What will we be when we are born and reborn again? This is up to us. Together we will turn our sadness into happiness, step by step, day by day, toward a new day with a heavenly bright light guiding our path.

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<sup>2</sup> Classic story, this version as quoted from Rabbi Debra Cantor