

ROSH HASHANAH 2019 / 5780 MESSAGE

Is the earth orbiting more quickly, time passing us by at an ever more rapid pace? Or is it just a perception we are left with by the seemingly increasing rate of change in the world around us? Certainly it feels as though we are living through some of the most rapid developments in human history. Compared with even ten or twenty years ago, our experience is so fundamentally different in terms of our technology, our politics and our understanding of the world around us including the real and tangible threat of climate change. The pace can be disorientating.

Judaism's hardwired for change. This year we've seen change due to the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the increasing influence of global technology companies. Important elements of our lives are augmented by computerised helpers. We may feel controlled by what our phones and computers indicate that we should be doing at any given moment.

The task for this coming year is to reaffirm the *mitzvot*, values and actions which are important to us when there is so much to draw our attention away from them. We've had enormous changes before - industrialisation, immigrations, world wars and we have kept Judaism vibrant and relevant. This is not a coincidence - Judaism is built exactly to adapt to changing situations. We've morphed from tribe to nation, from scattered to independent State, from priesthood to rabbis. There's no question in my mind as to our capacity to embrace what is good about new technologies and to use our Judaism to challenge and adapt ourselves in response to opportunities evoking a vast mixture of emotions.

The High Holiday period offers us the moment in time to step away from the pressures of this rapidly moving world and focus back on these questions of what really matters to us. We must account for ourselves - take responsibility back - and plan ahead for a year where we remain true to the values we reflect on at this moment. It's our annual reboot which refreshes our identity, our memories, our capacities and our plans.

When the Enlightenment arrived a couple of centuries ago, it also raised questions of how to maintain the connection between Jews and the values behind our practices. One response to this challenge was the *Mussar* (ethics) movement - one which focussed on moral and ethical underpinnings of a Jewish life. Some have seen the revival of this focus on values and ethics as an answer to our own modern context. Perhaps we do indeed need an updating of *Pirkei Avot* - the Ethics of our Fathers - for ourselves today. Maybe even a *Pirkei Imahot* - the Ethics of our Mothers; to add the voices that were not heard in the past, that we need more and

more today. I want to suggest three foundational values for us as we enter 5780 and beyond.

The first value is *Arevut - Kol Yisrael Aravim zeh b'zeh* - all of us are *arevim* for each other. This does not just mean that we are "responsible" for one another, but much more. We must be each other's "guarantors". Within our community, we not only have a stake in the success of one another, but our behaviour guarantees the behaviour of others, setting a constant example. Within the Reform Judaism community, we take this commitment to each other seriously at all stages of life. For the older members of our communities, we have focussed on tackling the crisis of loneliness - which harms the quality of life and health of so many - through our Communities that Care initiatives. For the youngest members of our communities, we have ensured the maximum number of young people can gain positive Jewish experiences through our youth movement RSY-Netzer. Approximately one-fifth of the young people engaged with RSY-Netzer would not be able to participate because of physical disabilities, welfare needs or mental health challenges were it not for the specific support our professional welfare structures can provide.

The second value we should focus on is *chachnasat orchim* - welcoming and hosting others. When it seems in person connections between people are being severed in favour of a digital life, forming in person bonds through hospitality becomes ever more important. Up and down the country, Reform Jewish communities are hosting Friday night dinners, lunches and events in homes - showing how real Judaism lives in the whole world, not just inside the confines of the synagogue. We must not just welcome each other, though. At a time where our concerns about anti-Semitism remain significant, the correct response to our feelings of vulnerability is *davka*, particularly, to open the door and show the world what our community is really all about. Our synagogues welcome in countless school visits every year, letting children and teachers experience our community first-hand, not to mention the amazing interfaith projects so many Reform synagogues are creating with our neighbours. We extend our support to those in need of safety, with Reform Jews being some of the loudest voices in support of refugees in recent years.

The final value which seems so critical right now is the correct use of our power of speech, of avoiding *lashon ha'ra* - negative and hateful speech. Right now, social media has provided the platform for anonymous hate to spread at turbo-charged virus pace. Individuals feel emboldened to say things they would never say in person. When you're surprised, shocked by the language try asking one simple question: "*would you say it to my face?*" Even more importantly, we must face up to those who feel emboldened to bring such hateful speech into our societal discourse - especially when those people are in positions of power and use those

positions to amplify hatred, rather than do good. We must not enter the fray of division and intolerance which has spread, sometimes with violent consequences. Reform Judaism will continue to set high standards for engaging respectfully, responding constructively and calling out hate wherever we see it. Within our communities, the value of constructive engagement is a value which is alive and real; perceptible to any person entering the doors.

The precious period of time around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur gives us a rare chance to pause the rapid pace of our lives and take back control for ourselves. We must identify the values which matter to us, and ensure we are reminded of those every day. The judgement our liturgy discusses is as much about whether we take responsibility for ourselves and not get swept away by life, as it is the specifics of what we may do. May the coming year be one of intention and thoughtfulness, where we write the story of our lives with deliberation. May we all as Reform Jews bring to life the values we all hold dear.

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