

Leyl Rosh Hashanah 5784  
Alone Together  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shanah Tovah.

Alone together. This is how I feel we experience the High Holidays.

This phrase, which I heard from Rabbi David Wolpe of LA, encapsulates so much about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For me, there are moments I feel I am all by myself, and this is both wonderful... and intimidating.

And there are other moments when I feel I am part of a much larger whole, and that is both thrilling... and limiting.

It's paradoxical, I know, but for me it fits perfectly. Tonight let me share with you more of what I mean.

There are core parts to these holidays that are deeply personal, that make me feel like I am traveling by myself in the woods. First are my sins, which are completely my own. My list of shortcomings may overlap with someone else's, but my full list will not be identical to anyone else's. And this makes sense, because no one else had the exact same interactions with people that I did, for better and for worse.

Second are the apologies that I alone have to make. Based on my mistakes that harmed certain people, I have a responsibility to tell them directly that I'm sorry. I can't ask anybody else to do that for me. And my list of people to apologize to is different from everyone else's. The apologies are not to happen during services, but it's homework for the days between now and Yom Kippur.

Finally, my personal goals for the year ahead are my own. These character goals are different from yours and everyone else's, though there may be some overlap. These are based on my shortcomings, as well as my own skills and opportunities for the year ahead.

Together these three steps - sins, apologies, and goals - map out the Teshuvah process. These are the stops on the road map to repentance and earning a second chance - to identify my shortcomings, to say I'm sorry, and to resolve to do better next year, starting today. That means that Teshuvah is a highly personalized journey, different for each and every person. And that fits with what we know about the grand metaphor of the holiday: that we be inscribed in the Book of Life. That inscription is

personal – each of us comes individually before G-d and is judged on these days based on our own actions and on our own Teshuvah. In all of these important ways, we are indeed alone.

In some ways, that's optimal. For us to feel personally connected to G-d and Judaism, we need a personal experience, one that speaks to each of us individually where we are now. There's definitely lots of room for that on the holidays. But the downside of being alone is *feeling* alone. Being by ourselves can sometimes be scary and inhibiting. As we know, sometimes being in the company of others is deeply reassuring and vital for our growth. And that's what's brilliant about these holidays, we are alone *together*. There are foundational pieces of the High Holidays that are done *collectively*, so that we never feel isolated even though each of us is on our own path.

First, this is a holiday primarily celebrated in the synagogue. Of course we have Rosh Hashanah dinner and lunch, as well as Yom Kippur break-the-fast together with others. But all the other action happens here in the synagogue: the hours and hours of prayer. That's not always true with other Jewish holidays: Passover's main event is the Seder, which happens at home. Sukkot's featured attraction is eating in the Sukkah, which happens outside at home. Hanukkah candles are lit at home. But the High Holidays happen in the synagogue. After each of our individual Amidahs, we open our eyes and are surrounded by community, a wordless acknowledgment that we are in this together.

And sometimes we are deeply moved by the moments when the whole congregation *sings* together: for me, on Rosh Hashanah it's Avinu Malkeinu (though not tomorrow because it's Shabbat). And on Yom Kippur, it's the Shehehyanu at night. To have hundreds or over a thousand voices singing the same words together in one voice is breathtakingly powerful. Even when I know it's coming, it's captivating.

Next, another way we are in this together is that the language on every page of the Mahzor prayer book is first person *plural*. Not "*I*," but "*we*." Even the prayers we utter privately are said in the plural, which is very odd. Most jarring are the Yom Kippur confessionals. What is sung aloud is "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu* - we are guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen..." But even what is done quietly, like the longer *Al Het* confessional, is recited in the plural: "*We* have sinned by..." It's a way to recall that we are all in this together. Whereas I may have fallen short in some areas, I am buoyed by the fact that around me are Jews who have not made the same mistake, and whose righteous acts lift me up as well for we are one community.

Finally, we are in this together because we are all following the same road map of Teshuvah. We all have different starting points and end points, but we all follow the

same process of reflecting on our mistakes, apologizing to those whom we have hurt, and resolving to do better. We are in the company of Jews all across the world on this very day, as well as Jews for thousands of years on this day annually in history.

We may also take inspiration from the first Jew to undergo this deeply introspective Teshuvah process: our biblical ancestor Judah. I now want to go into detail about his story, which is not so well known. In this process, we follow a trail that has been walked by others who came before us. We are together with them not in a physical sense but a spiritual sense, starting with the first Jew to achieve Teshuvah, Judah. Judah is of course the namesake of our people, the Jews. We are Yehudim because we are descendants of Yehuda, Jacob's fourth son.

If we were to stop reading the Book of Genesis in the middle of the extended Joseph story, Judah is the *last* person we would expect to serve as a role model. Remember that Joseph's brothers hated the younger brother Joseph and threw him into a pit. Along came big brother Judah who proposed selling Joseph into slavery. Yes, it was all his idea. He said to his brothers: "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not harm him with our own hands. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood" (Gn. 37:26, 27). His brothers agreed. This act is abominable. Judah proposes letting strangers dispose of his brother while making a profit off of it. It's the complete opposite of how a brother should act.

But we must keep reading. For he grows and matures more than any other character in the Torah. The very same man years later stands face to face with his brother Joseph, whom he does not recognize as second in command in Egypt. Joseph has framed their brother Benjamin and has told the brothers he will keep Benjamin in prison while the others can return to their father in Israel. But Judah will have none of it. While earlier in life, it was Judah's idea to sell his younger brother into slavery, now he is prepared to become a slave himself to free his brother. As he tells Joseph, "Now, my lord, let me remain in place of the boy as your lordship's slave, and let him go with his brothers. How can I return to my father without the boy? I could not bear to see the misery my father would suffer" (Gn. 44:33,34).

Judah finally understands what it means to be a responsible brother, which means to protect another in a time of danger. To be responsible for another. With Joseph, he fails the test but learns his lesson, so when Benjamin too is in the same situation as young Joseph, Judah responds differently. A changed man has a changed response.

Where did Judah's personal growth come from? It comes from an episode in the middle of his life concerning his daughter-in-law Tamar. I won't go into all the details of Genesis

38, but there is a moment when Tamar confronts him about another grave error of his, and he responds in a significant way: he admits he was wrong. He says “*Tzadeka Mimeni* - she was more righteous than I” (Gn. 38:26). It is that insight, that new character, that becomes his destiny ever after, that enables him to become responsible for his brother Benjamin - to become a changed person.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

“Judah is the first person in the Torah to achieve perfect repentance (*teshuvah gemurah*), defined by the Sages as when you find yourself in a situation where it is likely you will be tempted to repeat an earlier sin, but you are able to resist because you are now a changed person.

We now understand the significance of his name. The verb *lehodot* [which is the root of Yehuda, Judah] means two things. It means ‘to thank,’ which is what Leah has in mind when she gives Judah, her fourth son, his name: ‘this time I will thank the L-rd.’ However, it also means, ‘to admit, acknowledge.’ The biblical term *vidui*, ‘confession,’ – then and now part of the process of *teshuvah*, and according to Maimonides its key element – comes from the same root. Judah means ‘he who acknowledged his sin.’”

On these holidays, each of us travels our own path. But we are in good company. Our ancestor Judah provided the map, and our fellow congregants search by our sides so that we can reach our individual destination together.

Shanah Tovah.