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Elliot Frolichstein-Appel, president's reflection, 5781

*Shanah Tovah* -

The Hebrew greeting "*shanah tovah*" literally means a "good" year. We have all spent half a year hoping for the "good" to return – or at least "better," or even "normal." We want to return to the "good" old days, and be done with the current "bad" times.

We say "*Chadesh yameinu kekedem*" – Renew our days as of old. Take us back to the good old days. But we know that the old days were not entirely good, and that we can't get rid of the bad by simply retracing our steps. As Reconstructionists, rather than going back in time, we want to renew the "good" things we miss, and leave behind the "bad" things we can do without.

This Rosh HaShana, let us renew the critical glue that holds us together. I miss the serendipitous visits I used to have bumping into people on the train, though I can do without the experience of running, late and breathless, to catch my train, and I can give up cursing when the train door closes in front of me and having to make an apologetic call home. Similarly, while I can give up rushing through Shabbat dinner to get to JRC on time, I do miss singing all together, and chit-chatting under the stairs or on the way to the water fountain. These small and often unplanned interactions form the social glue that is eroding as we distance ourselves from one another.

Today's service has let us gather, pray, inspire, and hear the shofar together, not because members helped deliver a truck full of JRC to "our" church, but because members helped envision and produce a live virtual experience. It is amazing and hands-on, but I still worry about that social glue. Much of community and relationship building at JRC has always happened under the stairs, on the way to the restrooms, or finding the extra coffee creamer together. It is hard to replicate that informal serendipity through a screen.

As we adapt our congregational life to our virtual reality, we don't want to be just "Judaism on demand," where you can follow The Great British Bake-off on Wednesday with Latke-fest on Thursday. That won't strengthen our community ties, but other innovations might. Several religious school parents report that holding Zoom open houses to kick off the school year was a brilliant way to have an adult conversation without parents having to chase their kids or find a sitter. We know that some of the challenges created by having a bat mitzvah on Zoom are offset by being able to include loved ones from across the globe. My own family learned this summer that it is just as meaningful when our loved ones and community members show up for a funeral on Zoom as in-person. When our world eventually starts easing back into more in person gatherings, JRC may continue holding the occasional parent meeting on Zoom, or designating one night of shiva as virtual. Hosting some programs virtually will make more of our congregational life accessible to our members with disabilities. But with all of this adaptation and renewal, where is that critical social glue?

The way we can restore the glue that holds us together, and sustain JRC at the same time, is to continue showing up for one another and for our shared community, even if we are showing up on line. I can't set up chairs in your home for a shiva, but I CAN help moderate Zoom for your virtual shiva. We may not be able to dance around the torah together at your child's bat mitzvah service in our sanctuary, but I CAN drop off fruit from the farmer's market for your socially distant backyard celebration after a Zoom service.

JRC's board meetings have long included an agenda item called "good and welfare," where board members share personal tidbits after our thrilling budget and policy discussions. We still do that, AND now we make sure to start our Zoom call a half hour early so we can schmooze. Many other virtual meetings and programs do the same, because we're all still hungry for those interactions. Showing up is still showing up; we're just reconstructing our hallways and water coolers, so we can keep nurturing those crucial connections that serve as our social glue.

And, just as we need to continue showing up for one another individually, we need to continue showing up for JRC as a community. Many of us have already renewed our membership as a critical way to show up for JRC, but nearly a third of us have not yet done so. More JRC members than ever face serious economic hardship this year. If you are among them, please show up however you can, and know that JRC is still your home. If you are a JRC-er who is fortunate and doing well, please show up by writing an extra check (or two) to JRC to help sustain our shared home for all of us. If you are a guest today, you're already practically family! We would love to have you join us at JRC as we reconstruct and discover new ways to connect with each other. Newbie or old-timer, enroll your children in JRC's school programs to teach them – and their classmates – that we need our relationships and our community, even, and especially, when times are hard.

Zoom into a bar mitzvah service or a minyan service, even if you are all Zoomed out. The same people will delight and annoy you on screen as they did in person, but we are still showing up for one another. Attend a Zoom shiva or funeral – the support is just as real through a screen, and it is even more important when we are all isolated. Be the person who comes early or stays late to chat, whether it is for a service, a shiva, or a meeting, because that is when connections are made. That is the glue.

As we prepare to say *kaddish* for the loved ones we have lost, in our families, in our high court, and in all of our communities, remember: *Chadesh yameinu kekedem* – let us renew the "good" parts of the "good old days" together. And, let our renewal at JRC focus on those parts of JRC we want to sustain: our relationships and our community. 5781 can be a "good" year if we continue reaching out and showing up for each other and for our community.

*Shanah tovah.*