

## The Great Separation

Rosh HaShanah, Second Day 5782/2021

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The room is pitch black and silent, but it trembles with anticipation. Someone strikes a match and lights the braided candle--a signal to all to move a little closer together, to put arms around shoulders. The grape juice sloshes gently over the sides of the cup, the tiny packets of cinnamon and cloves are ready for all to sniff, the guitar begins to strum, and voices swell in peaceful harmony.

Havdalah--the Great Separation between Shabbat and the coming week--is one of the most cherished rituals in our tradition. And it's an outstanding example of *liminal space*, what author and Franciscan friar Richard Rohr describes as "where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence."

The word "liminal" comes from the Latin "*limen*", meaning threshold. And indeed, a threshold is a particularly liminal space between the comfort and familiarity of our home... and everything on the outside. My teacher Rabbi Dr. Neil Gillman, of blessed memory, used to explain the concept of liminality with the (admittedly heteronormative and gendered) image of a groom carrying his bride over the threshold of their new home. Everything behind them is familiar, but what's inside is yet to be discovered; it's the future they are building together.

Other examples of liminal spaces: A hallway. A street. The train platform. And liminal times: Birth. The period around a divorce or a death. The beginning of a new school year or a new job. Twilight. Dawn. New Year's Eve. Rosh HaShanah. Perhaps: Rosh HaShanah 5782, as we fight our way out of a global pandemic.

Our tradition has always called Rosh Hashanah "Hayom Harat Olam", the day the world was born, and as such it raises for us all the feelings of anticipation that something new brings. But this year is different. This Rosh HaShanah, we come together differently than last year, differently than ever before--many in our sanctuary, even more participating on Zoom, others attending via Livestream--and do our very best to feel the embrace of our beloved community, wherever they are. We had high hopes that we'd all be together this holiday, but as the Yiddish proverb says, "man plans and God laughs". This Rosh HaShanah, we pray fervently to behold the complete end of the pandemic. We pray that this Rosh HaShanah could just very well serve as our own Havdalah--our own Great Separation--not between Shabbat and the week to come, but betwixt our lives over the last 18 months and a new, freer, healthier, safer future. And that's what I'd like to explore this morning.

Let's first think a little more about Havdalah at the end of Shabbat. Why is it so powerful? Here are 4 suggestions:

1. **The reflection.** Since lighting a flame on Shabbat is a big no-no, striking that match is a very stark acknowledgement that Shabbat is over. Lighting that candle takes us back 25 hours to the moment we lit the Shabbat candles. And in bookending Shabbat with flame, we are saying in essence: Shabbat has ended, but we want to reflect on its tranquility in the new week. Let's take it with us.
2. **The pause.** Havdalah takes place at one of the liminal moments of our day--just after twilight, when we can see 3 stars in the sky. It holds us in that post-twilight space for a few extra minutes so that we don't rush thoughtlessly into a new week, pressured though we might be. We praise God for being the Great Separator between "light and darkness, between Shabbat and the 6 days of the creative week, between sacred time and the mundane"--*haMavdil bein kodesh l'chol*. What do we hope for in these next 7 days? What challenges lay ahead? From where will I draw my strength? We pause. We transition. Spiritually. Thoughtfully.
3. **The new beginning.** Havdalah formalizes the start to our new week by awakening all of our senses out of the dream-state of Shabbat. We see the flame, listen to the music and the words, smell the spices, taste the wine or grape juice, touch all of the ritual items and perhaps stand close to others. This awakening reminds our bodies, our minds, and our hearts: It's go time. Bring on a new week.
4. **Hope.** Every new beginning comes with potential, with the hope for something wonderful, something unexpected, as Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and philosopher wrote: "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known." You may recall that Havdalah is often accompanied by the singing of Eliyahu HaNavi, inviting Elijah the Prophet to come speedily and, as our tradition teaches, to hearken the coming of the messianic era. Every week--every Havdalah--is another opportunity for redemption.

Reflection, a pause, a new beginning, and hope. All of that is wrapped up in Havdalah.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan friar, elaborated on liminal space, suggesting that it's "a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible... This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy."

I know Richard Rohr wasn't writing about our contemporary situation--although he is alive today and living in Albuquerque, NM--but he really couldn't have been more accurate. We can't live in the dream-state of Shabbat forever--that's what makes it so special. Those

liminal moments of Havdalah--the leaving-behind of Shabbat--help us to gather the momentum we need to meet new challenges head-on. So it is with our current reality. We know what the past looks like - quarantining, isolation, Zoom, separation--and we're living it again right now. *And* we've had a glimpse of what the future could hold. We're full of anticipation, and await the knowledge of whether or not this year will live up to our hopes and dreams.

We've had a long time to reflect on, to consider what we've appreciated about our different circumstances. People are talking about COVID Keepers all over the place. I'm sure you have already incorporated your own COVID Keepers into your practice, even as you began to emerge from the strictest isolation over the spring and summer.

I've been thinking a lot about what sticks around Beth El, and we're seeing some of it today. Our COVID Keepers can be summed up by one word: Connectivity. Connectivity is the awareness that our community includes both those present physically AND anyone who participates from home, whether that be in Norwalk, elsewhere in Connecticut, anywhere in the United States, or truly anywhere in the world. Over the last year, we've seen morning minyan led by folks in Long Island and Rhode Island. We've offered aliyot to those in the sanctuary *and* those participating via Zoom. We celebrated high school grads, some of whom came to shul and others who Zoomed in from their homes. Uncle Alec led Shacharit at Joel Goldman's Bar Mitzvah direct from Thailand! Although I'd continue to advocate that being together in person is still the ideal--both Jewishly and socially--I'm so proud of the work our professional staff and volunteers have done to make multi-access participation possible. Thank God for Zoom; I have a feeling we'll always have some kind of opportunity to attend from afar.

Connectivity also takes the form of deeper individual connection between congregants and between myself and congregants. I want to highlight the work of our Caring Committee, spearheaded by Jayne Hirshfield, who volunteered last year to help me and the Board of Trustees reach out to each member of our shul. Jayne realized how vital and enjoyable these connections were and she put out the call for a new Caring Committee. This wonderful crew have been connecting one-on-one with members of our shul who could benefit from a little more Beth El love. And while COVID was the impetus, this one's a keeper. If you'd like to join the committee OR you'd like to receive a phone call, please let me know.

And connectivity is more of my own individual outreach to you, given that we haven't been seeing each other as much in person. Last January, I began calling you around the time of your loved ones' yahrzeits, and I have found these opportunities for connection so meaningful. I hope you have too. That's a Keeper.

Just as we carry the tranquility of Shabbat into the new week, we will most certainly continue to embrace deeper connectivity as we start to discover our new normal lives.

After reflection, we pause. That's today. Today we celebrate the world renewing itself, and the ways in which we want to renew ourselves along with it. Just as we embrace Shabbat as a separate, sacred day, today we welcome this new year in hopes that it will be the Great Separation between sickness and health, between isolation and more contact, between worry and confidence, between missing out and showing up.

Which leads me to the most important element of this Havdalah: Our new beginning. We thought we were in it over these last couple of months, and it seems to have been pushed off by Delta. It can be so very daunting to think about emerging from COVID, to leave behind the mindset that illness lurks within every person on the outside. But the day will come when we can try again. And it won't need to be a return to our old normal. And so I would challenge each of us to try to answer this question: How do YOU envision your new beginning, when it comes? And more specifically--given that we're attending Rosh HaShanah services at our Beth El--how would YOU like to show up in our Beth El community in this new year? During this liminal space of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, each of us has the opportunity to ponder these questions and to make a commitment to ourselves--and to each other--for this year.

And finally, this new beginning brims with hope. Each Saturday night, we proclaim the belief that Elijah the Prophet could usher in the messianic age in the coming 6 days. Today, despite the proliferation of Delta, there is so much hope for the coming year. The gift of vaccines has given us a great measure of the freedom we have so deeply missed, and we are blessed that the vast majority of those eligible in our shul community and so many in our state have received their vaccines. I am hopeful that this year will bring shots to the arms of the youngest members of our community and our families, and that schools, camps, and youth activities can make a full return to an exciting new normal. We're getting there.

Right now, we're in the pause. The threshold. The hallway. The airport. New Year's Day. Rosh HaShanah. And we pray for the day when it will be safe enough to remove our masks for good--may that come speedily in this new year.

At that time, we will light the proverbial candle, smell those spices, and lift our voices together in song: (sing) Baruch A-Tah...HaMavdil bein COVID l'chol....

Ken yehi ratzon. May that be God's will. Amen.

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