

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5781

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Shannah Tovah!

As we enter 5781, we find ourselves scattered all over. All of us are outside of our usual gathering place in Chatswood, others outside of New South Wales altogether. Yet despite our distance, we count ourselves lucky to live in a time when we can still gather in this new and reassuring fashion.

This *Rosh HaShanah* as we look around the spaces that we are sitting in, we do not see the familiar works of art around the walls of our beloved sanctuary; stretching from the colourful creation of the world on one side going all the way to the bright Blue and White flag of Israel on the other side.

Nor did we arrive at this service from the NSTE car park or walking in from our spots on Chatswood Ave as we waved hello to old friends and converged on our Temple on this most holy and special of days.

Tonight some of you are tuning in by yourselves from home. Others are at a family members house with relatives by your side.

Others of us will be in one location for *Rosh HaShanah* but will be in a different place for *Yom Kippur*. Nevertheless, in this moment, we are connected to each other and resilient in the face of whatever the year ahead will bring.

This year, the ways in which each and every one of us will greet the new year, the way that we will hear the cry of the *shofar*, or utter our concluding prayers at *Neilah* will be completely different than how we have ever done it in the past.

There is no getting around this fact. This year is quite different. But different is not necessarily bad. In fact, different can even be an opportunity for new understandings.

There are many gates of entry into the valleys and the peaks of our hearts.

The old and familiar path that we have grown accustomed to travelling on during the high holy days has been shuttered to us and we have been forced to find a different means of accessing the touchstone experiences that we have looked to for inspiration over the years.

This year we must discover a new path and uncover new ways of feeling the majesty and beauty during these Days of Awe. Like many other unexpected journeys, we may realise that other forms exist that can bring hope into our hearts, or revive our strength so that we can truthfully and seriously do the work of teshuva - returning to our truest and highest selves.

While the differences in how we approach these high holy days may be great, this detour away from our usual path has actually been travelled on before by our ancestors.

Although the technology is different, the Jewish spirit for overcoming obstacles to mark sacred time away from our sacred spaces is a recurring theme for our people.

In each generation when we have lost access to our places of prayer for one reason or another, we have created new forms and innovated to rise to the occasion.

Will we walk in the steps of our ancestors and also seize the moment and the opportunity? Looking at Jewish communities all over the world, especially our community here, I would say that we have.

With the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem, synagogues arose. With the loss of the Sacrificial system, prayer was no longer fixed to one location but would instead enter into the home of each and every Jew as they yearned to reconnect with the holy and the transcendent.

With the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in the 15th century, the tears spilled by the sojourners were transformed into the ink spilled by the scholars and artists of the day. With old and familiar spaces no longer accessible, devotional mysticism and poignant poetry built new synagogues - made of songs and hope. Palaces of space gave way to palaces in time.

The same groups of sojourners who lost their sacred buildings would build new structures of spirituality. The *Kabbalat Shabbat* service on Friday evening which never existed before in Jewish history was created by these weary travellers. With the onset of *Shabbat*, we sing their songs. *Lecha Dodi* - come, my beloved, join me. But you will not find me at a location, instead, I exist in time. Meet me at the setting of the sun.

History has caught up to us and now it is our turn to recreate what was lost and for us to discover a new way forward.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel highlights this exclusively unique quality to Judaism in his landmark work "The Sabbath":

"Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous. To whom all hours are alike, qualityless, empty shells; the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike.

Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals, and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn;

a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate: the Day of Atonement. According to the ancient rabbis, it is the Day itself, the "essence of the Day," which, along with man's repentance, atones for the sins of man. Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time; as architecture of time."

Whether we are here in Shul or we are in some distant land, *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur* come regardless.

This year, we are reminded that it is not the old and familiar gate to our heart, nor the buildings beyond the gate that impose on us the demand to strive for holiness and wholeness.

The call for *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah* is not bound to space, instead, it is the season that beckons us to look within and perform the acts of return, repair, and renewal.

When our ancestors showed up in Jerusalem with their sacrifices in tow for *Yom Kippur*, ready to tick the box for their repentance. As soon as some of them would take just one step out of the city, they would return to their old ways.

The prophet Isaiah saw this behaviour by the pilgrims to Jerusalem, as did God. As we will soon read during the *Haftarah* on *Yom Kippur*: they were admonished for this behaviour.

Isaiah exclaimed on behalf of God: *“On your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your labourers. Your fasting today will not make your voice heard on high. Is this the fast that I desire? A day for you to starve your bodies? No, this is the fast that I desire: To break apart bonds of wickedness, to untie the cords and let the oppressed go free. To share your bread with the hungry. When you see the naked, to clothe them, To not ignore your own kin.*

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn. And your healing spring up quickly.”

Humans construct churches, mosques, and synagogues. God separates the evening from the morning and calls it day.

Our psychology can trick us into thinking that God or even an opportunity for heartfelt prayer only resides within the four walls of sacred space.

We can look around the spaces that we are currently sitting in and think that they could never compare to the sanctuaries that we erected.

But this is not the case. Each of our homes, each parcel of land across this world is equal in sacredness, one to the other.

What sanctifies our shul is not the timber or concrete used for its construction, rather it is the hour of the day as we rise and face the entryway to greet the *Sabbath* Bride. It is not the real estate that we find ourselves on, but the community that we mark time with that fills our lives with meaning.

It is not the gilded cathedral that makes us tremble, rather it is the blast of the shofar as the gates of prayer are closing with the setting sun that fills our heart with awe.

As a result of this new reality, have we temporarily lost a building or have we gained a reminder about the timeless power of the day and the bonds formed with whom we mark it?

It is not the place alone that transforms us, but rather the seasons rotating around it, those that we experience it with, and how we act in days afterwards that define the sacredness of the moment.

Shanah Tovah to all. Wherever you are, may you have a sweet and happy new year.