

The Essence of Rosh Hashanah is Innovation

Rabbi Josh Levy, Rosh Hashanah 5787

What, for you, is the essence of Rosh Hashanah?

Perhaps it is the idea of today as Yom HaDin, the day of judgement, the beginning of the 10 days of teshuvah;

Or maybe what resonates is the expression 'היום הרת עולם' – 'today is the anniversary of the creation of the world', an opportunity for renewal for ourselves and our relationship with the world.

Maybe it is the reading of the Akedah, the extraordinary story of the binding of Isaac? Or the blowing of shofar: Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah; 100 blasts; the majesty of a Tekiah Gdolah.

More prosaically, perhaps, today is simply New Year – a day of transition, as we move from 5786 into 5787.

Go back into the Torah, and Rosh Hashanah looks very different.

This day is mentioned in Torah only twice – once in Leviticus, where it is worthy of three verses, and a slightly longer piece in Numbers.

This is how the version in Numbers begins:

ובחדש השביעי באחד לחדש מקרא-קדש יהיה לכם

"In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred assembly." What will this consist of? It continues: You shall not work at your occupations, you shall observe it as a Yom Teruah, and then - in great detail – a description of the sacrificial offerings required.

And that's it.

What we find in Torah is not referred to as Rosh Hashanah, indeed is not on the first day of the year but halfway through; it is a holy day of celebration, marked, as was the practice of the time, by cessation of work and the ritual of the sacrificial cult. With

one addition - unexplained - Teruah - some form of noise making, probably with trumpets.

So where does everything we think of when we think of Rosh Hashanah come from? How do we come to have the Rosh HaShanah that we do?

We can't trace the exact journey this festival took. But what we can be sure of is that during the late second temple period, and especially after the destruction of the Temple, this day was utterly transformed in the hands of those who were living it - the rabbis of the first centuries CE.

The rabbis took a biblical festival, inherited from generations before, and they crammed it with new meaning. They declared it one of 'ארבעה ראשי שנים' – four starts of years, making it the New Year for the counting of years. They associated it with creation, making it the anniversary of the creation of the world (though the link is far from obvious). They made it a day of personal judgement, creating a unit with Yom Kippur – itself transformed from a day in which the priests made sacrifices on behalf of the people to one in which we make our own personal atonement through acts of teshuvah (repentance) and vidui (confession), the details of which were ordained and described by, yes, the rabbis. They formalised and ritualised the concept of Yom Teruah, giving the blowing of shofar structure and meaning. And they created a liturgy to express these ideas, allocating Torah readings, and creating the structure and content that we have in our services today.

That they did so was an act of remarkable creativity. There is nothing obvious about many of the associations the rabbis made. Rather, they valued new ways of making the text shine, valued the application of intellect and imagination to religious life. 'אי אפשר לבית מדרש בלא חידוש', it's impossible to have a house of study without innovation, the rabbis taught. Creativity was built into the rabbinic exercise. And so, too, diversity of voice – layering themes and ideas upon one another, refining it through - mainly respectful - argument.

It was an act, too, of great theological chutzpah. The rabbis took a tradition that they understood to be divine in origin and nonetheless transformed it. The Torah says very clearly in a couple of places “observe only that which I am commanding you”: ‘לא־תִסֶּף עֲלָיו’ - do not add to it; ‘וְלֹא תִגְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ’ – and do not take away from it.” Yet that is exactly what they did – they did take away... and, as we’ve seen, boy did they add.

An act of creativity and of chutzpah. But, most of all, this was an act of will. It was a choice. They made a decision. A decision across generations that *this*, this thing we do, matters. That it was worthy of reinvention. They had contemporaries who stood against them, rejected the whole exercise, but they decided it was worth time, thought, energy, effort. To engage, to be creative, in order to build the content, the meaning, that would make Rosh HaShanah sustaining and sustainable.

And they did something similar for most aspects of our Jewish lives. The rabbis took the practices of an ancient people and built upon its foundations a religion of richness and meaning, of new rituals, of alternative views, of words and ideas – they did so with love, and argument, and diversity - because they thought that this mattered, and wanted it to survive.

1800 years after the earliest rabbis, another generation of our ancestors faced their own moment of dramatic change. The twin forces of enlightenment and emancipation utterly transformed Jewish experience, bringing us into contact with different ways of thinking, new forms of religious and cultural life, a new enlightenment-inspired critical spirit; they brought new opportunities for work, study, relationships, new encounters with others.

And with this new context, the same challenge: how to take a tradition that they cared deeply about, understood to be sacred, considered to be an expression of God’s will in the world – and to help it to survive. How to retain the essence, that which is eternal, and to build upon it with respect, creativity and love.

Like the work of the rabbis, this included diverse voices, argument – mainly respectful but not always - and no little theological chutzpah. It began not with rabbis but with lay people – with experiments in worship in the early 19th century, and became a rich intellectual – as well as a practical – exercise. And it too was a decision. Plenty of people chose a different path. But this choice was motivated by love, and desire to see that Jewish life could remain relevant and survive.

Like the work of the rabbis, this was not the task of a single generation, but one that would stretch across centuries of conversation, reinvention and examination. And this is our task, still.

We are not always great at articulating what we mean by Progressive Judaism. We are good at describing what we do, talking about our practice. There are books aplenty about our history. But we speak less often about this religious imperative, about this core task that we bear, our Jewish mission.

Which is why the creation of Hertfordshire Progressive Synagogue is an inspiration. It is a reminder of what Progressive Judaism means – embracing innovation, being brave, trying new things, working to ensure that Jewish life remains relevant and meaningful for us and future generations.

That *is* our historic purpose - to place ourselves into the task of renewal – of shaping, and reshaping, this post-emancipation Judaism. To take upon ourselves the task of creating hiddushim: working to find new meanings to our religious practise, to develop new forms of ritual, multiple forms of service, to create new opportunities for Jewish life. Ensuring that our core values are transmitted and shared in the world in a way that can be heard by future generations.

Importantly, when we do this, we do it not only as moderns but as heirs to a radical, creative, re-inventing, tradition. Rosh Hashanah is a reminder of that.

What is the essence of today? To me, the essence of Rosh Hashanah is chiddush - innovation. The rabbis took an ancient festival and crammed it with new ritual, new words, new meanings to make it speak to them. They refused to allow their religious life, their ritual, their words, to be stale or lacking in content, to risk it withering for lack of imagination or effort.

To be Progressive Jews is to be heirs to that tradition, to that voice in our textual history that says Judaism must reinvent itself to meet the needs of the Jewish people, must respond to the spiritual needs of the moment.

To be Progressive Jews is to state that we are not passive receivers of a tradition, but have the right and the responsibility to shape it for meaning in our lives.

To be Progressive Jews is to follow the rabbinic example of creativity and chutzpah and effort – to bring our intellect and our imagination to the renewal of Jewish life because we think it matters enough to be worth our time and commitment.

Just as the early rabbis worked to renew this day, as we enter 5787, may we be willing to bring ourselves to this work of renewal, of trying new things, so that Jewish life remains vibrant, relevant and meaningful for generations to come.