

What Brings Us Here Tonight?

Shanah Tovah friends. I have been thinking about this evening for a very long time. It has been two years since the last time we had people in our sanctuary for the High Holy Days and so you can understand how thrilled I am that we get to reunite with one another. We have our new beautiful ark on the bima. We have a new A/V system and wall hangings. We have each other. Tonight may not completely resemble Erev Rosh Hashanah from years past, but it is certainly a lot better than last year when all of us were home and this sacred space was empty.

There is so much about tonight that fills my cup and brings me joy aside from being together with everyone. I love chanting our ancient prayers, listening to the music (especially Sam Sinai's cello), seeing families together, and sharing the bima with Andrea. Naturally, I wonder: what brings *you* to Erev Rosh Hashanah services. Why are you sitting here in person or tuning in and joining from abroad?

There might be several compelling reasons why you are where you are right now, but try to find the one that outweighs the others. I actually want all of us to try and answer this question. Go ahead and share for the next minute. If you are joining us via Zoom, write your answer in the chat box. For those sitting in the sanctuary, turn to your neighbor and share your thoughts.

If this was a regular Friday Shabbat service I would ask a number of you to share the responses you just heard. Instead, we are going to play a version of Family Feud. Remember that gameshow? Two family teams each compete to win cash by offering answers to survey questions that were previously posed to a group of 100 people. If we were to play this game right now with the question I asked you, what do you think would be the top response?

In the spirit of Family Feud I am going to list my top five answers to the question, "What brings us here tonight?"

Number five: We want to praise and extoll God's name. Let me guess, this isn't on your list. Yet, if you think about it, nearly all of the prayers we recite, in Hebrew or English, do just that. If we are not singing how great and magnificent God is, then we are asking God to hear our prayers and judge us with mercy. Rosh Hashanah is all about God. Shavuot is about the giving of Torah, Passover and sukkot remind us of our Jewish narrative, and tonight is about *avinu malkeinu*, our Creator who is in charge of it all.

In a recent [This American Life](#) episode¹, host Ira Glass says, "I started looking in the prayer book on the side of the page with the English translation of the prayers, which I hadn't done in years. And I really was struck at how many of them—the Amidah, the Ashrei, are about praising God at length. That's what the words mean, even the Kaddish, which you say over and over during services...It goes on and on. And the words basically are, 'May His great name be exalted and sanctified, blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded, be the name of the Holy One.' ... It's basically God is great, over and over...And it really hit me, sitting there. What does God get out of that? Why does he want us sitting down and telling him how great he is for 45 minutes a day? Is he that needy? If some parent demanded that of their kids-- OK, I want you to praise me for 45 minutes a day, every single day of your life, we would know they were nuts." I have to admit, sometimes I wonder the same thing.

If a martian landed here right now and observed us, I bet they would think that extolling God is the reason that led us to join together. But I have a gut feeling that we would disagree with their assumption.

Number four: It's a mitzvah. We are commanded to observe this sacred day in community. We read in Leviticus, "In the seventh month on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to the Lord".² Later in Numbers we get

¹ (Ep. 741, "The Weight of Words") <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/741/transcript>

² Leviticus 23:24-25

pretty much the same command. In other words, we are commanded to hear the shofar, rest, abstain from work, and worship God.

There are hundreds of mitzvot to follow and each of us makes choices as to which ones we want to observe. If we were in a more traditional community, I could imagine that showing up to shul on Rosh Hashanah because we are commanded to hear the shofar and words of Torah, would be the primary reason. After all, our tradition teaches that the more mitzvot one follows, the better. *Mitzvah goreret mitvah*, one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah. But we're not an orthodox community. Nevertheless, the mitzvot still infuse meaning into our lives and yet we appreciate the autonomy we have in deciding which ones to follow. I suspect showing up tonight because God commands us to is also not at the top of many of our lists, but it's still probably higher than the last one. Regardless, I hope that the mitzvah of showing up will lead us to more mitzvot in the days to come.

Number three: Guilt. Yes, this force is strong in Jewish families. If you are present tonight because you were guilted into it, you would not be the first or the last. I have heard that guilt is a Jewish mother's secret weapon. Can I get an amen!

Number two: Tradition. This is just what we do. Whether we are commanded to congregate and say these words or not, this is what we have been doing for countless generations. My parents go to shul on Rosh Hashanah, their parents went to shul, and so on since this whole custom began when Ezra the priest read the Torah to the whole community as stated in the Book of Nehemiah. For some of us this most holy day is less about religion and more about culture. Attending services is part of our yearly routine. Skipping shabbat once in a while or even a minor holiday like Purim might not bother us too much, but forgetting about the High Holy Days? Not so fast. I imagine this reason would get a lot of votes if we tallied them up. Tradition is a pretty powerful force. Maybe even as strong as Jewish guilt. Often, we follow a tradition for no other reason than it is tradition.

One day a newly married couple was getting ready to have the family over for Erev Rosh Hashanah dinner. While in the kitchen, the husband watched

his wife prepare a pot roast and became confused when she cut an inch off from both ends of the roast before putting it into the oven. When he asked why, she answered, "That's how you are supposed to cook it on the holiday." Not satisfied with this answer he pressed further until she said she learned to do it this way from her mother. A while later the mother arrives and the man asks his mother-in-law why she cuts off an inch from each end of the pot roast. She answers, "That's how you cook pot roast." He presses further until his mother-in-law says she learned to do it that way from her mother. The bride's grandmother finally arrives and the husband can't take it anymore so he asks the grandmother the same question because he can't figure out why cutting off good meat is a requirement for cooking a pot roast on Erev Rosh Hashanah. She laughs and says, "We used to be very poor and didn't own a lot of cookware. I cut the ends off so the meat would fit into my only pan!"

Traditions can be so ingrained in us that we don't even think about why we're following them. The *yamim noraim* come around and we go. It's like flying south for the winter. It's automatic.

And the number one reason for showing up tonight is: to be in community. We want to feel connected to one another. We want to see each other. It has been such a challenging time since March 2020 and we crave connection. By nature, humans are social beings. And Jews, as much as any other group on the planet, live in community with others.

We all know that being social and having direct person-to-person contact can have positive physiological effects on our lives and overall health. In her book, The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier and Happier, developmental psychologist, Susan Pinker writes:

"Face-to-face contact releases a whole cascade of neurotransmitters and, like a vaccine, they protect you now, in the present, and well into the future, so simply [...] shaking hands, giving somebody a high-five is enough to release oxytocin, which increases your level of trust, and it lowers your corti-

sol levels, so it lowers your stress.”³ Simply being around others, even connecting via Zoom, may help our bodies generate dopamine which just might make us feel better overall.

Coming to shul, whether in person or virtually, may not be consciously motivated by these internal chemical processes, but somewhere deep with us, we know that when we are around others we are happier. We are hard-wired to be together. Compound this with the past year and a half of relative isolation, masking, and social distancing, and we have our number one reason for showing up tonight, regardless if we know it or not. Our souls crave connection.

Don't get me wrong, the desire to be in community is not more important than performing mitzvot, praising God or following a tradition, but right now, it most certainly is the balm so many of us needed. I know I certainly did.

Whatever reason led you here tonight, even if it is Jewish guilt, I welcome you and I am so grateful that you have joined us. I hope that you feel connected to your Beth Israel family and community and that this feeling brings you much needed joy, comfort, and peace. Shanah Tovah

³ Pinker, Susan. “NPR TED Radio Hour: Susan Pinker: What Makes Social Connection So Vital To Our Well-Being?” 24 Apr. 2020.