

Rosh Hashana with a Difference



the elul project

Thinking about Rosh Hashana this year is daunting. How do we make it special with no guests, no Shule, no Shofar? I'm not alone this year – on the contrary so many people are living in my house that we often fall over each other. But I really feel for two of my daughters. One in London would have come home for Yom Tov. She's living with wonderful non-Jewish people in a non-Jewish part of London. She can't stay with relatives either. Another daughter lives a half hour walk away. She has a complex disability and a number of carers. That means she is with too many people to be allowed in my house, where we have people with immune deficiencies who are at great risk. Both will be alone.

When I think of it, the Rosh Hashana I imagine as the normal Rosh Hashana is not really all that normal. Having big dinners and lunches with 20 people, all close family and friends, has happened most years. The normal event goes like this. Everyone needs new clothes – with five children that was a challenge. Then the shoe shopping. Of course, they are difficult to fit – too long, too fat, too thin. The menu and cleaning, a frenzy of activity – everyone having multiple jobs, getting in each other's way, shouting, setting the table, cleaning candle sticks, peeling potatoes.

Then there's the Rosh Hashana Seder, a Sephardi tradition adopted by my family after my sister married a Palestinian from Bnei B'rak. This is basically a series of "dad jokes" said over different foods – blessings and curses in the hope that we will prosper in the new year. This leads, in my family at least, to more bad dad jokes and sometimes some equally shaggy, very Australian hairy dog stories. See – I'm already reminiscing.

The truth is, that these Yom Tovs really are the norm – but only just. They've been evolving over time and there have been many unusual Rosh Hashanas for my family. Back in 1989, my fourth child was born 6 days before Rosh Hashana. We certainly didn't have guests. We went to dinner at my machatonim straight from the hospital, via home to pick up the other children (who were 3,5 & 7). But then disaster struck – my baby did one of those motions where clothes, legs and little feet are covered in brown liquid. We were used to this, so that wasn't the disaster. What was bad was that we had forgotten one crucial thing in preparation for going out. Nappies and spare clothes.

That Rosh Hashana was memorable also because we named our daughter Shoshana. We were thinking of Shoshana Tova, but decided it was a little twee. So she ended up being named Shoshana Leah. Saying "shana tova" has had an extra dimension for me ever since.

I'm sharing this story with you because at NCJWA we believe that sharing our stories helps each of us to see the world a little differently. When you hear other people's stories you don't feel so alone. You can relate to their experience even if it is very different from your own.

We're hoping that this series of Ellul Stories will nurture you and encourage you to think and write your own stories. This year will be different. It is scary. It is lonely. So we need to do whatever we can to support each other.

We are publishing stories one at a time. Then, just before the New Year you will be able to download the collection and have it to read over yom tov. This is our New Year Greeting to you.

Shana Tova Metuka – May you have a wonderful and sweet New Year. May we transcend the traumas of 2020 and the personal travails in our lives. May the future be one of good health.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Melinda Jones'.

Melinda Jones
NCJWA National President



MELINDA JONES

Melinda Jones, the NCJWA National President, is a scholar, feminist, human rights lawyer, disability advocate and Jewish educator who identifies as Modern Orthodox Jew.

She's engaged in research and social action towards justice for all vulnerable people through law and policy development.

In an earlier life, Melinda taught law and political science at Melbourne, Monash, La Trobe and the University of New South Wales. She was a Senior Lecturer in Law, the Editor-in-Chief of the Australian Journal of Human Rights and the Director of the Australian Human Rights Centre.

ABOUT THE ELUL PROJECT

An initiative aiming to share stories and teachings from Jewish women leaders in our community. Whilst many of us are stuck at home, or isolated from family over Elul and the High Holy Days, we hope this project will serve to inspire, nurture, and uplift during this difficult time.

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