

## Corona Diary #14: Coping With a Rosh Hashanah Without

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The term “without“ best captures this year’s challenging Rosh Hashanah. Due to health guidelines so many classic features of Rosh Hashanah will be missing this year. Most regrettably, Corona limitations will deeply alter our tefilla format and we are all anxious about this new reality. This will be a Rosh Hashanah "without": we will most likely attend abbreviated services, and daven in small groups with limited family members; in many cases we will daven outside of traditional shuls - while wearing masks! How can we convert this compromised Rosh Hashanah into a deep and, hopefully passionate experience, given the absence of so many classic Rosh Hashanah components? How can a “Rosh Hashanah without” become a memorable Rosh Hashanah?

Here are four recommendations:

### 1. Outside of the Shul but Part of a Broader Reality

Rosh Hashanah doesn’t only mark the Day of Judgement but also the day of Creation- a creation which recurs every year. Waking up on Rosh Hashanah, the world around us may seem familiar, but it has been completely overhauled. Davening outside our human-crafted shuls and in greater proximity with Nature, we should be able to more acutely sense the day of Creation and not just the Day of Judgement. In particular, the Corona pandemic has reminded us of our inseparable connection with Nature as part of G-d's infinite and sweeping creation.

Furthermore, Rosh Hashanah, is a universal experience for all Mankind which is judged and whose fate is determined on this day. Davening outside of our shuls-in the outside world- should make it easier for us to consider the broader connotations of this day. It should be easier to daven on behalf of all humanity during a year in which the entire planet sorely needs our fervent tefillot. Coronating G-d outside of the shul should stoke our dreams of the "final day" and of a redeemed world which will embrace His authority and be completely healed. Typically, as we stand in shuls we

sense allegiance to those who have entered these houses of worship; this year we may also sense our connection to G-d's entire world and the humans who inhabit that world. We are on a journey to make G-d more palpable in this world and the broader setting may heighten our awareness to that broader agenda.

## 2. We Don't Daven Alone

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest disappointments this year, will be our davening in smaller minyan groups without the friends and family members who typically accompany us on our tefilla journey. Tefilla is a communal experience, and the presence of these 'tefilla' communities both frames and enhances our tefillot. However, this year, the absence of these familiar 'tefilla groups' can potentially open our imagination to less obvious tefilla partners.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of memory and we ask G-d to remember national and historical heroes, as well as our own ancestors and their lives. Prior to Rosh Hashanah I visit my ancestor's graves so that their images and past accomplishments become a vivid part of my tefillot. We don't just recall their lives but also ask them to daven on our behalf and perhaps this year we can more easily sense them davening alongside us. If we are unable to daven alongside friends and family, we should more vividly imagine those who are no longer living but who join us in tefilla.

We should also sense another partner in our tefilla- A Divine partner. The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah describes G-d donning a tallit and leading a tefilla of mercy, while Moshe listens and learns how to properly daven. Evidently, G-d Himself davens on our behalf and on behalf of His relationship with His people. As 'alone' as we may feel this year, we are davening alongside of G-d who is as deeply interested in our requests as we are. We may daven in smaller groups but we certainly don't daven alone.

## 3. The Reductive Sound of the Shofar

By blowing a ram's horn we replace our human voices with the bestial cry of an animal. The wails and moans of the shofar sound primitive and primordial; facing the gravitas and grandeur of this day we try to disrobe ourselves of human ego and human artifice while davening in a more

unsophisticated and genuine fashion. The animal cry of the shofar helps us repudiate human conceit and replace it with innocent purity. The past half-year a miniscule virus has stripped away human convention and confidence and currently, the "return to basics" which a shofar triggers, is deeply resonant. Lacking a fully attended shul and davening without a community and our friends, we approach this moment stripped of all pretense. We are now fully in sync with the aim of the shofar !! In many ways we are 'ahead of the game'.

This year, in addition to the shofar, our tefillot will be 'enhanced' by the masks we will all conscientiously wear. These masks muffle our voices but turn our thoughts inward to the whisper of our hearts. If we can't daven loudly perhaps we can better concentrate on our inner voice- an internal sound which can be heard even without loud proclamation. We ask G-d to listen to the murmurs of our hearts which aren't muted by a mask.

#### 4. Less is Sometimes More

Typically, Rosh Hashanah tefillot are lengthy, augmented by memorable sections highlighting the beauty and solemnity of the day. Typically, these segments are sung with familiar and soulful tunes. Extended services often allow for greater concentration and more authentic tefilla. However, shorter tefilla sometimes has an immediacy and a focused energy which lengthy tefilla sometimes dissolves. Though Moshe legendarily davened for forty days without food and sleep, he also was famous for the shortest tefilla on record. His tefilla for his leprosy-stricken sister contained five words – four of which were two letters. During longer tefillot our imaginations wander and we lose concentration, whereas shorter bursts of tefilla sometimes surge with more raging force. Our shorter tefillot will be different, but, potentially, more brisk, determined and desperate.

In 1988 the first intifada broke out and many student-soldiers in my Yeshiva were recalled to the army to help quell protests. My Israeli friends had already served their requisite 16 months of duty and were looking forward to uninterrupted Torah study in yeshiva as well as a relaxing Pesach at home. Being drafted for reserve duty was exasperating and the specter of conducting a Pesach seder in an army camp was dispiriting. My Rebbe, Rav Amital gathered us and described his Shabbat experience in the

concentrations camps. Obviously Shabbat as we know it, didn't exist. Every erev Shabbat, Rav Amital concealed a folded white shirt in his work uniform, and, as the sun set for Shabbat, would scurry away from the work details, don his white shirt and embrace the Shabbat. He chuckled with us that our Shabbat experience was streamed through different features such a food, dress, tefilla, company, and Torah study. By contrast, his entire Shabbat experience was compacted into one tattered white shirt. As Shabbat was more condensed it was experienced more intensely and more passionately. He assured the soldiers that though their Pesach seder in an army camp would be a rushed twenty-minute mini-seder, they would experience Pesach in its condensed form as deeply as he experienced Shabbat during the one minute he donned his shirt.

That story has always taught me that sometimes less is more and hopefully this year my Rosh Hashanah experience will be similar to my Rebbe's "white shirt" Shabbat.

May G-d be With Us  
Shanah Tovah