

Dear Friends,

My heart aches with yours.

When we gathered last Tishrei to usher in 5780, we had no idea how precious it would feel to be together as a prayerful congregation. We took it for granted that the rhythm of shul life—services, classes, meetings, kiddush—could never be interrupted. But COVID-19 doesn't care about the Jewish calendar, the secular calendar, or our social calendars. It has proven to be deadly enough that we have been wise to bend to its whims, not it to ours.

Consider these examples of the unexpected. When we went online in March, we began using PDF documents of our siddurim provided by the Rabbinical Assembly. At the bottom of each page, there's a copyright warning "for March-April 2020 only." If only it was "only!" We had a Yom Ha'atzmaut concert planned, and the booking agent and I thought Hol HaMoed Sukkot was a safe reschedule date. No, that's not happening.

As we learned officially this week, our High Holy Day services—a highlight of the Jewish year for so many of us—are not happening the way we wish they could. We will have a small minyan in the synagogue, with a live-stream option to connect and participate remotely. It won't feel the same, whether we are in the shul or "in the shul." Your clergy will be leading davening and preaching words of Torah under the cover of masks, from behind plexiglass. We will be yards apart from each other. We may barely be able to hear the congregants present singing. We even get guidance on how to sing safely. Since when is singing a safety concern? Since COVID-19.

I have two goals for the High Holy Days of 5781. The first is to make the best of a very bad situation. The second is to get us safely to 5782.

The synagogue leadership—myself included—believes that the plan in place gives us the best chance to meet my second goal while maintaining the integrity of Jewish prayer and Shabbat/Yom Tov while being as inclusive as possible. To return to my mantra borrowed from the movie *Argo*, "it's the best bad idea we have." Again, my heart aches with yours.

So how can we make the best of this High Holy Day season? I believe that we have an opportunity to reimagine Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in our personal and spiritual lives. For months now, we have transformed our homes into new sacred spaces, finding a regular place to set up our device, or from which to call in to pray, learn, or connect. We have opened books and studied on our own, or with family members, without relying on a master teacher. This is empowerment.

In the days leading up to the New Year, we will be providing rich resources to help you navigate these unusual days. One format will be somewhat traditional. The Cantor and choir will pre-record several passages from their beautiful repertoire, so you can hear the familiar sounds of our services. We will have several online sessions in the days before Rosh Hashanah, and more again before Yom Kippur. The other format will provide you with tools to bring special spiritual meaning to your tables at meals, and to be able to pray on your own. I encourage you to take advantage of these offerings, which will be on our website.

I'd also encourage you to seek out and connect with each other on Yom Tov. That might mean gathering in one another's back yards or some other safe place. Bring a mahzor, and pray together. You

don't need to be an expert davener to lead a service. We will provide templates for home worship and put them on our website. If you can safely gather 10 adult Jews and make a minyan, great. It can be concurrent with our live-stream, or at a different time. Let us know if you want to host one of these gatherings, or if you would like to know who has space. We will help make matches. Indeed, there are ways to make this special, and we are committed to helping you do so.

Again, my heart aches with yours. Never in my worst dreams did I anticipate High Holy Days like these approaching days. But from the moment we began sheltering in place, we searched for ways to connect, to maintain a semblance of normality. We never ceased being a congregation, thanks to devoted congregant leaders. Cantor Zim and I were not trained for this, but we are adapting and learning as we go, going on six months. Forgive us when we fall short of expectations. Perhaps these days there can be no normal expectations anyway.

I have never accepted the idea of a COVID-19 "new normal." It's not normal, nor do I believe it is permanent. It is *She'at Hadehak*, a temporary emergency. The act of balancing the needs of the hour with the integrity of our millennia-long tradition is the most difficult challenge of my rabbinate. But my faith in God and in the human capacity for resiliency sustain me. Right now, my heart aches with yours. Someday soon, our hearts will rejoice together.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Wise