Have you ever had a moment where you felt deeply seen, and embraced by a community exactly as you were? Where were you, and who were you with? How did the moment unfold?

One of my most vivid memories of a moment like this is the memory of the first time I went to a Pride Shabbat service, at an LGBTQ+ synagogue in New York City. There is a series of psalms called Hallel that are traditionally sung on festivals – like Sukkot and Passover and Shavuot[[1]](#footnote-1) – as a way of celebrating the festival, demarcating it as sacred and joyous for the whole community. Hallel has been recited by Jewish communities around the world for more than a thousand years. At my first ever Pride Shabbat, I heard Hallel recited in honor of LGBTQ+ Pride month, and I found myself deeply moved. As a queer Jewish person, I *did* think of the anniversary of the Stonewall riots as a sacred and joyous occasion, but I had never before heard them celebrated with Jewish prayers. It felt sort of like a hug, helping me knit together different pieces of myself that I hadn’t even consciously known felt separate from each other.

Belonging, connection, and comfort with one’s own identity are fundamental human needs, and they are inextricable from one another - belonging is incomplete if we cannot belong *as our full selves.*[[2]](#footnote-2)But often, these interconnected needs can be more difficult to fulfill than we might hope. Prejudice and discrimination can be major impediments, but so can life events that would happen even in a society free from systemic injustice. Maybe we move, and we don’t know our new neighbors (and they don’t have a detailed memory of the past few decades of our lives, and where we’ve been, the way our old neighbors did). Maybe we have a misunderstanding with a good friend, and both end up hurt. Maybe a loved one gets sick, or passes away, and not only do our most intimate circles rearrange themselves, but we also find ourselves going through a life experience we may or may not share with others in our community. Maybe *we* get sick, and have to renegotiate our sense of self. Maybe there’s a global pandemic, and it becomes harder to maintain connections with people in our lives for any number of reasons.

In many ways, much of Jewish life, including the Jewish holiday cycle, seems designed around the twin ideas that our connections to other people are important, but *maintaining* our connections to other people - and to ourselves - can be hard. And so, Jewish tradition gives us opportunities throughout the year to reconnect with ourselves and with each other, sharing rituals and meals and stories meant to help us reflect on different aspects of what it means to be a human being in the world. Our holidays also remind us that shared joy is amplified joy, shared sorrow is sometimes a lighter load, and shared stories can be galvanizing.

Nowhere is the Jewish holiday cycle’s focus on human relationship more apparent than on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, when we are called to focus on our relationships with other people, and to try to repair what needs repairing. And yet, more than for almost any of our other holidays, the theme of repentance and repair that weaves its way through our Rosh HaShanah liturgy was far from inevitable. In the Torah itself, Rosh HaShanah gets a brief shoutout – not by its name, which would come later, but by its date, the first day of the seventh month – and we learn that on the day we now call Rosh HaShanah, people are supposed to take a day of rest, and listen to a *t’ruah* – a loud communal shout or blast of a horn, which Jewish communities have typically understood to be the sound of the shofar.[[3]](#footnote-3)

So, how did Rosh HaShanah grow from a quirky day off on which the community got together to listen to the shofar, to a new year’s celebration on which we spend time thinking about our relationships with other people? To some extent, the answer to this question is obscured by the sands of time, but we do know that by the time the Mishnah was compiled, about 1800 years ago, people were already asking some pretty detailed questions about how to blow shofar, some of which pointed to a focus on human relationship. For example, do the person blowing the shofar and the person listening to the shofar need to pay attention to one another? The Mishnah, and later the Talmud, both said yes.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What would our lives look like if we approached all of our interactions with the same kind of attention and care that the ancient rabbis hoped the shofar-blower and shofar-listener would offer to each other? If when we spoke, we tried to always keep our listeners in our minds and in our hearts, and when we listened, we directed our minds and our hearts only towards the person speaking to us, and no one else? It would probably be exhausting … but it might also be beautiful.

It is also during the era the Talmud was being compiled that we begin to see rabbinic texts linking Rosh HaShanah to repentance. The ancient rabbis believed that the ten days from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur were a time in which God was paying particular attention to human beings, and judging them.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is a concept many of us are familiar with from the High Holy Days liturgy, even if it may not be a theology with which we agree. But our familiarity can sometimes obscure how *radical* it was for the rabbis to assert that while God was busy judging human beings, one of the things with which God was *most* concerned was how we treat each other. Because of the rabbis, centuries of Yom Kippur services have contained the phrase: “for sins against God, the day of atonement atones. But for sins of one human being against another, the day of atonement does not atone, until they have made peace with one another.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

By imagining Rosh HaShanah as a day to kickstart the work of repairing and deepening our relationships with other people in preparation for Yom Kippur, the rabbis chose to make Rosh HaShanah a holiday about relationships. They chose this *even though* they had other options, like thinking of Rosh HaShanah as quirky shofar day. And I think we can learn a lot from their choice.

First, Judaism is ours to play with. This may be a concept that already has some buy-in here in this room, as we gather to welcome the new year at the alternative services of a Reform congregation, but it still bears repeating. Jewish history is certainly full of people who thought there was one, best way to live a Jewish life (which was usually whatever way they were living their lives), but it’s also full of innovation and change, as people adapted rituals and received traditions to meet their needs and make meaning of the times they were living through. Pride Shabbat, which is now celebrated in many quarters of the Jewish community, is certainly one example of this, but there are many much older examples as well. And there is perhaps no better example of innovation and adaptation in Jewish tradition than the evolution of the meaning of the shofar, itself. In ancient times, one of the main uses of the shofar was as a call to battle, in times of war.[[7]](#footnote-7) Because of the work of the rabbis, the shofar is sounded in our world exclusively as a call to peace. When we, too, engage in innovation, and work hard to connect Judaism to our lives and our times in meaningful ways, we are not breaking with tradition, we are continuing it.

Second, building and maintaining strong relationships, as well as nurturing communities where people can feel a sense of belonging as their whole selves, takes a lot of work. It takes *so* much work, in fact, that the ancient rabbis essentially retconned Rosh HaShanah – and Yom Kippur, though that’s a story for another day – to make it a holiday all *about* relationships. Our relationships with ourselves, our relationships with each other, our relationships with God. We can be inspired by their example to work hard at our own relationships – including by working to repair what needs repairing – and to work hard to make our communities places where all people can be comfortable being their full selves.

One of the reasons I am thrilled to be joining the TRS community is that this is a community that is, in many different ways, deeply attuned to relationship building. From initiatives like the tents, which provide opportunities for members to connect over shared interests, to the inclusion committee and DEI taskforce, which strive to make our community one that embraces and lifts up all of our stories, to the hardworking caring committee, which nourishes bodies and souls, to our many learning communities, and more – ours is a community replete with opportunities for people to connect to Judaism and to each other, and a community that strives to be open to new efforts, and new perspectives.

I’ve also heard from so many of you that you have a deep desire to connect or reconnect with others after several years of pandemic living. The past few years have featured bouts of enormous creativity and hard work as we have all navigated crisis, and restrictions on gathering we could never have imagined. Now, as we live through a time period in which many of those restrictions have been lifted, we are engaging with our communities in a wide variety of ways. (Some of us are online, some of us are in person, and many of us are connecting in both of these ways, and more!) And we face a new challenge, which is to continue to approach the work of relationship- and community-building with the same intentionality and focus we have been bringing over the last several years. In this work, we can be inspired by the rabbis, who, in their reimagining of Rosh HaShanah, created for us an annual opportunity to check in on the state of our relationships and our communities, repair what needs repairing, and strive for greater wholeness.

In this new year of 5783, may we be drawn towards each other. May we reach out to one another and do our best to listen to each other, and to ourselves. May we make space for each other’s stories, and hopes, and sadnesses, and joys, and dreams … and in so doing, may we make our communities into spaces in which, as much as possible, everyone feels like they belong, exactly as they are. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, may this be God’s will.

1. Hallel is also recited on Chanukah and Rosh Chodesh (the start of a new Jewish month). Interestingly, Hallel is *not* recited on Rosh HaShanah, because Rosh HaShanah is considered too serious a time for Hallel. (See Babylonian Talmud (hereafter BT) Arakhin 10a-b.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See human needs theories articulated by John Burton and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Leviticus 23:24-25 and Numbers 29:1. The accounts of this day in Leviticus and Numbers also make suggestions about offerings the Israelites can bring. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 3:7 and BT Rosh HaShanah 28b-29a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for example BT Rosh HaShanah 16a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mishnah Yoma 8:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See for example Marvin Sweeney, “The Shofar in War and Worship in the Bible,” in Ed. Jonathan L. Friedmann and Joel Gereboff, *Qol Tamid: The Shofar in Ritual, History and Culture.* Claremont, CA: Claremont Press (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)