

Together, Apart

I realised last week that the Yamim Noraim are not far away and I felt a small wave of anxiety wash through me. How are we going to do it this year? How are we going to celebrate these special days when we've been siloed into singular households? Will there be as much meaning and joy if I can't watch my kids interacting with their cousins while chomping on apple dipped in honey? Is there any point building our sukkah this year? How much guilt will I feel for the relief of being spared having to feel guilty about going to shul? If I dry out the brisket, will my longing to be at my auntie's dining table be more pronounced? For me, like many others, the chagim are characterised by big family gatherings, meals and related activities. What will these festivals look like without all of that engagement and interaction?

Here in Victoria, as things stand, we're unlikely to be able to get together this year with anyone who doesn't live with us. We thought at Pesach that it would be a one off. That hasn't come to pass. As the wave of anxiety beaches inside of me, I am bracing myself. Yep, I'll be catering entire meals for my little family instead of simply bringing a plate. Yep, the vast majority of the storytelling and the conveying of an immersive experience to the kids will fall to me. Yep, there'll be no fun wine and cheese nights with friends in our sukkah. Yep, I'll be whispering yizkor for my late father in solitude, without the security of a surrounding community of people who have lost their parents. It's amazing how the repetition of customs and the way in which we perform them becomes so ingrained over time. That's not to say that many of us don't try new things or interrogate our choices. But once we've settled on something that feels right, it's hard not to feel aggrieved by being restrained from accessing it.

Access versus restraint are, of course, bendable concepts. So, whilst we won't be sitting around a table with all of the usual suspects and, more to the point, we're prevented from doing so (albeit for good reason), we can choose to tap into the idea that we are all together in our performance of ritual. There is comfort to be elicited from the knowledge that each siloed household is marking the chagim. We are not restrained from that. And that freedom is to be celebrated.

We will find ways – new ways – of making these chagim special and of ensuring that all family members and friends are looked after. We will modify our rituals, but we will be doing so as a community. As the pandemic wears on and it becomes more challenging to lift our spirits, we are well served by buying into the mantra of "this too shall pass". And so long as it doesn't, we can still be together, apart.



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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.