

**Like Branches on a Tree**  
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**Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5782**  
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I remember the first living room concert I attended. It was a year and a half ago, maybe a week into the stay-at-home orders at the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, and Idan Raichel, the famous Israeli musician, was performing on facebook live from his Tel Aviv Apartment. I excitedly settled down on my living room couch with my phone, ready to share the experience via text with friends and family members who were also enthusiastic fans of Raichel's music. When the concert began and I saw Raichel's apartment, and the images of people from around the world who were participating through a special web conferencing stream, I had a surge of emotion. They're going through this too! So far away, in Israel, in Australia, all over the world, they're also stuck at home, and yet, in this time of uncertainty and fear, we're all sharing this moment together, and the comfort of this music.



Being part of something greater than ourselves is a major theme of Rosh Hashanah. Today, we say Hayom Harat Olam, today the world was created. Today, unlike most other Jewish holidays, is not about a milestone in the history of the Jewish people. It's not the time that we were freed from slavery, or given the Torah, or won a

war-- it's the time that all humanity, regardless of religion or nationality, was given, according to our tradition, our shared existence. In a special paragraph in the Amidah prayer, we ask God to manifest Godself to “כל יושבי תבל ארצך”, to “all the inhabitants of Your land.” Today, we are citizens of the world.

In celebrating the world's creation, we celebrate the things that every being on earth has in common-- the air we breathe, the food that sustains us, the very fact of life. These resources are universal, and they tie us together with the rest of creation. One image that our liturgy uses to express this idea is through the image of God as Melekh, or Ruler, and the world as God's realm. While the concept of monarchy may be unappealing to many of us, the idea behind that metaphor may still stand: If the entire world is God's domain, then regardless of whatever human-made boundaries we might erect between people, we are all subject to the same laws of physics, we all share the same resources, and we are connected to each other by inhabiting our shared planet.

The Rosh Hashanah Musaf Amidah devotes an entire section to this idea, the Malkhuyot section. It consists primarily of a list of 10 verses about God as Melekh from all over the bible. Surprisingly, however, the 10th verse, the pinnacle of Malkhuyot, doesn't actually have the word ruler in it. The verse is the Sh'ma: Hear O Israel, ADONAI is our God, ADONAI is one. The people who compiled this prayer clearly felt that the Shema expressed the essence of what God's sovereignty meant for them. In expressing God's oneness, the Sh'ma implies that if God is ruler, then God is ruler over everything. And if that is the case, then the world is united.

This point is further emphasized in another part of the Malkhuyot section of the Amidah which later migrated to the daily service, the Aleinu. In the first paragraph of Aleinu, there is a line “Adonai is God in the heavens and on earth, there is no other.” The entire world and everyone and everything in it, the prayer states, is united by a relationship to God. In Aleinu, the connection between rulership and one-ness is explicit: an essential component of what it means to be part of God’s kingdom isn’t about authority at all-- it is about being part of a connected whole. Just like the limbs of a tree, each distinct yet each part of a whole, all of us who live in this world are deeply connected to each other.

Being interconnected comes with benefits. At its best, being connected to others means we have people to watch out for us, people to call us when we’re sick, visit us when we’re lonely, help us make minyan so we can say kaddish for a loved one-- and that we’ll do the same for them.



It also means that our actions can have meaning that goes beyond ourselves. That is why some of us feel a sense of belonging when lighting Shabbat candles, eating cranberries on Thanksgiving, or voting in an election. Even alone, those actions may help us feel connected to a larger whole.

Connection also brings responsibility. The very next paragraph of Aleinu tells us that as a result of acknowledging God’s oneness, we pray לתקן עולם במלכות שדי, to

establish the whole world as a divine domain. In other words, we want the world to be the kind of place that reflects well on God! And of course, that means it is our job, all of us, by virtue of being those branches on the same tree, to help care for the whole tree, and to look out for each other.

This responsibility can mean so many different things. For one, we all share one planet, which can absorb only a finite amount of carbon in its atmosphere before it becomes uninhabitable by people. When I, or my organization, or my country, chooses not to take steps to cut our emissions, everyone else suffers. For another example, we know very well that we humans share similar immune systems, meaning that we are vulnerable to the same viruses, which when they grow in some of us, can mutate and become stronger and more dangerous to everyone. This dynamic brings to mind a story from the collection Leviticus Rabbah about a group of people on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him: What are you doing?! He replied: What do you care? I'm only drilling under my own seat! They said to him: But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship! Those of us on the ship that is the world are similarly able to help, and to harm, each other through even actions that may appear to be personal decisions. Sharing a planet means that very few actions have consequences that are truly confined to ourselves.

The responsibilities of being connected also extend to recognizing that although we are all connected, we still have very different experiences of the many things that impact us all. Sticking with the tree metaphor, there was a recent book review in the Atlantic magazine of a book by Meg Lowman about the amazing complexity of trees.

She shares that the very shape of a leaf is impacted, not just by its DNA, but also by its position in the forest. So, too,

each of us may experience the very same phenomena differently, depending on a myriad of individual factors. This was true of people's experiences of the pandemic, when supermarket workers and computer



programmers had very different options when it came to staying safe on the job, and when people who were homeless, or in prison, had very different options from people who owned a house, who in turn had a different experience from parents of multiple children living in a small apartment in Manhattan. And rates of illness, and of death, were much higher, as we know, among people of color than among white people. Even as we are all connected, some bear the brunt of different forces much more than others.

Not only did the pandemic impact each of us differently, but even beforehand, being connected to others meant something different for different people. Some of us previously were never able to attend services or other events in person without a great deal of assistance, if at all. Some could not physically sit through services or events due to bad backs or physical injuries or ongoing illnesses. Others are immunocompromised or living with people who are, and even before Covid had to

avoid being in the same room with other people. Still others have childcare obligations or challenges with transportation or hearing impairments that make it difficult to comfortably interact in person. I could go on and on listing reasons why people were not able to be physically present with their communities during pre-pandemic times, and I know that many of you could make that list even longer.

During the past year, for that group of us, something shifted. For those who felt comfortable with computers and had access to the internet, the barriers between them and their communities lifted. Any of us could “go” anywhere in the world to pray, to learn, to socialize, and many of us did. People who hadn’t been to services, or to classes of all sorts, or seen faraway relatives and friends, suddenly were doing these things all the time! Furthermore, Zoom helped us to look out for each other, and to be more supportive and supported. Our shared humanity became all the more shared because of this new way of being present with each other. So while many found the pandemic newly isolating, and zoom to be stressful or tiring, many of us also found that having zoom as a widely available option offered a new link to the wider world.

Now, we have a new challenge. As I stand here today, some of us are physically here in this room, and others are at home. Those of us who are here in person may revel in the ability to wave hello across the room, and to catch up with people we may not have seen for many months. We bask in the sense of holiness that occurs when a group of people gathers for a sacred purpose. When this service ends, however, those at home will turn off their computers, and leave this space, whereas those in the room will still be here, schmoozing with friends and community members on their way out.



After all of this time, might we now be separating into two groups, those who are present in person, and those who participate from their homes? How can we continue to be part of one larger whole, even as we join together in different ways?

Over the past year we learned how to be a digital community, connecting with more people than before. Now, we're learning how to be a multi-access community. That process involves trial and error. We need to figure out how to be a supportive community in ways that work both for people who find meaning primarily in person, and for people who remain physically remote.

I opened this talk by recalling my first pandemic concert. Two weeks ago, I had another experience of togetherness. Right outside this building, in the Temple Emunah courtyard, I joined around 85 people for the first community-wide Friday night dinner that we have had here in over a year and a half. Looking around, seeing each other, joining together in food and in song, engaging in casual, rather than planned, conversation, we performed rituals that brought us together as Jews and as Emunah members. As we did, I felt a shared sense of joy at being together in person. Now, there was a cap of how many people could be there, and of course, some people couldn't be there even if there hadn't been a cap. But for many of those of us who were there, it was thrilling, and it met a need for interaction that many of us had yearned for for a year and a half.

Our challenge now is to find ways to include both those who can join physically and those who join virtually, and to do so, compromises may need to be made that impact both the in-person and the on-line experience. Once people are gathering

together in a room, people joining from home may find that they miss seeing each individual face in its own Zoom box or may feel left out of socializing that once took place in the chat. People gathering together indoors may find it disruptive to have the presence of a screen, or may be disappointed when the convenience of Zoom means fewer people might show up in person.

There's a certain category of story in the Talmud that typically starts with a line such as "עולא איקלע לפומבדיתא" -- Ulla-- or some other traveller -- came to Pumbedita -- or some other city in Babylonia. What's going on in these stories is that a traveller comes from the land of Israel to Babylonia, and as they interact with the people there, they come to notice-- and to share-- differences in practice or interpretation between the scholars in the land of Israel and in Babylonia. This happened a lot -- The phrase כִּי אַתָּא, which is often used to indicate that information about a legal tradition was brought from one place to another, appears 400 times in the Babylonian Talmud. These travellers helped to maintain a connection between the two disparate communities. Sometimes, differences in practice between the two groups were a source of contention. Nevertheless, what each group learned about each other was considered of utmost importance. Staying in touch, even when it leads to mild conflict, is part of what it means to be one larger Jewish community.

We are all citizens of the world. Our actions impact, and are impacted by, people across our country and the globe. These connections confer responsibility, but I hope they also make us feel empowered. As much as each of our circumstances and experiences are different and unique, we are still all in this world together, because our



actions matter. That means that none of us is alone. As we celebrate this special day,  
the day that our shared world was created, we feel our ties to our fellow humans, ties that make us vulnerable, and ties that call upon us to care for each other. We may be separated, but we're also intimately connected in ways we may never know. Shanah Tova.

