

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777: Of Travellers and Pilgrims

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Goldie Cohen, an elderly Jewish lady from New York, goes to her travel agent. "I want to go to India."

"Mrs. Cohen, why India? It's a schlep!"

"I want to go to India."

"But it's a long journey, and those trains, how will you manage? What will you eat? The food is too hot and spicy for you. You can't drink the water. Why torture yourself?"

"I want to go to India."

The necessary arrangements are made, and off she goes. She arrives in India and, undeterred by the noise, smell and crowds, makes her way to an ashram. There she joins the seemingly never-ending queue of people waiting for an audience with the guru. An aide tells her that it will take at least three days of standing in line to see the guru.

"That's OK," Goldie says.

Eventually she reaches the hallowed portals. There she is told firmly that she can only say three words.

"Fine," she says.

She is ushered into the inner sanctum where the wise guru is seated, ready to bestow spiritual blessings upon eager initiates. Just before she reaches the holy of holies she is once again reminded: "Remember, just three words."

Unlike the other devotees, she does not prostrate at his feet. She stands directly in front of him, crosses her arms over her chest, fixes her gaze on his, and says: "Sheldon, come home."

There are many reasons to travel. Goldie had her reasons. Sheldon, I'm sure, had his own. When I took my children with me to Israel this past summer, I did so in hopes of broadening their horizons, giving them the gift that my parents gave me of seeing different places in the world. Reporter Andrew Solomon says it well:

After my husband and I had children, we began taking them with us on trips as soon as they learned to walk, because we wanted them to have a sense of the world as a large and varied place overflowing with possibilities...ⁱ

Once, he recounts, "[a] New York cabbie announced to us that he came from Senegal, caught the eye of then five-year old George in the rearview mirror, and said, "I'll bet you don't know where that is, little boy." George said, "South of Mauritania, next to Mali and Guinea." The driver nearly crashed the taxi."ⁱⁱ

And so it was that we landed at Ben Gurion at the beginning of the July. As we walked off the plane and down the ramp towards customs, I pointed out the big window for their first glimpse of the Promised Land. Alice, my six-year-old, saw the palm trees, and declared: "It's just like Florida. But with Hebrew!" It let me see the whole country with new eyes.

There are many reasons to travel. Almost always, we think of it in positive terms: what we learn, who we meet, how we grow.

That is why I was so surprised, in the middle of my studies at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, to find a text that was negative about travel. Let me share it with you, and we will unpack it together. It's a passage from the Talmud, describing the prayer that the high priest would say when leaving the Holy of Holies – this one not in India, but in the Jerusalem Temple, on Yom Kippur:

AND HE UTTERED A SHORT PRAYER IN THE OUTER HOUSE: What did he pray? ..."May it be Your will, Eternal our God, that this year be full of heavy rains and hot." But is a hot year an advantage? Rather: "If it be a hot one, let it be rich in rain." [Some say the prayer concluded like this:] "May there not depart a ruler from the house of Judah, and may Israelites not need to support one another, and may the prayers of travellers not find entrance before You."ⁱⁱⁱ

Now for the unpacking. *If the year is hot, may it be rich in rain.* Environmental sustainability: check. *May there not depart a ruler from the house of Judah.* Political stability: check. *May Israelites not need to support one another.* Financial security: check. *And may the prayers of travellers not find entrance before You.* What?

The Talmud, anticipating our question, gives an answer by way of an example:

Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa was walking along a road when rain came down upon him. He said: 'Ruler of the Universe! All the world is at ease, and I am in distress!' The rain stopped. As he came home, he said: 'Ruler of the Universe! All the world is in distress, and I am at ease!' The rain came again. Rabbi Joseph said: Of what use is the prayer of the high priest against Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa!

Allow me to explain the explanation. Hanina ben Dosa was a wonder worker, a rabbi from the first century who was known for his righteousness, and the efficacy of his prayers. Usually he would use them for others. But in this instance, Hanina is travelling. He is on the road, and it's raining. Hanina complains to God, and God stops the rain. Then, when he gets back home, he asks God to start the rain again, and God does.

A side note to wedding couples here- I, alas, am not Hanina ben Dosa. I have no control over the weather, despite it being the request I most often receive.

Here is the critical piece: Hanina knows that by stopping the rain for his own comfort, he is causing the world to suffer. But he does it anyway. And his power is such that even the high priest is stymied: "Of what use is the prayer of the high priest against Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa!"?

This, perhaps, is the more negative side of travel. It's all about me. *My* experience, *my* itinerary, *my* adventure. As Hanina might put it, God forbid anything should interfere with my plans.

Many of us come to synagogue on these days as travellers, somewhat curious and somewhat removed, wondering, "what's in it for me." But this is no ordinary journey on which we embark together tonight. Unlike Hanina ben Dosa's, it is decidedly un-individual. We are not going about our regular routine, and we are not marking the New Year by meditating, alone in our homes. I want to recognize that that in itself is a choice. Author Jay Michaelson wrote a widely-circulated piece in the Forward entitled, "Why You Shouldn't Go to Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah This Year." He summarizes the experience of the holidays as "Dress nice. Be infantilized. Write a check," and suggests that instead you learn to play the shofar, and "interpret it as you wish." ^{iv}

As you can imagine, this ruffled a few feathers among rabbis. We will read one response together on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, but for now, let me share these words from JoJo Schwartz Jacobson, a liberal Jewish rebbetzin, who wrote:

... It's not a big deal to ditch services, sadly. You can find a bunch of excuses, and you can easily stay home and live in your own isolated world. If you're an adult, no one will force you to go to services against your will. You can even push back against the loving guilt of family members by claiming an article online said it was okay to stay home this year.^v

So maybe you are here because of loving guilt – the guilt you inflicted, or the guilt you received. Maybe you are here because this is just what you've always done, so what you will always do. These are all essentially individual reasons, or familial at most; the weight of habit, or nostalgia, or tradition. The traveller who says, I'll make this trip, but don't let it rain on me. Don't make it worse than it has to be. Just let me get through it, and let me go back to my home in peace.

But this is how we spend much of our lives, Jacobson says, focused only on our own concerns. We filter our Facebook feeds to hear only from those who think like us. We individualize everything to an extreme, from who we will date to how we have our salads. From this perspective, "Deciding to opt out of a communal experience of a holiday in favor of another isolated little bubble isn't exactly revolutionary."

How-ever and why-ever you come here, it means something that you came, that you have opted in. But there's a way of thinking about being here that I think can make a difference, that can help us see this journey with new eyes.

Are you ready? Here's the secret. It's not a trip. It's a pilgrimage.

Old school, I know. You hear the word and you think of the Pilgrims arriving on the Mayflower, or Catholics climbing the steps of the Oratory on their knees, or Muslims making the Hajj to Mecca.^{vi} Not exactly Jewish images (though, for the record, the Hebrew word for holiday, chag, is closely related to the Arabic word, hajj). Sheldon, going to India, may have been on a pilgrimage of his own – though one wonders whether he needed to go quite so far.

We do have pilgrimage holidays in Judaism: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot to be exact. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur aren't, technically, among them. But in our times, when there is no Jerusalem Temple to which to bring our harvest, these are the days when we gather. We make our pilgrimage here, to 4100 Sherbrooke Street West. Reform synagogues call themselves Temples intentionally; it is an assertion that our religious practice, here in the diaspora, can be just as holy as the sacrifices in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. And when do we make our pilgrimage? Now. The High Holy Days. The time when the most Jews go to shul.

So what does a pilgrimage entail?

First, you bring something. The prophets and ancient rabbis said, in lieu of sacrifices, we bring our words. We articulate our wrongs and commit to begin anew. The Chasidic masters said, you bring your broken heart, all your vulnerabilities and your hopes. The classical Reformers said, you bring your commitment to a messianic age, to helping make a world of justice and peace. But whatever you bring, you don't come empty-handed. You don't simply sit back and say, what's in it for me.

Second, you expect something. Something is supposed to happen here over these days. Rabbi Larry Hoffman writes: "Pilgrims come because being in this place is part of who they are, a necessary segment in the story of their lives. If they are on a journey, not to *leave* home, but to *come* home to a deeper place in their soul, then they are pilgrims."^{vii} Don't play it cool, Hoffman says, or you will miss the heart of what is happening. Now, as grand as this sounds, not every moment will be exciting. Like any journey, there will be those moments of, "are we there yet?" When that question gets asked in my family, the answer is, "When the car is stopped and I tell you that you can unbuckle, that's how you know you're there." Here, the answer might be, "When you hear the final shofar blast at the end of Yom Kippur, that's how you know you're there." But the deeper answer is, "When you feel it. When your heart softens. When your minds opens. When a thought or a phrase or a piece of music permeates your soul."

Finally, you are part of something. Call it community, call it history, call it God. Hoffman again:

A pilgrimage is an exercise in stretching your memory. If you emerge from the experience richer for it, it will be because you have become more richly human by being more fully Jewish... Memory is partly what you draw from your past and partly what generations yet to come will inherit from you.^{viii}

Or, Rabbi Jordie Gerson, also responding to Michaelson's challenge:

We come together on the High Holidays to remind each other that we're all flawed, all culpable and all, ultimately, capable of great things and tremendous change... We do it with people we love, with people we don't even like and with total strangers, because that's what it means to live in the world.^{ix}

Or, one of very own congregants, Maggie Jacobs:

The sanctuary is full at this time of year, everyone shows up and I have asked myself... why I came to the High Holiday services. The only answer that has satisfied me thus far, is that I think in our heart of hearts, we know we are a people, even if we do not always

act that way. We know it intuitively, with or without a faith in God... [w]e know it... by sitting still, thinking about our actions, gathering as families, and looking to the new year with hope, [trusting] in the power of our heritage...^x

Bring something. Expect something. Be part of something. Be a pilgrim, and come home.

Shanah tovah u'metuka – may it be a sweet, healthy, and meaningful year for us all.

ⁱ Andrew Solomon, *Far and Away* (New York, 2016), p.42.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 53b.

^{iv} Jay Michaelson, "Why You Shouldn't Go To Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah This Year." *The Forward*, Sept. 15, 2016. <http://forward.com/opinion/349500/why-you-shouldnt-go-to-synagogue-on-rosh-hashanah-this-year/?attribution=author-article-listing-2-headline>.

^v Jojo Jacobson, "Before You Ditch Shul on Rosh Hashanah, Read This." *Jewschool*, Sept. 21, 2016. <https://jewschool.com/2016/09/77503/ditch-shul-rosh-hashanah-read/>.

^{vi} This sermon was partially shaped by a series of articles in *The New York Times* in September, 2016 by Daa Hadid, a reporter who made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

^{vii} Lawrence Hoffman, *Israel: A Spiritual Travel Guide*, 2nd ed. (Woodstock, VT, 2008), p.30.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.54.

^{ix} Jordie Gerson, "Five Reasons You Should Stop Kvetching and Go To Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah." *The Forward*, Sept. 21, 2016. <http://forward.com/opinion/350434/5-reasons-you-should-stop-kvetching-and-go-to-synagogue-on-rosh-hashanah/>.

^x D'var Torah on Nitzavim 5776, shared with permission.