

## Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - Return to Community 5783

Two old friends meet in synagogue on Rosh Hashanah after not seeing other in person because of Covid for almost three years. One says to the other, “Cohen, you changed so much over the last few years! Look at you: You lost weight, you don’t have wrinkles anymore, and you got a hair transplant. I wouldn't have known it’s you!” The other guy says, “I’m not Cohen.” The first guy says, “Look at that, you even changed your name!”

Much has happened over the last three years. Two High Holidays ago none of us could meet in person. Last year we had significant restrictions. And finally, we are back together in our synagogue completely open. And we have had daily in-person services twice a day for over a year now. But we are not yet fully recovered to where we were in 2019. Jewish communal life has suffered universally from Covid-19 along with humankind. In some cases, there was an astonishing loss of people from the virus. One of my colleagues told me that his synagogue lost about 10 members to Covid-19 early in the pandemic. Our community and synagogue worked very hard over the last two and half years to remain physically healthy and succeeded. But it came at the cost of the loss of some community which we also worked very hard to maintain. Through phone calls, online services, zoom programming and chesed activities we stayed together over the past 2 years. We knew that online services and programming were needed to save lives and the synagogue. But we always said that they could not supplant in-person activities. Online is second best. Synagogues across the world are now trying to bring members back into their physical building. But thank God we have managed to do well despite the challenges. I saw the impact of Covid -19 on synagogues in my travels this summer from Jerusalem, to London, to New York. The vast majority have seen a significant drop in physical attendance. We are, for example, one of the few congregations in the world with a daily

egalitarian minyan that has managed to bring it back in person thus guaranteeing our future vitality. But it has been no small feat. I am very proud of our synagogue for what we have been able to accomplish.

Now that we have reached this stage of the pandemic and the world has begun to open, it is very important for us to strengthen our community by returning to in-person activities and services. We are in a time of return. Our beautiful new white Torah covers, and new white ark curtain remind us of that fact. The white that we see all around us on the High Holidays reflects a return to a clean slate. The Rambam states in the Mishna Torah that the blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah has deep meaning, as if saying, Awake, Awake, Return, Return, and remember your Creator. We are returning to a new calendar year from an agricultural perspective. Since this time period traditionally marks a new harvest season in Israel, we celebrate the High Holidays now. And Rosh Hashanah has taken on new concepts of renewal. As Jonathan Berkowitz and Jean Gerber wrote in one of their pieces on the High Holidays found on our website “Rosh Hashanah is a sort of “do-over.” It is an opportunity for renewal, for the Jewish people to gather to reaffirm God’s kingship, covenant, and revelation at Mount Sinai.” The High Holidays are a time for teshuva which means repentance and return. Repentance in Hebrew comes from the word for return because through our repentance we return to a clean slate.

We need to return to our community to help us and it. A Minyan occurs with a group of people because there is spiritual strength in numbers. Large groups of people praying together not only give us a chance to develop needed social community, but a chance to inspire and be inspired by others spiritually. The Shulchan Aruch teaches us that if we are within a short distance to a minyan that is where we should do our daily prayer. The rabbinic principle of Kol Yisrael Aravamim Ze Le Ze, all Jews are mixed together, means that when Jews gather as a

spiritual community, they can help each other in communicating with God. What we put in is what we receive.

I am grateful for the people who have made the extra effort to help our synagogue and community recover from Covid, by coming in- person over this last year. A synagogue building is just an edifice. Synagogue members are its soul. It is important for us to return home, especially since some of our members aged and/or had significant health deterioration during the pandemic. It is too much for them to attend in-person now. This need is not limited to Beth Israel. I was recently trying to encourage a pre-pandemic regular of another Vancouver synagogue to start going back their shul's Shabbat services. Our entire Jewish community is only as strong as all of our institutions.

We need to return home, not just for our synagogue and community but for personal reasons as well. Synagogue give us the Chizuk, the emotional, social, and spiritual strength that we need as human-beings. From the blessings to the kiddush, in-person services are the best way for us to be nourished by our congregation. Congregants support each other in times of need and share in each other's joy. In a recent interview on National Public Radio, Sister Paula Terese Pilon, a Hospice chaplain in Cleveland, Ohio stated, "I think the most important thing I provide...is a ministry of presence. ... being present for somebody says a lot... They just need someone to listen to them and validate their reality and validate their experience." We need to be present with others to hear and to share. In some cases, Covid has amplified preexisting mental health conditions. By strengthening our in-person community we will be a place for these people to return to when they are ready.

One of the reasons that some of us may not be coming to synagogue as often as before is because humans become complacent. It is easier to stay at home. It can be hard to return to the

good habits we once held. There is a common Jewish idea proven repeatedly by the Israelites in their complaints against Moses after being freed from servitude in Egypt and wandering in the desert. It was easier to remove the slave from slavery than it was to remove slavery from the slave. We become used to even the harshest of conditions and can refuse to return or move into a better situation. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "Be not the slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back..., with new power, with an advanced experience." Now is the time to break the inertia to be stronger and better tomorrow.

I understand that many of us are still fearful of Covid -19, for good reason. I was extremely lucky when I had Covid in June. I had a mild cold. But many people are not as lucky. Covid can make even fully vaccinated people very ill, taking weeks to months to recover. But we go to great length at Beth Israel to ensure the comfort and safety of all who attend services. We are almost always outside or in the sanctuary and there is plenty of opportunity to sit far away from others. At least 90 percent of the time it is possible to be 20 (not 2 but 20) meters away from the closest person. We have a big synagogue, which we use. While we are not out of the woods medically yet, it is time to begin to emerge from the pandemic of fear. In a recent New York Times article about the eventual end of Covid -19 Dr. Allan Brandt is quoted saying, "many questions about the so-called end (of the epidemic) are determined not by medical and public health data but by sociopolitical processes. Trying to define the end... 'will be a long and difficult process.'" In my travels this past summer I saw that many people see this time period as the end of Covid. While I am not sure that that is true scientifically speaking, I am sure that we need to return home. I was an early proponent of caution, am a fan of vaccines and very well vaccinated myself. But we have hit the tipping point for those of us who are vaccinated and

healthy in which the fear of Covid and its consequential impact are worse than the risks from leaving our homes.

In Talmud Shabbat there is a story about Shimon Bar Yohai who spent 13 years in a cave with his son because of a decree against him by the Roman emperor for teaching Torah during a time of prohibition against Jewish study while Israel was under foreign Roman occupation. While Shimon Bar Yohai and his son were in the cave all their basic needs were looked after by God. They spent every day in Torah study and prayer. When they emerged from the cave they had come to appreciate all that they gained in the cave and the new world they entered.

While we were in our caves over the course of the last 2.5 years many of us engaged in higher pursuits than before. We studied new Torah, watched a service from a different city, or studied something new with scholars from around the world. We appreciate what we have gained. But just as Rabbi Shimon and his son realized it was time to return to the greater community, we must do the same. In Vayikra Rabba it teaches us that after killing his brother, Cain prayed to God and did teshuva. Because he repented the time of his punishment was cut in half. When Adam saw this, he hit himself on the head and said, “Such is the power of Teshuva, return, and I did not know it.” None of us should go through this year of return and hit ourselves on the head saying I could have returned to community, and I did not.

I would like to suggest a number of ways that you can help us return home to BI in 5783. The easiest is to come to services and to programs. Help us make a minyan on a weekday. Come on Shabbat and join us for Kiddush. We are open for business, and everyone is welcome! You are welcome even if you only join us for Aleinu and Kiddush. We just care that you come. Join our committee for rebuilding adult Shabbat services numbers by speaking with Diane Freidman. Or join our committee for increasing Shabbat Youth participation, by speaking with

Rabbi Bluman. Get in involved in one of our many learning or social opportunities. Or become involved in one of our chesed opportunities including the Veggie Club, One Heart program, and soon to be built new Jewish Community Garden. If you are not sure what these are please listen carefully on Yom Kippur morning when I explain them.

In order to prevent the spread of Covid we took important steps. We created bigger spaces for fewer faces. We spread people out, and during the start of Omicron we even stopped Kiddush. It is the opposite of everything we have ever done to build our community. In order to save lives and help people feel comfortable we took actions that contradict best synagogue practice. We paid a price by doing the right thing. I have to admit I never imagined that I would see the day where people are crowded back in airports, but synagogues across the world are still struggling to see a return to their former days. In Talmud Shabbat, Rabbi Eliezer said, “repent one day before your death. His students asked him “does a person know on which day they will die. He answered, all the more reason for him to repent today.” I find this teaching somewhat sad. But the truth is that it is good reminder of the reality of life. We have had too much of what we love stolen away from us over the past few years. Now is the time to reclaim it. And now is the time to do what we can to return before it is too late, not only to be a better and stronger community as we have spoken about today, but for better and stronger relationships and to create a better and stronger world as we will speak about over Yom Kippur. Let us truly defeat Covid - 19 as a synagogue together here in our sacred space as one congregation tighter and closer than we have ever been. Shana Tova