

This day is terrifying to me.

I mean really terrifying.

Not because I wonder if I've atoned enough or righted all my wrongs—I know I still have work to do.

Not because I'm worried about whether I'll be forgiven for my misdeeds—although I hope I am.

Not because I'm concerned about whether I'll make it through the fast—I happen to be exceptionally good at fasting.

And not because the day itself is holy and awe-filled—although I wish I was focused more on that.

This day is terrifying to me because the expectations are so high.

Because on this day, *during these Days of Awe*, everything needs to go exceedingly well, as close to perfect as they can.

The cues have to be correct, the music just right, the words not stumbled over, the sermons top notch—the Torah rolled to the correct place.

It's not just *your* expectations that are high.

But *mine* as well.

And they're *so* high—on both of our ends—because so many of us put all of our Jewish eggs into this High Holy Days basket. This is when we're here. On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur we are ready to pray and engage. And if these services and moments aren't spiritually uplifting, intellectually fulfilling, and Jewishly engaging enough, well, then, we may not see each other in this room for another year. If even then.

I'm terrified of what will happen if I say something wrong and the music doesn't move you and if the readings are not the right choices.

And so, I ask you to *lower your expectations* of these days. Not just to alleviate my fears, but because Judaism isn't specifically about *these* days.

Renowned Bible scholar Nechama Leibowitz shared, "When I was I child we were told in school that we need to behave particularly well during the days Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. At home my father told me that this was true, but that we needed to act no less well between Yom Kippur and Rosh HaShanah."<sup>i</sup>

Judaism cannot be boiled down to what we do during *these* ten days. It is what we do, what our community does, in the other three-hundred-something by which we can measure how well we are doing.

I hope you will lower your expectations of *this day* and instead think about the year to come—the learning you want to do, the *mitzvot*, commandments, you will assume, the way you will integrate yourself into this community.

Tonight, if all goes well, the hundreds of us filling this space will feel deeply moved and spiritually connected, to Judaism, to one another, to God. But, the real assessment is not whether we leave *tonight* with a sense of awe, rather if we return in the days, weeks, and months to come seeking out and working toward that spiritual fulfillment and connection to community.

Tomorrow we will read in the Torah:

*Atem nitazvim hayom kulchem*, You stand here TODAY, all of you before Adonai, Your God. Your tribal heads, your elders, your officials, every man, woman, and child of Israel, and the stranger in the midst of your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—to *enter* into the covenant of Adonai your God...And not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with each one who stands here among us *this day*...and with each one who is *not* here among us this day.

For this Instruction, which I command you *this day*, is neither beyond you nor far away. It is not in heaven causing you to say: “Who will go up to heaven on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?” and it is not across the sea, causing you to say: “Who will cross the sea on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?” No, this is *so very near to you*—in your mouth and in your heart—that you *can surely* do it.<sup>ii</sup>

You stand here TODAY, all of you. ALL OF YOU. To pray. To learn. To be in community. To atone. To reflect. To gain the strength to say, “I’m sorry.”

But why do you need to be here *TODAY*?

After all, the Torah isn’t in the heavens, across the sea, or in the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei*.

It’s close to us. In our mouths and in our hearts.

The Talmud teaches that in the womb a baby learns the entire Torah. And, just as a baby is about to make its grand entrance into this world, an angel taps the baby between its nose and its lip and it forgets everything it ever knew.<sup>iii</sup>

Torah is close to us. In our mouths and in our hearts. It's been with us since before we were born. Our job is to uncover it and relearn it.

So many of you crowd this room this day, to the back of the Social Hall—many days for services we can fit in the Chapel.

You're here TODAY.

But *why*?

What makes these Days of Awe—these days *from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur*—so special? So important?

Shabbat will happen this Friday.

Shabbat happened last Friday.

What do you hope to gain from TODAY that will sustain you for so many more days to come?

And *can* TODAY really sustain you for so many days to come?

You are here TONIGHT. All of you. Gathered here this Yom Kippur. Congregants, friends, siblings, parents, children, neighbors, Jews, non-Jews, those not yet Jewish but on that sacred journey. Those of you who show up every Wednesday morning, Friday night, Shabbat morning, and to every class offered. Those of you who come only on the holidays. Those of you who love prayer and study and those who have yet to find this passion. Those of you who are here because you want to be, those more reluctant.

Ask yourself, why am I here TONIGHT?

Because there are words and melodies you hope to hear?

A sermon you need?

A lesson you are seeking?

Chances are, despite our best efforts, those expectations will not be fully met *TONIGHT* or *TOMORROW*.

Because, despite the hours upon hours of staff, clergy, and volunteer planning that went into *this* day—from tickets to liturgical choices—this is only *one day*. Or maybe *TEN* days.

But, one day, or *even* ten days, cannot satisfy and needs of an entire year.

Sometimes I think, wouldn't it be great if I could go out and run all my miles for the week *today* and then I won't have to worry about if I'm too busy to run the rest of the week?

Or, if I get 12 hours of sleep tonight, doesn't that mean I can get four for each of the next two nights?

And if I put in a lot of effort for a few days into building a relationship, is it okay if don't concentrate on it that much in the months to come?

If I dump gallons of water on my plants *today*, does that mean I have a few weeks off from needing to care for them?

Unfortunately, we can't bank our mileage.

We can't stock up on sleep.

We can't cram in our relationships.

We can't overwater our plants.

Because our bodies are in need of consistent stimulation and rest.

Because relationships require ongoing work.

Because, in order to flourish, our environment is in constant need of our care.

And yet, many of us, including myself, expect and hope that these Days of Awe, if attended to with proper attention and ritual, will sustain us until next year. That if we cram in everything, we are good to go for the next 12 months.

But our Judaism needs constant and regular nourishing. It needs to be used and sharpened and engaged with and attended to.

All of it's within us, the entire Torah. But in order to access it we need to study, pray, and engage with one another on a regular basis.

TODAY you stand here and you *enter* into the Covenant. Just like a *bris* is an *entrance* into the covenant, just like Consecration is an *entrance* into childhood Jewish learning, just like *bnai mitzvah* mark an *entry* point into the learning of Jewish adulthood, just like standing beneath the *chuppah* marks an *entry* point into marriage, the Days of Awe are an *entry* into the new year. Not a standalone event. Not an opportunity to check off the list that we've come to synagogue in 5779. Certainly not an exit.

We can't bank our mileage, and we can't bank our Judaism.

A baby will not have a Jewish identity because he had a *brit milah*, he *will* because he was raised in a Jewish home.

A child will not learn Hebrew because she had a Consecration, she *will* because she comes to religious school and reinforces what she learns at services and with the support of her family.

Teenagers will not become engaged Jewish adults because they had their *bnai mitzvah*, they *will* because they heeded the call on that day to become responsible members of the community through actively participating in communal study, *mitzvot*, and *gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, in this space and beyond.

A couple will not have a marriage because they stood under the *chuppah*, their marriage exists in the ongoing work after they walk out from under the marriage canopy.

We all *know* this.

We *know* that just like our health, our relationships, and our environment, we can't cram in our Judaism—working on it intensely in a short period of time with the hopes that it will sustain us for a year—or even longer.

For one, that's *way too much pressure on ME* and on the rest of our Temple Shalom team.

But more importantly, that's *way too much pressure on you*.

Temple of Israel in Wilmington, North Carolina has been deeply impacted by Hurricane Florence. Due to the damage, lack of power, and unsafe driving conditions they have canceled *Kol Nidrei* and Yom Kippur day services.

We can't rely only on these High Holy Days, because there are times when we may not be able gather with our community to observe them. A hurricane may not be one of those reasons for not being together on these days, but illness, car trouble, or a business trip may prevent us from being here from time-to-time.

These holidays—with their intricate and complicated prayers, with their white robes and regal melodies, with their lengthy services and sermons—set an unsustainable precedent. These days are intimidating, intense, and exhausting. Of course we want a break after *Yom Kippur*. So take a day or two off. A few more if necessary. (Although we hope to see you on Sukkot and Simchat Torah!)

But, here's the thing. These days are *not just an entry point*. These holidays are also a culmination. Rosh HaShanah was not just a start of *this* next year, it was the conclusion of the soul searching of the last.

And for those of us who have been less involved, less engaged, less present than we'd like to have been over the past year, TODAY, *these days*, may be especially overwhelming.

It's like we're running a marathon without training.

It is *possible* that it can be done, but my gosh will you be sore, exhausted, depleted, and probably injured the next day.

So I ask all of you who are **HERE** tonight, and all of you who aren't **HERE** tonight but who may be watching or listening or reading this later, to be here *tomorrow* and in the many days and months to follow.

Why?

Because what you are seeking isn't high up on this mountain of Yom Kippur, such that we only have one opportunity to reach the peak and see the view.

It's not. What you are seeking is very near to you—in your mouth and your heart, that you can surely access it—with care and time and ongoing nourishment.

And what is already inside you can be brought out with the help of this community, these members, the happenings that take place within these walls.

Where have people found what they are seeking?

*In our Adult Hebrew classes.* Over and over again, people who have taken these classes have shared that they enrolled in them because they wanted to better follow along with services or improve their reading and translating skills. Yet they reported unintended consequences that through this learning in community and through the facilitation of amazing teachers they have gained a deeper understanding of the liturgy and textual tradition, a deeper spiritual connection to prayer, and have felt embraced by the community of learners.

That is not the result of the High Holy Days.

Where have people found what they are seeking?

*In attending and leading services.* One of the most powerful *shiva minyanim* I ever attended was for the parent of a religious school student. The *shiva* home was crowded, including dozens of Temple Shalom classmates and their family members. I was supposed to lead the *minyan* but had completely lost my voice. And so, one of our teens, one of the mourner's classmates, stepped in to lead the many people in attendance in prayer.

The capacity to step in to be there for a friend and competently lead a service for a mourner is not the result of the High Holy Days. It is the result of regularly showing up—to class, to services, to youth group, to being a part of this sacred space.

Where have people found what they are seeking?

*In Shabbat Morning Worship and Torah Study.* In showing up year-after-year to study the same texts over and over again.

Connection to our sacred stories is not attained by looking up to the heavens or across the sea, but through pouring over the same text yet again, but with a renewed sense of awe and with the wisdom and experience only another year of life experience can provide.

Where have people found what they are seeking?

*In choir.* In fostering connection to tradition through song.

What we are seeking is not up in the heavens or across the sea, it is in our mouths. By singing our ancient texts put to new melodies, by bringing new words to ancient tunes, by melding our liturgy with contemporary issues, regularly engaging with music in community helps connect us with our Jewish past and *our Judaism with* the world outside the synagogue.

Where have people found what they are seeking in their Jewish lives?

In weekly attendance of Shabbat services.

Through cooking meals and making visits and calls through *Mitzvah Corps*.

In acting on their Jewish values with the *Tikkun Olam* committee.

Amongst their Sisterhood sisters and their Brotherhood brothers.

The High Holidays, with their white robes, penetrating shofar blasts, and moving liturgy can *enhance* our Jewish lives, but they can't *be* our Jewish lives.

In honor of these High Holy Days, in honor of these Ten Days of Awe, in honor of our spiritual and religious lives that are in need of our nourishment, I'm going to ask you to commit to Three Sets of Five over the next year. (For those of you who already participate in one or more of these categories regularly, you can, of course, adjust your numbers accordingly. For those of you who'd like to do one set of 15, you can adjust your numbers accordingly as well.)

1. Commit to attending *five services* that you wouldn't already be attending. Friday night, Saturday morning, *bnai mitzvah*, Wednesday morning *minyan*, *shiva minyanim*, or holiday observances. If you need motivation to do so, sign up to be an usher (we can always use more!), make a list of your family members *yahrtzeit's*, anniversaries of deaths of loved ones, and mark your schedule to come to synagogue to say *kaddish* for them on those days, come to mark a *simcha*—an anniversary, birthday, or other happy occasion and let us know what you are celebrating.
2. Commit to attending *five synagogue learning opportunities* that you wouldn't already be attending. Go to Torah study (you can double that up with Shabbat Morning Worship that comes right before it and cover services and learning opportunities at the same time), go to youth group events, come to a Lunch-and-Learn (the calendar will come out in the next few weeks), attend *Kehillat Shalom* Adult Learning sessions, take Adult Hebrew, attend some of our one-off classes, enroll in the Intro to Judaism class we are hosting beginning in October.
3. Commit to attending *five other synagogue programs* that you wouldn't already be participating in—*Tikkun Olam* meetings and events, membership meetings and programs, *Sukkat Shalom* Israel conversations, Sisterhood gatherings, Brotherhood brunches, Renaissance outings, visits to homebound congregants, volunteering with Temple Shalom at Shepherd's Table.

Yes, I just asked you to do fifteen additional things this year. I just asked you to show up at Temple Shalom an average of 1.25 additional times each month.

Judaism is not far away. We don't need to count on these days alone to connect meaningfully. Our engagement, our study, our prayer are the methods of accessing the Torah that's within us all the time, that's been with us since before we were born. The Torah is not up in the heavens, or across the sea, it's in our hearts, minds, and mouths.

*ALL OF YOU STAND HERE TONIGHT* as we *enter* into Yom Kippur.

May the conclusion of these Days of Awe be uplifting and moving and powerful.

But, more importantly, may they inspire you to come back in the days to come.

*G'mar Chatimah Tovah.*

May you be sealed for a good year, a year of prayer, learning, engagement, and deep connection to your Jewish self.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://naan.org.il/weekly-newsletter/%D7%93%D7%A3-%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%93%D7%A2-3682/>

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 29-30

<sup>iii</sup> *Niddah* 30b