

Reflection and Prayertime: Rosh Hashanah – Head of the New Year

September 14, 2020

The Festival of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement

²³ The LORD said to Moses, ²⁴ “Say to the Israelites: ‘On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of sabbath rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. ²⁵ Do no regular work, but present a food offering to the LORD.’” ²⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ²⁷ “The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves,^[a] and present a food offering to the LORD. ²⁸ Do not do any work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the LORD your God. ²⁹ Those who do not deny themselves on that day must be cut off from their people. ³⁰ I will destroy from among their people anyone who does any work on that day. ³¹ You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live. ³² It is a day of sabbath rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.” Leviticus 23:23-32

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, is the first of the High Holy Days or *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe). ... it’s one of the most important holidays in the Jewish calendar. It’s the Jewish New Year, anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve, a day of judgment and coronation. It weds seriousness with celebration and begins the 10 days of repentance that culminate in Yom Kippur. The new year focuses our attention on themes of judgment, repentance, memory, and the divine presence in the world. At the same time, Rosh Hashanah invites us to celebrate birth and creation on many levels. The liturgy suggests that Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world. Family-oriented services often include a birthday cake for the world—a big hit for kids of all ages! We dip apples in honey to emphasize the sweetness of starting the cycle of seasons once again, and eat round *challot* to remind us of the cycles of life. The Torah and Haftarah readings for the holiday also address birth and the preciousness of all human life. These stories remind us that the arrival of every child—each and every one of us—is a promise for a renewed world. We renew ourselves at Rosh Hashanah in order to reconnect with this promise and to help ourselves fulfill it in the year ahead.

The Jewish new year greetings for this time of year reflect our prayers for a good, sweet year ahead. On the first night of Rosh Hashanah, we wish l'shanah tovah tikatevu v'techatemu: "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year." The main thing is to wish each other a good, sweet year with all our heart – because that is what God values most.

Rosh Hashanah is packed with mitzvahs, special foods and traditions but the central observance of Rosh Hashanah is the sounding of the shofar, the ram's horn, on both days of the holiday.

Why the shofar? The blowing of the shofar represents the trumpet blast that is sounded at a king's coronation. Its plaintive cry also serves as a call to repentance. The shofar itself recalls the Binding of Isaac, an event that occurred on Rosh Hashanah in which a ram took Isaac's place as an offering to God. The shofar fills us with awe and humility as we contemplate God, how God fills all space and time. The Chassidic masters teach us that the cry of the shofar is akin to the wail of a child, yearning to be reunited with a beloved parent. There are no words to express a longing that is so deep, so primal and so true. On Rosh Hashanah we give expression to the cry of our soul.

The Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah offer an honest portrayal of Abraham and Sarah. On a day when we contemplate our own character flaws and imperfect lives, we read about Abraham and Sarah's troubled relationship, the complex account of Ishmael's birth, Sarah's disturbing expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael and the day when Abraham almost slaughtered his own child. Despite all of this, we also look up to Abraham and Sarah as people who helped shape the religion and faith with which we identify. We tell these stories on Rosh Hashanah -- the anniversary of the creation of human beings -- because they remind us that all people, including those we look up to as our founding patriarchs and matriarchs, are filled with character flaws. Human beings are imperfect, and despite that eternal truth, we never lose hope in our potential to achieve great things.

The reading is followed by a Haftarah about Hannah's prayer for children teaches that God fulfills even the most improbable of requests. Her song of gratitude is a shining example of how we need to thank God for our life every day. Her life takes on greater dimensions in the birth of Samuel the Prophet. From her sorrow to her joy, Hannah's story is really the story of the Jewish people.

After the conclusion of the prayers, we go home and have a festive meal, certain that it has been decreed that we will have a sweet new year. It is customary to eat sweet foods, symbolizing our desire to have a sweet year, blessings and abundance. Throughout the meal, it is customary to also eat foods whose names allude to blessing and prosperity. We dip a piece of sweet apple into honey. Before eating it we say: May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet year. A head of a fish, ram, or other kosher animal, is served. This symbolizes our desire to be at the "head of the class" this year. A pomegranate is eaten, symbolizing our wish to have a year full of mitzvot and good deeds as a pomegranate is filled with luscious seeds.

This Rosh Hashanah each of us begins a new year with a different need than ever before. We ache with sorrow and grief, for this past year has been for many one of the most difficult. We have become ill, we have lost loved ones, we have missed important life events.

On this Rosh Hashanah we crave connection. On this Rosh Hashanah we crave connection to one another after months of physical distancing and isolation. We long to hug our parents, our chosen family, our children and grandchildren, our friends. On this Rosh Hashanah we pray for all those we miss. On this Rosh Hashanah we crave connection to our heritage. Although in separate homes, we come together today to celebrate and affirm our Jewishness. On this Rosh Hashanah we pray in the words of our ancestors and remember that we are the People of Israel.

On this Rosh Hashanah we crave connection with Divinity. Whether the name we use is Hashem or the Universe—whatever we use to remind us that we are not alone and that the world is so much more than just our everyday lives. On this Rosh Hashanah we pray to feel a connection with Divinity.

On this Rosh Hashanah 5781, may we find the connections we seek.

i thank You God for most this amazing by e.e. cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

This poem makes me think so much of some of our clients who are homeless and who have substance use disorder and how some of their appearance changes so drastically when they are housed and are in recovery with improved health – a “recreating” of sorts. I was in Manchester KY the end of last week to provide chaplaincy support to some staff following a crisis situation there and the staff showed me some before treatment and after treatment photos of a man that we served and he is completely unrecognizable as the same person. I believe that he was on the path to death and in recovery found his way toward life.

Rosh HaShanah by Maia Ervona

To a new year that is good and sweet
with apples dipped in sticky honey
pomegranate seeds that stain—
the true fruit that tempted Eve.
For though we are imperfect and like she
we owe apologies, we may remain
another year in this messy world.
Surely even God above must know
a sweet beginning is a sacred need.

As we observe Rosh Hashanah and reflect upon the world's birthday, the duality of reflection/atonement and celebration, may we be open to the spirit of God like a wind that blows into our days with sustaining gusts. May today be a day of awe and reverence, and of sweet beginnings again for all of us, thanks be to God.