

Why Are We Here?
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 2019, 5780

A few hundred years ago, there was a rabbi. The elders of his synagogue were fed up with all of the chitchat during services. They had meeting after meeting to figure out how to solve the problem—things don't always change—and eventually, they came up with a solution. They publicized their new rule for the synagogue: From now on, there is no more everyday talk in synagogue. Come here to pray, to study, to celebrate—and go to the market when you need to chitchat! It seemed to work. Services were quieter, people were respectful. So the elders were quite surprised when the rabbi stood up a few weeks later and said, “I am revoking the new rule about synagogue chitchat.” Sensing their confusion, he continued, “Before the rule, people talked here at synagogue, and they found out who was sick, who needed a job, who had a job available, who was celebrating, who was mourning, who needed help. They connected. They built community here, in this space. Now, they come as individuals and they leave as individuals. We aren't a community if we're only talking to God. We're only doing our part if we are talking to God and to one another, if we're praying and learning and opening our lives to each other.

For some of us, it has been about a year, give or take 10 days, since we last set foot in this sanctuary. For others, it has been a few days or weeks. Coming to synagogue is about returning, intentionally turning toward this place, whether it's a familiar, regular destination, or our first Rosh Hashanah. For some, it is our first time here. But all of us *returned*, all of us intentionally stepped through these doors this evening. For (just about) everyone here, we didn't come under duress; it was our choice to have a slightly early dinner (really early for our choir), get dressed up on a Sunday evening, and spend it here, in synagogue. We all have different reasons for returning here tonight.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, these High Holy Days, are all about turning and returning. Over and over again, we hear about teshuvah, which is usually translated as repentance, but literally means a turning back, turning towards something. In Avinu Malkeinu, we ask God “*chadesh aleinu shanah tovah*,” to renew us for a good year. We ask, “*hashiveinu Adonai eleicha, v'nashuvah*,” renew us, God, and we will return. As our eyes wander across the page of the machzor and we read some of the alternative readings, we'll notice a theme of returning that, well, returns throughout the pages of the services. Over and over again, we ask God to help us turn and return. The text does not always tell us what we are turning from or turning towards, or what we are returning to; the destination, the reason for turning is our own challenge.

Tonight, each of us has returned to this place all on our own, although we may not be entirely sure why. By examining why we have returned this evening, by figuring out why each

one of us is here, we can grow from this experience and turn our lives in a direction of which we can be proud. Robert Putnam wrote the book *Bowling Alone* some twenty years ago as an investigation into what he described as the collapse of American community and communal institutions. Religious attendance and involvement has declined, although the number of “devoutly observant” has remained stable¹. This overall decline, combined with traditional religious stability, means the lessening in religious involvement has been from those who are moderately involved. One of his observations was the parallel between the shrinking religious middle—those who are somewhat religious—and the shrinking political middle—those whose minds are not made up with certainty, who aren’t loyal to a particular political party, and the ones who decide the outcome of most elections. We represent that religious middle, a vitally important ground that ensures ongoing connection between different parts of society and helps prevent total religious polarization. Let’s stand strong here in the religious middle. Let’s consider why we entered this middle space, this gap between traditionally religious and non-religious, for hours of prayer over the next ten days. With that insight into ourselves, these Days of Awe can do even more good for our souls.

Some of us are here to atone. Perhaps this is obvious, but these Holy Days are about atonement, making ourselves better, and for some of us, that’s why we’re here. Teshuvah, returning, for some of us, is about revisiting familiar words and tunes. Teshuvah is about turning those words around and around in our minds and our mouths, and trying to figure out how we can do better, be better in the coming year. Teshuvah is about reading the prayers and trying to mean the words we say aloud, about letting the voices of the choir lift us to higher and higher places. In Pirke Avot, Rabbi Ben Bag Bag teaches about torah, “turn it and turn it again, because everything is in it. And look into it, and grow old and gray in it, and do not budge from it, for there is no better teaching than [torah]².

If we acknowledge that we returned here to atone, we may be seeking spirituality in our lives, and this Rosh Hashanah, we were looking into one more option in the menu of modern life to check the spirituality box. We all have other choices: spirituality retreats, secular classes, yoga and meditation, and so many other avenues to explore that spark of spirituality we may feel is missing from our lives. We look for that spirituality in so many secular spaces, but Jewish worship, ritual, and study *can* give us a sense of the sacred—if we let them.³ Coming here tonight to atone shows that somewhere deep down, we understand that.

¹ Putnam, Robert: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster, 2000, page 75.

² Pirke Avot 5:22

³ Paraphrased from Schwartz, Rabbi Sidney, *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Future*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, page 35

There are so many different ways to understand the Divine, including some where God is more involved in our day-to-day lives and some where God is less involved—all of them validly Jewish beliefs. Some ancient rabbis pictured God literally sitting on a throne, writing our names in a book this season; others imagined that we write our own names with the way we live our lives; others concede that they think the whole Book of Life is a metaphor, or something that happens in the World to Come, or something we mere humans still cannot understand. Like us, the ancient rabbis weren't sure. Like us, they kept searching anyway.

Judaism offers so many avenues to connect spiritually, and atonement these High Holy Days is only one of them. Shabbat, every week, gives us a pause to reconnect with the world around us, with our loved ones, and, if we wish, with God. We can all try setting the day apart in any way that feels special to each of us as individuals. We can run errands as a family if it feels special and different—but we can put it all off until Sunday if it feels like a chore. Same thing with cleaning the house, gardening, or taking a bike ride. If it feels spiritually elevated, if it sets the day apart and makes it special, it could be a Shabbat activity in one home—even if it isn't in someone else's. The goal, here in the religious middle, is for our spiritual practices to elevate us and connect us, not to make us feel guilty or resentful.

Think about the words of this holiday season. Avinu Malkeinu, our Parent our Sovereign, reminds us that the Divine goes from A-Z, from a being with more compassion than we can fathom to the one with the very harshest sense of justice. In our machzor, Avinu Malkeinu is translated as “Almighty and Merciful,” underscoring those ends of the spectrum, compassion and justice, and by extension, encompassing every measure in between. We can turn outwards to other, more generic or secular places for spirituality, but it's here in Judaism, too.

I feel this pull to atone, to spiritually recharge. I notice different readings each year; I am struck by new phrases and poems. The choir moves my soul in a way I didn't expect. I have served on camp faculty at OSRUI for two weeks of several summers over the last eight years. In a summer I wasn't on OSRUI faculty, my family went to visit for a Shabbat. As we left, I looked at my husband and said, “thank you. I feel filled back up now.” I need this: prayer and atonement and God. It fills my soul.

To those who are here to find Jewish spirituality, to atone, welcome. Let's follow the advice of Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, and consider and reconsider the words on the page. We'll explore the texts we find interesting. We'll read the poems and paragraphs on the facing pages, the ones we skip over because we can't possibly read every word in this book. Let's sit with our reflections and really feel what inspires us or makes us think.

Some of us are here to rediscover Judaism. We've felt disconnected or somehow turned off from the Judaism of our past, and we were pulled to check in again, to see whether with the passing of time, there's something new to discover here. This is the right place! We will be

starting Anshe Mitzvah, an adult b'nai mitzvah class, at the end of October; it is a great place to delve into Jewish learning. Over Sukkot, we have services and programs to explore a holiday that not everyone celebrates or knows much about. Tonight, and again tomorrow morning, and next week, we have a room full of people—three rooms full! Let's not rush out after the services are over, but chat for a few minutes. Let's try and connect with someone new, or reconnect with someone we used to know.

Judaism, like most things, is more meaningful when we understand it. In his book about motivation, *Drive*, Daniel Pink describes three elements of intrinsic motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose⁴. One thing that results from the flow of these three qualities together is authenticity. When we make something ours, we are more connected to what we are doing. Pink shares that people are more motivated in their workplaces if they are doing things that feel authentic to themselves and if they understand why they are doing what they're doing. But if it's true for work, where people have to go, and where we have tasks to perform and objectives to meet, then it should be all the more important for something less required and structured in our lives, like religion.

Rabbi Sidney Schwartz explores the idea of authenticity in Judaism in *Jewish Megatrends*, a book exploring religious trends and looking to the future of the American Jewish community and its institutions. Rabbi Schwartz notices that we often choose not to do something simply because we don't understand it. Sometimes, we are unwilling to take a leap—of faith or otherwise—because we are not sure how it will come out, or we won't take a class because we aren't sure we have the background to understand it. Barring any actual prerequisites, most teachers would say, come anyway. Take the class. Ask questions. Let's be curious. Let's learn as we go. Choosing not to learn because we don't know enough to begin with is circular, and it holds us back. Learning can and should continue throughout life—ask the regulars to our Shabbat morning Study Minyan, who range in age from our 30s to our 90s, with thoughtful questions and insightful answers coming from those throughout that range.

To those who are here to reconnect to Judaism, welcome. I feel this way this year. I have been around the last few years, and I've seen so many people who are sitting around this room—especially if you come to family programs as I have done with my own children. I spent the last two years working at Milwaukee Jewish Day School. I loved connecting with teachers and parents and getting to know students in an entirely different way. And, although I couldn't believe it myself when I realized it, I really missed the synagogue. I missed the connection to the cycle of life and studying Torah and writing about it. I missed the spiritual connection, the searching, the conversations I've had here with so many of you. I love MJDS, and I am proud to be an MJDS parent of two students. I remain in awe of the teachers there and everywhere; synagogue work is where I find my passion and calling. Wherever we choose to find it, let's all

⁴ Pink, Daniel, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Riverhead Books, 2009.

rediscover what we love about Judaism and work on strengthening our connection to Jewish learning and programming.

Some of us are here because we would feel guilty being anywhere else, because the community expectation is that we'll be here, because being in synagogue on Rosh Hashanah is just what Jews do. Perhaps we weren't so excited to come in here this evening, or we're spending more time than we'd like to admit making mental to-do lists, thinking about the things we could be doing at home. Guilt is powerful—and so is community. Tradition teaches that when the Jews were offered the Torah, we collectively said, “na’aseh v’nishmah,” we will do it, and we will understand it. Generations of commentators have stared at these seemingly backwards words, and most have concluded that sometimes we do things, even if they don't make rational sense, and that through doing them, they may come to make sense. We might not fully understand why we're here this evening, but hopefully, the words, the music, the community will carry us into some understanding of our place within the Jewish people.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam cites a whole list of benefits of being part of a religious community: we know more people, we have conversations with more people over the course of a day, we are more involved in our community through volunteering and philanthropy, we are more involved in other community groups and organizations, including non-religious groups. We have more experience running meetings, planning events, and public speaking. We have higher rates of voting.⁵ In a society where so many are lamenting the rise of virtual interactions, there is so much value in the face to face interactions a synagogue fosters. We bring generations together in shared experiences in ways that few other places can do. In this room, at this time, we have about 100 years of Jewish life. Think about how often four or more generations share an experience. It's no wonder that the community pulls us together, pulls us back in. It sustains us, it helps us grow, it makes us better people.

I can't go to the JCC without saying hello to at least six to ten people I know. We have yet to go to the new Mequon Public Market and not see someone we know. Our kids are not surprised when we see people we know at the grocery store, at restaurants, and at the zoo. I love that my network makes a city feel small and interconnected. At Religious School last Sunday, several of us were comparing Jewish geography stories. When my phone pops up with “on this day” photos from past years, it's as likely to be my own kids as it is synagogue teens when they were elementary schoolers. We cook for one another after the birth of a baby, surgeries, and loss of a loved one, and we carpool kids to religious school and adult friends to services at night. This is community.

To those who are here because of a sense of guilt or the pull of community, welcome. I hope we can let go of the implied expectations of the magic of these Days of Awe, and just

⁵ *Bowling Alone*, page 66-67

experience them as they happen. Maybe we'll spot a reading on the page that speaks to us that we hadn't read before, or we'll hear the beauty of the choir's voices in harmony in a way we hadn't really noticed before. Perhaps we won't. We might leave after this holiday thinking it was a waste of time, questioning whether the guilt will be strong enough to bring us back again next year. If that's the case, let's talk, outside of the pomp and circumstance of Rosh Hashanah, away from the pressure and guilt to search the depths of our souls. Let's work together to explore the pull of community, the feeling of guilt that brought us through these doors this evening.

Some of us are here for other reasons. Some in this space aren't Jewish, but come here tonight for their own reasons. Some are considering or working toward formally joining the Jewish people. Some are here with a Jewish spouse or family, or just looking for something different. To those who join us and are not Jewish, welcome. I hope everyone who is here finds meaning in the words and prayers of our tradition, and know that I am always happy to talk about it.

Each of us is here for a different reason. A challenge of Rosh Hashanah is to figure out what made us walk through those doors, so that we can grow, learn about ourselves, and get the most out of this time that we have, here in synagogue these Days of Awe, and this time we have here in this world.

May we find meaning in these High Holy Days, may we find what it is we are seeking, and may we walk this path together, as a holy community.