

POST-ROSH HASHANAH

Tossing Flaws and Breadcrumbs

9.29.14

REMEMBER, AS A kid, feeling that the High Holy Day passage, *Unetaneh Tokef*—“Let us acknowledge the power [of the holiness of the day]”—which says that God is going to decide “Who will live and who will die,” did not apply to me.

“Who by sword” seemed archaic; “Who by water” remote.

But that litany becomes alarmingly vivid as I get older. This year it feels as if every peril leaps off the page when I’m in Rosh Hashanah services.

“Who shall see ripe age and who shall not. . . .” My childhood friend Dan died a few weeks before the holiday while swimming in the ocean.

“Who shall perish by fire. . . .” Six members of a New Jersey family—related to Rhonda, who works the checkout counter where I get breakfast—died in a fire on Father’s Day, three months earlier.

“. . . and who by water.” The *New York Times* just reported that global temperatures, left unchecked, will ultimately flood coastal cities.

“Who by sword. . . .” Steven Sotloff and James Foley were recently beheaded by ISIS.

“. . . and who by beast. . . .” A twenty-two-year-old hiker was mauled by a bear.

“Who by earthquake. . . .” A main shock of 6.0 in Napa.

“. . . and who by plague.” The Ebola virus made headlines all summer.

The grim catalog rattles me when I read it in preparation for Rosh Hashanah—the day we’ll recite the *Unetaneh Tokef* in morning services.

For now, the night before, I’m comforted by my congregation, Central Synagogue, packed into Avery Fisher Hall on the eve of the new year (our numbers require renting a larger space on the High Holidays). Looking out from the first-tier balcony, there’s something symbolically powerful about rows and rows of yarmulkes and familiar families. Thousands are still here, not yet smote by water, fire, or sword. So many of us made it one more year.

Two self-evident facts are suddenly, atypically moving:

1. We’ve been given another chance to live—and to live better.
2. Look how many of us feel it’s important enough to be in this room.

Whatever the sobering Pew Center Report of 2013 portended about synagogue attrition (in a nutshell: shuls are struggling and Jews don’t find meaning there), there are still glowing pockets of connectivity. For my synagogue, there’s an extra tenor of expectation on this *Erev* (eve of) Rosh Hashanah because just one week prior, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, formerly Central’s Senior Cantor, was installed as the new Senior Rabbi. Buchdahl is the first woman to hold the job in Central’s 140-year history, inheriting the baton from the much-beloved Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein, who led (and bolstered) the congregation for twenty-three years.

From the first words she utters, Buchdahl manages to shrink the grand auditorium to a hallowed sanctuary, addressing the multitudes with an intimacy that draws us in. When she later sermonizes about the Fifth Commandment (honor your mother and father), it reminds me of everything my parents are and how I haven’t thanked them in a while. “It’s precisely when parents are no longer critical in the pri-

mary sense,” she says, “when we’ve done them out of a job, that we need to remember to honor them most.”

When she pauses midway through the proceedings to acknowledge what was a painful summer (the 2014 war in Gaza) and to introduce the Hebrew prayer for Israel, *“Avinu Shebashamayim”* (“Our Father in Heaven”), I realize it’s the first time since three teenage Israeli boys were kidnapped on their way home in June that I’ve stood alongside hundreds of fellow Jews, acknowledging, without speaking, the upheaval and disquiet we’ve all been feeling.

After the service ends and I greet synagogue friends whom I haven’t seen all summer (*“Shana Tovah”*—“May you enjoy a good new year”), my family heads uptown to my sister’s apartment for “the festive meal,” which, in my family, might as well be called “the ravenous inhalation.” This is the tradition I grew up with, the rituals my mother passed on to her twin daughters (my brother has yet to host a holiday meal, but there’s still time): a beautifully set table; blessings over the candles; the round challah (for the cycle of the year and seasons); the bread sprinkled with honey (may the new year be a sweet one); the apples dipped in honey (we’re supposed to eat a newly ripened fruit; more honey for sweetness). Saccharine as it may sound, the ease of my family at this table is sweetness itself. I’m keenly aware that we’re lucky to be together on another Rosh Hashanah, healthy despite some medical hurdles for my parents. And I’m conscious that this new year is also new because I’m clocking it in a way I never have before.



On the following day—Rosh Hashanah itself—the petitionary song, *“Avinu Malkeinu”* (“Our Father, Our King”), feels unusually soul-wringing. Though the literal translation is somewhat distancing—formal and masculine—nevertheless the melody feels embedded in my DNA. I’ve heard it every year of my life.

Our father our king, hear our voice
Our father our king, we have sinned before you

Our father our king, Have compassion upon us and upon our children

I confess, not every section of this morning service comes alive for me. But I'm attuned, for the first time this year, to the three key themes of the day, which map the middle of the service:

God rules. *Malchuyot* (verses of sovereignty)

God remembers. *Zichronot* (verses of remembrance)

God redeems. *Shofarot* (verses of the *Shofar*)

I can hang my hat on that. Or at least, it gives me a sense of why there's so much God praise in this service: the tributes are for different things, not as redundant as I'd thought. It's too tidy to say that the God I believe in does rule, remember, and redeem. The "rule" part, at least, trips me up. Too authoritarian. And the "redeems" section suggests that we should rely too much on a higher being to do our heavy lifting. But my mind is firing differently now because I understand the framework: ruler, remembrance, and redemption.



That afternoon, the rain begins just as my fifteen-year-old daughter, Molly, and I walk to the East River with fellow congregants to observe Tashlich (casting off)—the ritual of throwing one's sins (aka hunks of challah) into a moving body of water. JTS professor Rabbi Visotzky hates Tashlich: "Throwing crumbs out of your pocket doesn't absolve you of your sins," he scoffs. "It's not the real work." But this is one rite I've done since the kids were small, and I have always found it to be profound in the simplest way. Maybe because it's a physicalized expiation instead of just atoning in our heads. Maybe because Tashlich has always made confession tangible for my children. Since they were little, I've taken them to the water to watch their faults float away.

I hesitate to confess what I threw into the East River this year, because it feels akin to revealing my birthday-candle wish—too sac-

rosanct, too risky. Suffice it to say that I have a pretty clear sense of what needs fixing.



Friday morning, the second day of Rosh Hashanah (yes, there's a second day, which most of my Reform friends don't observe, but the Orthodox do, per the Hebrew calendar), I visit Romemu, a congregation on the Upper West Side, which draws from traditional and Eastern spiritual practices, and which strives to make every prayer feel not just applicable but emotional.

Rabbi David Ingber, who maintains a kind of simmering concentration on the *bimah* (elevated platform), leads the service with Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer, who has a poetic presence. People clap or sway in the pews around me, even, at times, lifting their arms in the air. Before each *aliyah* (call to the Torah), which precedes the reading of a Torah portion, Ingber introduces an idea, or personal challenge, and invites those for whom it resonates to come up for the blessing.

"Invite the Torah to say to you, 'Please find the places in your life that you have yet to disclose, the places where privilege acts as a block to more meaningful participation in the world, to making the world a better place. If this speaks to you and you would like to stand for the first *aliyah* this morning, I invite you to come forward.'

I like the idea that a call to the Torah can be personalized. Ingber offers an *aliyah* for those experiencing loss, for those who have felt barren, for those who have had to make a sacrifice. He dramatizes how current the Torah can be.

His choice of prayer book also underscores an insistence on relevance. Romemu's *machzor* (holiday prayer book) is fatter than any I've ever seen, and far more captivating. I need to mention this volume because it becomes my lifeboat throughout the morning. Without it, I am unmoored. It's something I keep realizing in myself this year: I need the facts in order to feel. The structure of this book provides a running explanation of why each prayer is there and how it connects to Torah or to the liturgy as a whole. Looking up the author's name

after the service, I am surprised to learn the book was compiled by a non-rabbi who was simply captivated by liturgy and eager to open it up for others. Joseph Rosenstein was raised Orthodox and teaches mathematics at Rutgers, my father's alma mater. I'm certain that if every bored Jew held this prayer book, they would never be bored again.



After services, I'm not quite finished with this holiday. It's time to experience a more modern *Tashlich*. I signed up for "Let it Go: A *Tashlich* Walk" near the theater district, conceived by the Lab/Shul, a self-described "Experimental Jewish Community" based in Tribeca, in collaboration with Elastic City, which organizes "participatory walks."

The self-selected group meets up near an open plaza in Hell's Kitchen, and I instantly feel shy among a group of thirty mostly younger strangers. What puts me at ease is our leader, Lab/Shul founder Amichai Lau-Lavie, a kinetic Israeli in jeans and baseball hat, sunglasses hanging on his shirt collar, whose obvious lack of self-consciousness makes me let go of mine. "Welcome, everybody!" he shouts over the city noise. "Let's get started."

We make a circle around the plaza's fountain, which includes four sculptural female figures representing the four seasons, all holding up the globe. Amichai directs us to stand near the season with which we identify most and to introduce ourselves to someone who's chosen the same season. I'm an autumn. I end up chatting with someone named Tony who works at Friends of the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces), an organization that ships supplies and care packages to soldiers in the Israeli army. Tony grew up in New York, and of course we know people in common, because that happens with Jews. He ends up being my buddy for this short *Tashlich* pilgrimage to the water.

We form a loose trail of wandering Jews following behind Amichai on the sidewalks of Hell's Kitchen. He pushes our group to make *Tashlich* urgent: "What are you holding on to?" he asks the group. "I

invite you to find someone and confide what you are shedding today: skin, memories, iPhone apps.”

What should I shed? (Where do I start?) An overconcern with others’ opinions. My obsession with productivity. My inability to hide judgment. Fear of failure. Fear of cancer. Fear of cooking. Bad golf.

We make a stop to “shed” clothing donations at Housing Works (a thrift shop that supports AIDS patients), then pause in front of restaurants with names like “Gossip” and “Perdition”—apt stimuli for atonement. Amichai keeps demanding that we make this ritual real for us, that we don’t cheat the expiation. It’s not working if it’s too easy. We make our way to the 46th Street footbridge that leads to the Hudson River, where we pause in a cluster, a communal confession. People verbally throw out the things they’re discarding today: “Indecision.” “Intolerance.” “Guilt.” I’m tempted to say, “I’m shedding my initial resistance to this event.”

We cross over to the park by the river and Amichai gathers us in a large closing circle, holding hands once more, with the USS *Intrepid* aircraft carrier in view (more echoes of a summer of war). New Yorkers stroll by us, unfazed by the tambourine in Amichai’s hand, the ram’s horn jutting out of his jeans pocket, or our last flying bread-crumbs arcing into the Hudson. I’m struck by the unapologetic visibility of this faith: our big circle, the singing, the shofar, the bread lobs. Observance requires a certain boldness. Maybe today I’ve managed to shed a little of what keeps holding me back.