

The Carousel Of Time  
Erev Rosh HaShanah 2021  
Rabbi Mona Alfi  
Congregation B'nai Israel

I recently read about a Jewish artist down in Malibu who invited 20 people to join her in a project she calls “Dig a Hole to Put Your Grief in.” It’s the artist response to the communal traumas of the last year and a half; Covid-19, police brutality, the existential threat of climate change, and so on. It’s a weeklong project to dig a hole with a 7 foot wide diameter to as she says “create a cavity that could contain the depth of the grief.”<sup>1</sup>

She said that she was inspired by the act of sitting shiva and the Jewish mourning process. She was drawn to the idea in Judaism that the person who is doing the grieving is supported by the entire community, and that they are not expected to go through the experience by themselves.

And while what she is doing is interesting, it just touches on the surface of the beginning part of the healing process. Because shiva is just the first step. The Jewish calendar provides space for us to revisit our losses and our grief over and over and over again. We begin with shiva, but then we have Yizkor, four times during the year, where during the major holidays we take time to remember who is no longer celebrating with us, and then of course we mark a full day every year where we remember the yertzeit for the person we have lost.

Throughout the calendar year, every year, multiple times during the year, we circle around to that place where we are vulnerable. We revisit again and again our most tender emotions, until it becomes memorialized on our emotional calendar.

Why do we this? Because simply burying those difficult feelings won’t help us to get past them. Sitting with them, again, and again trying to find meaning from them, learning how to live with them, and even taking our worst pain out to look at on an annual basis, this is what Judaism teaches us to do, this is how we survive our sorrow, our disappointments and our grief.

And it’s more than that at well. By allowing ourselves to wrestle with what has hurt us, this is how we grow, how we find meaning from our pain, and eventually learn to live more fully than before. And this is true not only for the pain of losing someone we love, but also from the pain of losing part of who we are, or who we once were.

Over the last decade or so I found that I had a compulsive desire to return again and again to my hometown, both in my imagination and in real life. Like the swallows returning to Capistrano, I

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<sup>1</sup> [https://hyperallergic.com/671220/in-malibu-a-large-hole-is-being-dug-to-contain-your-grief/?fbclid=IwAR2RTVclXHGW02DDsPKYFqTVpQ\\_8OpRjmqBm84LZdPxbOBEjQqtpqyAolUQ](https://hyperallergic.com/671220/in-malibu-a-large-hole-is-being-dug-to-contain-your-grief/?fbclid=IwAR2RTVclXHGW02DDsPKYFqTVpQ_8OpRjmqBm84LZdPxbOBEjQqtpqyAolUQ)

had an uncontrollable urge to walk in my childhood footsteps and to revisit the world that I once lived in.

I thought it was strange at first, because my childhood was profoundly chaotic and unhappy. I couldn't wait to move away. I was literally on a flight out of town within 12 hours of graduating high school. And yet, here I am, living the life I dreamed of as a child, and I kept finding myself wanting to revisit the place and the time in my life where I had been the most unhappy.

The first few years when I would make the pilgrimage home, I would find myself overwhelmed by emotions. While walking down the street, tears would suddenly stream down my face and I would feel an urge to run away again.

And then the following year, I would find myself wanting to return, year after year. And each time I did, my emotions would come back, but less sharp than the year before. Until this last summer, when I experienced something unexpected when I was there. It was at long last, a sense of calm, a sense of being renewed and refreshed, and finally being at peace.

And I realized, maybe that was what I had been looking for all along, not just resolution, but understanding where my starting point is, so that I can keep moving forward.

I discovered that my childhood wasn't as unhappy or as horrible as I once thought. Don't get me wrong, it was really hard. But I have also come to realize that mixed in with all of the painful memories are beautiful ones as well. Priceless memories of getting into mischief with my siblings, beautiful Shabbat dinners, memories of teachers whose wisdom continues to guide me, and friendships I treasure to this day. I have finally come to not only accept, but to also embrace, the idea that I could only be who I am now, because of the life I lived then, for good and for bad.

I realized that each year when I returned to where I began, I was seeking my own personal Rosh Hashanah, a resetting of my spiritual clock, a reminder that I can always begin again, any and every time I need to.

I have learned that if I'm willing to go back to my starting line, but with the wisdom I have accrued over my lifetime, then giving myself the gift of starting over is something I can look forward to, and not dread.

Teshuva is the psychological and spiritual act of returning to your personal starting place, of being willing to start again. Not to start from scratch, but to have a new start. Teshuva is like drawing that card in Monopoly that says "Advance to Go, collect \$200." Teshuva gives you the chance not only to keep playing the game, but also with a little something extra, just not in your wallet, but in your soul.

The High Holidays remind us that life is not meant to be lived passively, but we must take responsibility for our choices, our actions and reactions. It reminds us to keep an eye on the big picture even as we take responsibility for the day to day. It reminds us to never be afraid to start over.

Each time we start again, we're not starting in exactly the same spiritual place, because we are not the same person we were a year ago. Even if we're not sure what path to take this year, we at least know we don't want to travel down the road we took last year, that there is a new path forward to explore.

Time in Judaism is not linear. It is circular. Each day spirals around the sun and the moon. And seven days spiral into a week, and the highest part of the spiral is Shabbat. And around and around we go through the seasons. Each year circling back to where we were, but from a higher place than where we stood the year before. So that each Rosh HaShanah when we find ourselves back at Go, it is hopefully with more wisdom, insight and experience than we had a year ago. Even though we are standing in the same location, it is from a higher level, so that we begin again, but from a better vantage point than before.

The first several times I went home I cried, but each year when I went back, it got easier, because each time I was different, I had grown. The memories I was dredging up and the questions I was asking myself every year may have been the same, but the answers that I needed were not, because each time I came back, I was in essence a new, or newer, version of myself than I had been the year before.

This is what teshuva does, it gives you permission to begin again. It's part of the reason coming into this space every Rosh HaShanah is so powerful. We know that we are starting this journey again, but we also know that we are not alone, there are others who are embarking on this journey with us. We stand in this sacred place in time, where generations before us have stood, and together, we take a deep breath, and begin again.