



This is not how I imagined tonight would be. I didn't want to be alone in this space. Speaking into a void.

I didn't want to welcome the new year separated, isolated, without community. I wanted this room to be full. I wanted you talking during prayers, leaving early to beat the traffic in the parking lot, hugging each other in the halls. I wanted to ask you how you've been and see the guilt flash across your eyes before I told you DON'T WORRY!! I'm just so glad you're here! (Don't you remember what I told you last year!??) I didn't want to welcome the new year like this. Did any of us?

No. This is not where I want to be. Alone, solitary, speaking to an empty room - a room filled only with cameras and wires and nothing else. So I will fill this room, fill this space with my heart and soul and I will send my words out to you in your spaces. And we will sit, tied together by the sound of my voice, by our spirits alone.

 Hinei ma tov umanaim shevet achim gam yachad 

We are beyachad. We are together. We will approach the gates as we do each year - with awe, with introspection, with love, and perhaps even a little fear. We will begin the season of teshuvah as we've done in years past - connected to others, connected to ourselves. Our Rosh Hashanah prayer book opens with a reflection. It resonates even today in this empty room and I offer it as we begin this season in uncharted but still totally familiar waters.

Here I am

One soul within this prayer community.

Like those around me, I bring my own concerns and yearnings to this place, Hoping they will find expression in the time-hallowed words of my people and in the traditions cherished by generations before me.

May I bring the best of my energies to these Holy Days, approaching this spiritual work with open heart and mind, sincerity, and sustained focus on the deep questions of this season:

Who am I? How shall I live? Where have I fallen short -- or failed?

This night I take up the challenge of the Days of Awe: *cheshbon hanefesh* - a searching examination of my life, a moral inventory of my deeds, words, and thoughts.

During the next ten days, let me face the truth about myself and listen to Your still small voice.

Taking comfort in Your promise that I am always free to change, released from staleness and routine, let me know the joy of beginning again.

May I gain strength as I share this task with those around me, united by our common purpose:

*Tikkun midot* (improving our characters) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).

I now prepare myself to pray -- one soul amidst this holy congregation.

This holy congregation may not be in one room, but we are no less a holy congregation. This year, these High Holy Days will be strange. There will be sadness and emptiness. There will be prayers that we miss and things we do differently. But it is not forever. And the important things remain. Our love

for each other. Our commitment to tradition and community. We are here beyachad. Together. Sitting in our own spaces but filling the world with the strength of our TBK community.

As we welcome Shabbat and Rosh Hashana, let's take some time to acknowledge the difference. Acknowledge the sadness. This is not how any of us wanted to celebrate the new year. Not how we hoped to welcome 5781. We can name this. Sit with it. Be sad. And know that the sadness is temporary. That we'll do everything we can to hold each other, share this holiday, and in spite of everything, be beyachad.

If you wish, close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Breathing. In and out. In and out.

Wherever you sit right now, know that you are part of a powerful community. You sit together while distant, together in silence, breathing, listening, reflecting.

Understand there is a deep connection to others listening today.



Know that they sit ready to welcome the new year as you sit ready to welcome the new year.

Know that they sit focused on their breath just as you sit focused on your breath.

Become part of this collective breathing. In and out. In and out.

Visualize our community.

Imagine that we are all together at the temple. Imagine walking into this space. How are you feeling? Are you ready to focus? Ready to turn your mind to the Holy Days ahead? As you imagine walking into the temple, who is here to greet you? Who are you most excited to see? Family, friends, neighbors, people you see only a few times a year? Imagine walking through the halls, finding your seat. Opening your prayer book. Are you ready? The gates are opening.

 Hinei ma tov umanaim shevet achim gam yachad 

We are together. We are beyachad. This is a time to be in your heart, in your spirit, and in the presence of God. It is Rosh Hashanah. The gates are opening. These ten days will be different. Will feel different from every year before. But perhaps this new experience will bring new insight. The new perspective will open our hearts in new ways.

Rabbi Laura Geller writes:

Your book of life doesn't begin today, on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents, siblings, and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people's decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like. But the message of Rosh Hashanah, the

anniversary of the creation of the world, is that everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day - by the choices you make. The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit it, decide what parts you want to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to leave behind. Shanah tovah means both a good year, and a good change. Today you can change the rest of your life. It is never too late.

Perhaps as we experience the change this year, we will find ways to see it as a shanah tovah - a good change. And this perspective will help us make this year a shanah tovah - a good year. Sit in this moment. Sit with this change. Consider the words of Ecclesiastes as offered in our machzor:

To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.

This is the season of the soul -

a time to rejoice,

a time to reflect

a time to return ...

a time to gather round the table with loved ones and friends,

a time for song and silence, for prayer and confession to open the heart,



a time to retreat to our sanctuaries within,

a time to renew the life and spirit of our community ...

Let these words sit in your heart and inspire your days as we approach the gates and enter these holy moments.

Breathe in. And out. In and out.

And as we open our eyes and prepare ourselves for this shanah tovah - this good and changed year, consider reaching out during these next ten days. Reach out to the people you most wanted to see this day. Reach out to your family and friends. Spread your love out into the community and the world. Be beyachad, if not in person, at least in spirit. We are all here together. Singing together, praying together. It's not how we wanted to welcome the new year. But we will be strengthened as we approach the gates and prepare for 5781.

 Hinei ma tov umanaim shevet achim gam yachad 

Shana tovah.