

Re-Examining: What Do You Stand For, Today?
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One year ago, my Yom Kippur looked very different from the way it does today. As many of you know, I served as the senior Jewish educator at Santa Barbara Hillel. One of my first major duties was to lead Yom Kippur programming. In a normal year, this included hosting meals for students and leading services. I already had been informed of the dismal turnout for zoom Shabbat services during the spring of 2020. It is true that zoom services accomplish a lot, particularly for well-established communities such as Temple Sinai, where people have existing relationships with one another and the clergy. At Hillel, many of the students do not yet know each other so the proposition of getting onto a Yom Kippur zoom service and seeing a bunch of unknown squares is not very compelling. Fortunately, my supervisor was open to letting me be creative. I set out to ask several student board members the following question: What have been the most important parts of your high holiday experience at Hillel thus far? You may or may not be surprised that they did NOT respond, “the rabbi’s sermon”. (Pause for laugh) They did not mention the music or the prayers either. Overwhelmingly, they answered: community!

As one of the first events of the school year, students looked forward to the opportunity to meet new friends and re-unite with old ones. My task became to figure out how Yom Kippur could be celebrated in a way that would cultivate community given the current context of only being able to gather virtually.

Fortunately, by the time I tackled this problem, I had already had a meaningful communal experience on zoom. Throughout the summer of 2020, I led a learning fellowship on zoom for 10

weeks. On week 1, most of the students did not yet know each other. By the last few weeks, however, we were no longer strangers. While I had not met one of my students in-person, we had built relationships with each other during our repeated, online interactions.

I wondered how I could apply this cohort learning model to Yom Kippur. The result of my query became “Zooming into Yom Kippur.” Over the course of the holiday, students could sign up to participate in a cohort of their choosing that would enable them to experience Yom Kippur through a spiritual, justice, wellness or art focus. The beauty of this model was the way it brought the same people together throughout the holiday to actively engage with its themes in ways that interested them. I was quite surprised by how well the program went and have not forgotten some of the very positive feedback I received. One of the students in my art cohort shared it was the most meaningful Yom Kippur experience she has ever had. When asked why, she explained that usually on Yom Kippur she sits passively in services. Zooming into Yom Kippur, the product of my re-examination of Yom Kippur, enabled her to experience the holiday more fully.

Ten days ago, I asked you to respond to the following prompt: What have you re-examined in the past year? What was rewarding? What was difficult? What would you like to re-examine in the coming year? We have all had to closely examine some part of our lives in the past year. It was not a choice. To live life during the Pandemic, we have had to ask questions about our lives which we could have otherwise avoided. The process of re-examination is imperative for leading a meaningful life, even when it’s challenging or not as immediately gratifying as what I experienced last year during Yom Kippur.

During Rosh Hashanah, I shared with you a personal account of my 2020 rabbinic ordination. It was another event in my life that could not occur in the “usual,” way. I did not know how I could enter the rabbinate without the expected ordination ritual. Year after year, I remember attending the ordination ceremony in Los Angeles complete with inspirational speeches from professors and rabbis, cheers from family and friends and most memorably, each ordinand’s moment in front of the open ark. While the piano plays softly in the background, each ordinand receives a special blessing from the provost, culminating with the laying of hands ordination ritual and the dean announcing them as “Rabbi” for the first time.

To adjust the ordination ritual for the pandemic, we had to first explore the ways that meaning had previously been made so that we could ultimately find a new way to ritualize our transition from student to rabbi. I desperately wanted to find a way to see the ritual anew. I joined the task force of students and professors working together to plan the new pandemic era ritual. I studied some of the original source texts behind the ordination ritual, hoping to connect with the greater meaning behind it all. The process was painful for my classmates and I. We didn’t want to find a new way to ritualize this sacred moment in our lives. Ordination arrived and I felt disappointed and even depressed. I sat in my apartment staring at the screen, hoping to feel the excitement and joy that I imagined I would feel on this day. Yet, I kept returning to the fact that this was not the ordination I was accustomed to, the one that should have marked this moment in time.

And then, there is my wedding. My fiancé Liora and I were engaged in December of 2019. In January of 2020 we booked a venue and planned for a July 2021 wedding. We both had

hopes and expectations for our wedding. One of the biggest ones was to be surrounded by our family and friends. Following the onset of the pandemic, a few close family members and friends suggested we consider having a small and intimate wedding. I was unable to see how the wedding would carry the same meaning without having the expected guests celebrating in person with us. By October of 2020, we realized that if we wanted a chance to still maintain our expectations, we would need to delay the wedding. So, we moved it to November of 2021. However, as we have gotten closer to the new date, it has also become clear that our original hopes and expectations still cannot be met.

Many friends and family members will not be able to attend due to the pandemic. We will need to wear masks which will cover the faces of the people who are able to come. We have had to ask ourselves tough questions about weddings. What is the intention behind having a wedding in the first place? In what ways can meaning be made in new ways that we were not originally anticipating. The process has been grueling for Liora and I. We did not want to let go of the old. Yet, here I am, months before my own wedding, preaching about the importance of this re-examination process.

The Torah portion we read on Yom Kippur morning is *Nitzavim*. In it, we find grounding in the Jewish tradition for the necessity of regularly reassessing our lives so that the way we live remains relevant and sincere. The portion recounts the moment the Israelites received the covenant at Sinai. The first verse reads, *Atem Nitzavim hayom* “You stand today, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God.” The word *nitzavim* does not simply mean to physically stand. If Torah wanted to say that it would have used the word *omdim*. *Nitzavim*, rather, means to take a

firm stand, which requires being deliberate and intentional. The third word, *hayom*, adds another important dimension. It is not just our ancestors that take a stand in earnest before God, but it must also be us today. To know how we take a stand in our day and time requires a constant process of reexamining the way we live. We must ask ourselves questions like, what does that mean to me? Why do I do it that way? What is most important? In turn, our queries may lead us to act or do differently in the future than we had in the past. Pandemic or no pandemic, in order to fulfill the precept of *atem nitzavim hayom*, we must ask deep, probing questions about all aspects of our life, big or small. In doing so, the stance we take in life, whether on Yom Kippur or under the chuppah on our wedding day, will reflect our deepest intentions as individuals and as a people, today.

At the end of the portion, *Nitzavim* presents what appears to be an obvious choice: “Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. Choose life!” Why would anyone choose death and curse? It is a simple decision, right? If that were the case, why would Torah need to say it? To choose life and blessing, is not a given. It requires a constant exploration of ourselves and the decisions we make against the backdrop of our day. This way of living is the only way we can live intentional lives and truly be *atem nitzavim hayom*.

Finally, the portion acknowledges the very thing that makes it difficult for us to renew our lives and live more intentionally. We read, “But if your heart turns away and you give no heed and are lured into the worship and service of other gods, you will not endure” It’s difficult to try something new when we’re used to living a certain way. Patterns are difficult to break, especially when we feel emotionally connected to them. Familiarity provides comfort. For our

ancestors who first entered the covenant, taking a stand before one God was new. It was so new that one of their first acts in the desert after God revealed God's self to Moses on Mt. Sinai was to build a golden calf. The Israelites were accustomed to idol worship. Their new relationship with God had the potential to move them forward as individuals and a people, but the prospect of living anew is frightening.

We must acknowledge that often, we need to step out of our comfort zone and be unafraid to move toward the future. My decision to become a rabbi was influenced by my past Jewish experiences. Yet today, I choose to be a rabbi because I want to be involved in shaping Judaism's future. I grew up with a love of Jewish learning and family holiday celebrations at home that I looked forward to each year. Today, I still have a passion for Jewish learning, but I want to make it more accessible to all generations as a way to invigorate a more robust Reform Jewish practice. As a kid, I learned Torah is a tree of life for those that hold fast to it. A tree is always growing, so in order to hold fast to it, we too must push ourselves to grow by moving beyond the familiar and align our lives more closely with the truths we hold most high.

Since my ordination could not include the physical ritual of the laying of hands, Liora and I wanted to do something else to mark our transition from student to rabbi. As rabbis, we dedicate ourselves to a life of Torah. And so, we planted a lemon tree to mark the occasion. Initially, the tree was very small and did not bear any fruit. Over a year later, the tree has grown and has been sprouting lemons all year. At the time, although it felt cathartic to use our hands and put something in the ground to mark this sacred moment, it was different from a formal ordination and did not completely erase my disappointment.

Today, the tree reminds me that while re-assessing our usual patterns in life is difficult, pushing us out of our comfort zone and sometimes even forcing us to act in ways with which others may not agree or may not understand, it's worth it. We plant trees not because they are instantly beautiful or luscious. We plant trees because they have potential in the future. A tree planting ritual is dynamic like the formation of a rabbi. Therefore, it is quite a convincing ordination ritual as it has come to metaphorically and symbolically represent my new identity as a rabbi.

In a few minutes, we will transition to our Torah service. As I put away the Torah, you will hear the Cantor sing the words, *Eitz Chayim Hi, Lamachazim Ba*: It is a tree of life, for those that hold fast to it. She will conclude by singing the words, *Chadeish Yaminu Kikedem*: Often, we translate this as "Renew our days as in days of old." The word *kedem* can mean the very beginning as in antiquity, however, as one of my rabbis reminded me, it also means to advance as in moving forward. Each time we read from Torah, we remind ourselves that to firmly stand for and thereby live by our utmost truths and aspirations, we must remember our past yet be courageous enough to grow over time. Today, when we reexamine what has been, we create what can be tomorrow. May this be how we live--today, post covid, and for eternity. Amen.