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Rosh Hashana

Look at this Rosh Hashanah as a bespoke experience

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Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the most highly choreographed religious experiences across all Jewish denominations, from intimate *shteibels* to vaulted sanctuaries.

The setting, songs, and community surrounding us combine to impart a sense of occasion and are key to the experience of awe and holiness of the High Holidays. The physical setting is a portal through which we achieve the spiritual.

The entire Jewish world has been stressing since Pesach about the impossibility of High Holidays under current pandemic restrictions. Indeed this is when every synagogue seat is filled, we reconnect with distant friends and family members and we experience the effervescence of community at its best. The loss of this social component is especially acute now, at a time when our resilience is otherwise depleted and we most need the warm embrace of community.

Additionally, we have a clear concept of what an authentic High Holidays feels like, and praying individually in our homes, (or joining a Zoom service) doesn't fit that definition.

We can attempt to replicate this authenticity at home, by importing elements of the synagogue service, but we are likely to find the result disappointing in comparison to the 'real' thing.

While, unfortunately, there is no substantive replacement for the social deprivation resulting from synagogue closures, there may be another way of imagining what an authentic service might look like.

This reframing, borrows from two options available to us when planning a vacation; a 'package' versus a 'bespoke' tour.

A package tour is hassle free; you pick a destination, and the tour operator worries about all the logistical details. You just show up and are conveniently shuttled to location, guided through salient attractions, wined, dined and entertained. You are spared the review of schedules and hotel ratings, the burden of making choices or experience of loneliness, and any hiccup or disappointment will not be your responsibility.

In some respects, Jewish institutions offer us the packaged tour version of Judaism. They offer



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us the convenience of an expertly designed religious experience and deliver the congregational numbers required for Torah reading and Kaddish, to lift our prayers in a chorus of song, and embody the concept of *kehillah kedosha*, sanctity in community.

While these are aspects vital to our Jewish experience, other aspects can be achieved only through the bespoke tour approach.

Planning a bespoke vacation requires a significant investment of research and reading, and demands difficult choices. It can be more expensive, expose you to inconvenience and you'll have sole responsibility for any disappointment.

You will also have the opportunity to gain some expertise, whether by familiarizing yourself with the local history, phrasebook or map. You can personalize your itinerary, decide to linger at the cafe with a charming view or get delightfully lost in a labyrinth of alleys.

Reframing this year's High Holidays as a bespoke experience can liberate us from the daunting pressure to recreate the High Holidays version we are used to. Rather than consoling ourselves with a homemade reproduction, we can take charge of curating our individual High Holidays. We can be more deliberate in the pace of our prayers, lingering over *piyyutim* or liturgy that resonates, and indulge in a tune we are fond of.

In becoming active agents and designing our religious experience we can become more attuned to and discover new ways to kindle our spirituality.

This year, we will miss the solemn peak of Rosh Hashanah as the Shofar is sounded in a packed synagogue, the pomp and circumstance of Kol Nidrei in a crowded sanctuary. May we return to them next year with a fresh lens and renewed energy. Less as passive consumers and more as active contributors to the religious communal experience.



Rabba Dina Brawer was born and raised in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem, New York and London. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London, and Semikha from Yeshivat Maharat. She is the founder of JOFA UK, and the producer of #YourTorah podcast, a journey to discovering Mishnah. Her work has been featured in '10 Women, 10 Decades' a short film produced by Chocolate Films. She has recently been appointed Director of Recruitment and Admissions for Yeshivat Maharat.