

Rosh Hashanah 5781: Day 2

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I know it's not Yom Kippur yet, but I have a confession to make.

To set the scene, you have to understand that the High Holy Days for rabbis are like tax season for accountants. I can't tell you how many times I've told my kids over the past weeks that anything they want to ask me, they need to ask me after the holidays – so much so that Alice, ten years old, said to me the other day: “Mama, if I ask you what's for dinner tonight, you're going to tell me to ask you after the holidays.” She wasn't wrong.

But this year – well, this year, we rabbis started sweating the High Holy Days right after Pesach, when we realized that come September, we might still be on Zoom. And livestreaming. And all the other platforms and forms of technology and communication that they didn't teach us in rabbinical school. And as the summer unfolded, great conversations took place between rabbis and cantors of all different denominations and all around the world. We have helped each other and supported each other in countless ways. There has also been a wee bit of competition. Who booked a drive-in movie theatre for their services? Who distributed nicer looking gift bags? Whose volunteers baked 600 honey cakes (ok, that last one was us)?

So, when an article appeared in my Facebook feed by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, titled “Synagogue awards for creative worship on the High Holy Days,”ⁱ I read it right away. And I have to tell you, I died a little bit inside. An LA synagogue engaged Rachel Brosnahan to preach about the binding of Isaac, in full character as Midge Maisel? A synagogue in Portland managed to share a video of the late Kirk Douglas, inspiring kids to continue their Jewish education? In New York City, my old stomping grounds, one of the synagogues managed to get Lin-Manuel Miranda of Hamilton fame to do a hip-hop version of Yom Kippur?!

I am sorry to tell you that even up to this point in the article, I didn't realize it was a spoof. No. I wanted to know *which* New York synagogue managed to pull this off,

and why don't I work there. I mean, I love you all, but Lin-Manuel Miranda?! Sure, I didn't get to see Hamilton until it appeared on Disney Plus and we, like many other families, had totally exhausted the age-appropriate shows on Netflix, but I'm now a big fan.

My envy – and my gullibility – only grew when I read that that this New York synagogue managed to get not just Lin-Manuel Miranda, but singer and actor Jonathan Groff to play God, with modified lyrics. At this point I was at least comforted by realizing we have a great tenor too, and I could borrow the idea. Take it away, Joe:

(Joseph Kaiser sings)

*You'll be back, wait and see,
I can't wait 'til you return to Me.
You have sinned, that's OK,
I will wait until your dying day
Empires rise, empires fall,
We have seen each other through it all,
And when push comes to shove,
I will send pestilence and plagues and pogroms and all that Unetaneh Tokef stuff
To remind you of My love.*

Take that, New York synagogue!

It was only when I came to the next paragraph of the article, describing a synagogue in Ohio that was organizing a *tekiah gedolah* shofar face-off between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, that I realized I'd been had.

So yes, I am guilty of gullibility. But I think that envy is the worse sin.

Rabbi Elazar Ha-Kappar said: Envy, lust and [the desire for] honour remove a person from the world.ⁱⁱ And Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch said, "A person who has a good heart is one in whom envy, jealousy and hate can gain no access."ⁱⁱⁱ

Spanning fourteen centuries of Jewish history, these two sages agree: envy is not a good thing.

There is a Jewish school of thought called Mussar which some of you have been studying with me for the past two years, and are continuing this year. Mussar is Jewish character development; it challenges each of us to figure out the ways in which we need to change and grow. Maybe I'm too quick to judgment, or I get angry too easily, or I procrastinate too much. But Mussar also teaches that every character trait has both a positive and negative side. Humility, for instance. It's possible to struggle with arrogance – “My synagogue is the best synagogue, we should have Lin-Manuel Miranda and nobody else” – and it's also possible to be too humble – “Why should I even try? Even if we got Lin-Manuel Miranda, no one would show up.” Or judgement – too much looks like this: “I saw my neighbor not social distancing in their back yard, I'm calling the police” – and too little looks like this: “Why should I care if someone else wears a mask? We can all decide for ourselves.” The challenge is in figuring out the balance. By this way of thinking, envy, too, has a good side.

The sages of the Talmud called this positive aspect “the envy of the scribes,” *kinat sofrim*.^{iv} *Kinat sofrim* describes a situation in which someone is inspired to be better by someone else's excellence. So, bad envy is that feeling that eats at you when you see your friend on Facebook succeeding with their sourdough starter or their tomato garden or their award-winning High Holy Day creativity, while you call a day a success if everyone in your household is in one piece at the end. But good envy is when you see what someone else is doing and it doesn't lead you to hope that their bread doesn't rise or their tomatoes are eaten by squirrels or Jonathan Groff's voice cracks in the middle of the song. Rather, it leads you to ask yourself: how can I be my very best?

Which of course, is the question posed by Rosh Hashanah.

But here's the thing. This year especially, I want to ask us to go a little easy on ourselves. Strive for greatness, yes; try to channel your weaknesses into strengths. But also recognize that most of us, most days, are doing the very best we can.

Israeli author Meir Shalev, in a brilliant book called *Beginnings*, reflects on the tenth commandment. I'll spare you the pop quiz – the tenth commandment tells us not to

covet. Not to envy what is not yours. Shalev rightly points out that this is the only commandment which deals with thought rather than action. “It’s strange,” he writes:

In general, the authorities are only interested in prohibited actions, statements, or plans. Even dictators and inquisitors are not able to supervise what is in one’s heart... Can it be that “You shall not covet” is the zenith of totalitarianism, an example of a theocracy so dark that it seeks to oversee thought as well? I don’t think so. Such an outlook requires not only wickedness but stupidity, and it’s hard to impute those qualities to the biblical lawgiver.^v

Rather, he suggests, this last commandment helps us understand that we will never get it fully right. “Everyone fails the last commandment,” Shalev insists. “[T]he biblical lawgiver made sure that no Jew would ever get a perfect ten in the test of the commandments. Nine is the highest score on the Jewish report card.”^{vi}

So, I didn’t get you Lin-Manuel Miranda. I’m sorry. As far as God is concerned, putting off my daughter’s questions is probably the bigger sin. We’ve all fallen short one way or another over this past year, and especially the past six months; we can always aspire to more. But nine out of ten isn’t bad. Please join me in saying: Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, “Synagogue awards for creative worship on the High Holy Days,” *Religion News Service*, Sept. 9, 2020. <https://religionnews.com/2020/09/09/high-holy-days-pandemic-synagogues-judaism/>.

ⁱⁱ Pirkei Avot 4:21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Commentary to Pirkei Avot, cited in Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind* (Boston, 2014), p.126.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 21a.

^v Meir Shalev, *Beginnings* (New York, 2011), pp. 293-94.

^{vi} Ibid.