

New Jewish Rituals

Secular High Holidays Opportunities for Innovative Expression

IF EVER THERE WAS an example of a Jewish oxymoron, it might be “Secular High Holidays.” Yet secular and cultural Jews, in communities small and large, are devising inspiring High Holiday celebrations that are intellectually honest and consistent with our beliefs, and place us squarely on the Jewish continuum. We are learning to recast traditional practices into modern expressions that speak to our secular sensibility. These new observances — still called “services” by some, even if they deny that there is a deity to be served — often begin by affirming a connection both to Jewish tradition and to innovation.

“Our observance, secular and unique,” reads the Los Angeles Sholem Community’s Kol Nidre program, “is a legacy of an ancient custom. Babylonians believed [that] at this time of the year the gods reasserted their dominion over chaos, reviewed past deeds of individuals, settled their fates for the new year. Jews of old adapted the tradition to reckon up the year gone by. In our own, we also pause to take account of ourselves and of the year.”

Formal programs like these appeal to many, but others, who feel constricted by organized communal structures or are simply not liturgically inclined, are nonetheless drawn to mark the High Holiday season in a meaningful way for themselves. For some this means gathering the family together for a special holiday meal. Candles may be lit or

a toast offered, but what counts is being together. Others will turn to nature and make an annual visit to a nearby forest or beach. There they will sit with their own thoughts and derive personal invigoration and renewal from nature’s majestic beauty and awesome power.

One familiar tradition connected to the High Holidays is the association of Rosh Hashanah with the ‘birth’ of the world. We can’t possibly take literally the idea that the universe was created 5,768 years ago, but the idea of a ‘birthday’ for our planet can, in fact, serve to remind us that our own days are fleeting, our lives a mere moment in time to be cherished and filled with renewed purpose and meaning. We also might appreciate, with pride, our longevity as a tiny minority who have clung to our heritage despite all odds. And we might see an occasion to rededicate ourselves to guarding the environment, which has no borders or boundaries between peoples.

Traditionally, on Rosh Hashanah afternoon, Jews have observed the ritual of *tashlikh* by going to a nearby body of water and casting into it crumbs representing their transgressions. Not surprisingly, this ceremony is being reinvigorated by many secular Jewish communities that find a particular resonance in its natural setting. They are creating new readings that speak not only about personal wrongdoings

but of those of society generally. Perhaps an ecological approach could take this a step further: Sometime during the ten-day High Holiday period, we might go to the same body of water, or a nearby park or roadside, and clean up the trash that has accumulated there. This would be a real step towards revitalization and renewal, not just a symbolic one.



The Michigan Workmen’s Circle’s Yom Kippur service asks, “Is this day merely a heritage from the past, or can it have new and relevant meaning for today and from a secular/cultural perspective? For centuries we accepted what our ancestors had bequeathed to us. In time . . . we realized that the traditions of our ancestors were no longer completely in harmony with what was growing and devel-

oping in our own spirits.”

One of the least “harmonious” of those traditions is the idea of “atoning for sin.” The classical High Holiday liturgy is filled with reiterations about how one’s fate for the coming year is held in the balance. Many secular Jews disassociate from High Holiday observance because of this very notion of placating God with contrition and self-denial. Many consider fasting, in particular, to be an archaic ritual that brings unnecessary discomfort.

Others among us do fast. We may believe that fasting enhances introspection and contemplation by suspending the distractions of worldly indulgences. We may take the position that by voluntarily depriving ourselves of food for one day, we learn to be more compassionate towards those who suffer hunger daily. We may simply fast to link to a feeling of virtue and family ties. Whichever path we follow, we can be grateful for the freedom to ponder these decisions and the privilege of doing without nourishment voluntarily, not for lack of food.

We might also find useful a teaching about “sin” that is included in the High Holiday service of Toronto’s Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture. *Khet*, the Hebrew for “sin,” has its origins in archery. It means “missing the target.” *Teshuvah*, or “turning” (*i.e.*, atonement), connotes getting on-target, or refocusing. This is an appealing idea for secular Jews, who see the task of atonement as an internal, psychological struggle and not a confession of broken religious rules and disobedience to a deity they do not believe in.

At The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, we declare that “Humanist Jews see Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as an affirmation of human power and human dignity. The High Holidays are a time to consider the possibilities for change, for improvement, for happiness that we human beings can create ourselves. Acknowledging human courage and independence, we achieve human dignity.”

The Sholem Community reminds us to balance our particularism with our universalism. “Our Jewish identity can be a source of strength. But oneness with a people is perilous unless it is part of allegiance to humanity as a whole, just as oneness with humanity is hollow unless it is rooted in one’s own identity and culture.”

These subjects are very compelling for most secular, cultural Jews. We tend to design High Holiday observances not only for personal introspection, but for consideration of our shared obligation to correct the wrongs of society. This is consistent with the Jewish tradition of collective confession: “We have sinned, we have transgressed,” says the liturgy, not “I have sinned, I have transgressed.”

The biblical book of Jonah, typically read on Yom Kippur, also stands out for its universalist message. It portrays an entire corrupt city, Nineveh, repenting communally of its evil ways. This actually frustrates the prophet, Jonah, who jealously perceives, according to the Midrash, that the non-Jewish city is more “prone to repentance” than Israel. The book ends with an affirmation of Nineveh’s equal humanity, as God scolds his prophet, saying, “Should I not care about . . . that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons . . . and many beasts as well!”

For secular Jews who often feel cut off from much of our religious history, the High Holidays offer an opportunity to make Jewish connections. We may feel, for example, that a chasm separates us from the ancient rabbinic martyrs who were killed by their Roman rulers early in the Common Era, and whose memory is traditionally recalled on Yom Kippur afternoon. Yet the anguish we feel about the destruction of a whole generation of European Jews in the Holocaust is all too real. We have reason to mourn.

Personal losses are also traditionally memorialized at the High Holidays by visiting the cemetery. This practice may originally have been driven by superstitions about the placating of deceased spirits; the traditional *yizkor* memo-

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rial service of Yom Kippur is still shrouded in the kind of superstitious mystery that caused children to be shoed out of the room if their parents were still living, so as not to jinx them.

Today, while we try to protect our children, we know that we cannot insulate them from pain and loss; we stay together as a family in strength and support. At Humanistic services, congregants recite aloud the names of any loved ones they want to memorialize, not just their immediate family. We create modern versions of the *kaddish* that speak about the goodness of life, about hope, about life renewed, not about the goodness of a deity who commands our loyalty even in the face of death.

We make other connections to memory and history through language. Some communities accentuate Yiddish, the *mameloshn* that breathes connections to family and forebears, to the immigrant experience, to social causes, and to the folkways of our people. Others prefer Hebrew sounds and cadences that link to Biblical texts and mod-

ern-day Israel. As the Michigan Workmen's Circle's Rosh Hashanah service notes in a poem, "The Ancient Words," many cannot always understand these languages, but "there is a rhythm to them, a beat, a pulse, I understand, from somewhere very deep inside of me, my heart, my soul."

Nothing strikes chords deep within us more than familiar tones of music that echo over time — especially the sounding of the *shofar*. Many secular congregations and communities have restored the chanting of *Kol Nidre*, the haunting 16th-century song that problematically absolves us of errors of the past year or clears us of pledges we are slated not keep in the year to come. Of course, we can offer up our own alternative 'translations' and poetic renditions of that early passage to make it relevant to our own lives.

In addition to the wealth of Yiddish and Hebrew songs and poems to draw upon, many secular communities welcome songs and poems from our own American lives, including those by Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, Pat Humphries, Holly Near and Paul Simon, along with beautiful pieces composed by our own members.

My own congregation invites personal reflections or essays by our members, which often lead to highly participatory group discussions. We also devote a special portion of our *Kol Nidre* service to a literary presentation that draws from material like Barbara Myerhoff's *Number our Days* and David Leviatin's *Followers of the Trail*. Each in its own way faces themes of the High Holidays and makes connections to our Jewish identity.

For many communities, however, song and literature are not enough. They want also an urgent call to action. The Sholem Community's *Kol Nidre* observance, for example, is infused with the spirit of shaking one's fist at God, or making a prophetic challenge to society. In its enumeration of contemporary issues it has echoes of a political rally or a boisterous union hall meeting. "We are a passionate people," it says, "working for justice, confronting hatred." Yet "somedays we grow weary . . . The cascading horrors tempt us to despair, but together, we reject futility. Together we find sustenance and harvest hope."

Secular, cultural High Holidays? Absolutely. No longer do we have to sit with indifference or ambivalence. Instead, we have an exciting and inspiring way to connect to our Jewish identity with clarity, commitment, and purpose.

Best wishes for a healthy and happy new year! ■