



Sacred Time in the Time of Corona

Usually about this time of year people start asking me about when the High Holydays are falling. Without fail they ask me whether they are early or late this year. Funny thing about the holydays, early or late, they just never seem to be “on time!” We Jews have a unique perspective when it comes to time. We live by two calendars, which reflect two worlds. One calendar is the Gregorian calendar which connects us to our secular pursuits. The beginning of school, paying taxes, secular holidays, birthdays and anniversaries. The other is the Jewish calendar established by Rabbi Hillel around 2,000 years ago. This calendar keeps track of our Jewish lives. Holidays and holy days; Yahrzeits and Yizkor; b’nai mitzvah, weddings, brit milah and Shabbat. As modern-day Jews our struggle is often to reconcile those two calendars. To meet our obligations to our secular every day needs, but to also celebrate our Jewishness.

Of all the holydays it is the High Holydays that seem to reveal this tension more than most. If they fall on a school day or a work day we are forced to choose between observing our faith or attending to secular needs. Whatever decision we make, unless we are totally assimilated, we are mindful that a sacrifice of some kind is made to reconcile the two worlds. Remember when every b’nai mitzvah student talked with pride about the famed pitcher Sandy Koufax who decided not to pitch on Yom Kippur during the World Series? That singular act inspired many a student for a generation.

In the time of Covid it feels like time is measured differently. It feels slower. Each day merging into the next. Birthdays celebrated via zoom while festive to the extent possible are really not the same as in person. The same goes for other events which require in person community to make the celebration a true celebration in time. Technology helps connect us to each other; but time spent together is illusive.

With a measure of resign we understand that the Holydays will be observed virtually this year. Out of an abundance of caution and care for everyone’s well being. And while the decision is sound, I feel a bit saddened that fewer are asking me, “Are the Holydays early or late this year Rabbi?” It is as if they somehow matter less this year. Many have suggested we even eliminate 2020 from the calendar!

I would argue, that the Holydays matter even more this year than ever before. Deprived of our sacred space we are challenged to make our homes into sacred space. Deprived of our ability to congregate physically in great numbers, we will meet that challenge by understanding that in every congregant’s home across the valley we will tune in to services at the same time for the same purpose. We will ritualize our participation in a new way in an effort to embody our old ways.

Time will not pass us by. Nor will we deprive Time of its meaning. Every day is not the same; nor should it be. And whether it is celebrating a bar/bat mitzvah, a bris, a birthday or anniversary we will make special effort to acknowledge these milestones. Not with apology, but with fullness of heart. And when it comes to the High Holy days, we will arrive committed to making the year to come one filled with hope.

Let us measure time not by what we cannot do. But what we are able to do. Let us meet the challenges of this time and not allow time to stand still. Time is a verb. And we, like time, must keep moving forward. Always forward.

Rabbi Sanford Aksehrad

p.s. And for the record, yes, the Holy days will arrive on time this year! The question is, will we be ready?