

KOL NIDRE 5781...In a Chaotic World, God's holiness is portable
Rabbi Mara Nathan

In the weeks leading up to the High Holy Days, many people made an appointment to be in the Wulfe Sanctuary, to visit with God. Fifteen minutes alone, or with a partner, a page of meditations in hand; a private, personal moment for those in search of renewal and return...to gather strength to face the challenges yet to come.

Here is where so many of us seek God's presence, even if that presence defies concrete definition. And being away from Temple, being away from each other for so long, searching for a spiritual connection we didn't even know we missed, many of us are left to wonder: How do we maintain connection to each other and the Holy One when we are physically apart on these Days of Awe?

Exile. It's what all human beings fear most...a forced leaving.....the loss of our home. Jews are experts at exile. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. The Israelites from Jerusalem. Our Sephardic ancestors from Spain and Portugal. Our Ashkenazi forebears from Central, Eastern and Western Europe.

Today is no different, not really. Sure, most of us are safely ensconced in our homes, but we still find ourselves in a modern-day existential exile, perpetuated by a microscopic organism- separated from our community, our congregation, our Jewish home.

As Reform Jews, we're far more comfortable focusing on the historic aspects of exile than on the spiritual ones. But I promise you they are intertwined. And if we can intuit the consolation and hope our ancestors held on to, despite their time in exile, then perhaps we can find some relief from the malaise we feel when we confront our current reality.

As the sun sets and we begin the holiest twenty-four hours of the Jewish year

We owe it to ourselves to figure out how to make *these* Holy Days count like they never have before.

From the book of Deuteronomy forward we are told that proper worship requires that we gather people in a specific way, in a specific place, at a specific time.

In Temple times, sacrifices overseen by priests—punctuated by pilgrimage festivals, maintained the holy structure of Jewish life. But after the Temple was destroyed, we began to see God’s dwelling place as temporal. And what remained was a requirement of people-- a Minyan or 10 Jewish souls-- to say certain prayers- to properly encounter God.

Today, as Reform Jews we find that innovation is required once again. For as much as we believe that to gather together in person is ideal, we know we do not need to be in a particular place or space to experience God’s presence.¹

As we learn from the Talmud:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says:

Come and see how beloved the Jewish people are before the Holy One. As every place they were exiled, the Divine Presence went with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Divine Presence went with them...They were exiled to Babylonia, and the Divine Presence went with them...So too, when, in the future, they will be redeemed, the Divine Presence will be with them, as it is stated: “Then Adonai your God will return with your captivity.”² It does not state: God will **cause** the Jewish people to return, but rather it says: “God **will** return,” which teaches that the Holy One, will return together with them from among the various exiles.³

The Talmud seems to be saying, God can’t (or won’t) do anything to fix the situation, but no matter how great our struggle or our sense of alienation or

¹ <http://www.jtsa.edu/where-is-god-to-be-found-in-exile>

² Deuteronomy 30:3

³ <https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.29a.4?lang=bi> (adapted)

isolation, God IS always present, traveling along the path of exile with us until we are able to return. In a Chaotic World, God's holiness is portable.⁴

I can still remember how I felt when I walked in here for the first time for my interview to be your rabbi. I was struck by its vastness...and then by its elegant, historic beauty. The space felt both majestic and calm, I conjured the energy of a sanctuary filled with people over many generations. And I wondered..."what would it feel like to speak from this bimah, to lead worship here?" I felt a long way away from the mid-size suburban sanctuary I was used to. Would my connection to God feel the same here? Could I create strong and loving relationships? Could this be my spiritual home?

Seven high holy days later I know without a doubt that a direct connection to God's holiness doesn't depend on a specific place....this is now home.

So why, after leading Shabbat services from *my* home in March and April, did I feel that I needed to be here instead of there? If location doesn't matter, Why did I long to share the sanctuary with you? Nostalgia...or homesickness? Maybe...But it was more than that. I think I had a need to remind us all that exile is temporary, that we *will* gather in this place once again.

I am often physically alone in this room. But I never feel lonely. Because I see your faces- singing songs and reciting prayers. And even though the only voice I hear is my own, I *feel* yours. And it gives me hope. Your energy, your faith, your decision to be present- to help create community are what bring God's holy presence to me. And your choice to be here tonight also fills me with hope. It is a strong testament to your faith that bolsters mine.

In a chaotic world, God's holiness becomes portable.

⁴ <http://www.jtsa.edu/where-is-god-to-be-found-in-exile>

We often assume that to be a person of faith requires that we believe something specific and certain about God and how God works in this world. “Not so”, said Rabbi Larry Hoffman during a Zoom panel presentation this past June. “Faith has very little to do with belief.....[rather,] faith is a perspective on our future. It is being able to paint a picture of our world or tell a story about our lives where there is a future worth living for....So faith at any time or place...is a redeeming snapshot, drawn from our own picture or story of the human condition.”⁵

If Rosh Hashanah is about embarking on the road to our personal return what is Yom Kippur if not a reminder of our responsibility to create that “redeeming snapshot” together? Our responsibility is not diminished by the current need to be physically apart. If anything, it is amplified and requires enhanced courage, connection and commitment to make important choices about how it should be when we are physically back together again.

The prayers we say connect us to the generations of Jews before us who were also searching for a way to paint their own picture of a world redeemed. But the moral choices we make, the words we speak, the relationships we nurture...*These* are the tangible expression of our own theology- of our understanding of God’s holy presence.⁶ And when these choices are made together- in community our impact and influence, but also our resolve to be better and do better are strengthened.

Tonight, we are reminded that as much as we ‘wish it were all over,’ that a vaccine or a treatment for Covid-19 would arrive already that the last 6 months had never happened....We know that even if the pandemic *had* never happened- our world would still need healing.

⁵<https://templemicah.org/2020/06/12/faith-in-a-time-of-pandemic-a-conversation-with-rabbi-larry-hoffman-and-dr-diana-butler-bass/>

⁶<https://templemicah.org/2020/06/12/faith-in-a-time-of-pandemic-a-conversation-with-rabbi-larry-hoffman-and-dr-diana-butler-bass/>

We would still need Yom Kippur- to take account of our own actions, choices and words, to own our mistakes, to forgive others for theirs; to paint a renewed picture together - of what 'a future worth living for' might be.

This task is what connects us not just as people but as Jews. Time and again we have made our lives among others, only to be sent away...into exile. So, we have learned to look out for each other. But God requires more. We must look after all of God's creatures, and finish creating the world that God intended it to be.

Each of us is accountable to help make a world where everyone receives honor, respect and acceptance for being our most authentic selves. A world where everyone's individual needs and the collective good are in better balance. A world where everyone chooses to use the power of words and actions to heal and not hurt. A world where there is greater currency in lifting others up rather than tearing them down.

This year the stakes feel higher than ever before.

So, this year I challenge us to keep our teachers and our employees feeling safe and supported, we must keep wearing masks and washing our hands, and insist that our children...that our family members do the same.

I challenge us to acknowledge the stress of working from home, for those of us who have that privilege and make sure we appreciate those who must leave their homes to provide for their families every day.

I challenge us to insist on safe and secure but also accessible ways for people to cast their vote- while we resist the urge to turn civic responsibility into a political fight.

I challenge us to have uncomfortable conversations about gender and race, about inclusion and exclusion- to open our hearts and our minds to a more equitable future for all.

The rabbis of the Talmud understood that God does not abandon us in our exile. But they also knew that exile was never an excuse for bad behavior or harsh words, for self-pity or overwhelming despair. So even though by all accounts it has been a most difficult year, God still requires that we—through our actions and behavior—work to create a life that is worth living --- for us all.

So, while we find ourselves in exile, during these holy days we are still very much together, and God's presence is most certainly among us as well; wherever we sit, wherever we pray. Wherever we let God's presence in.

AMEN