

Meeting God One on One



the elul project

During Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we are used to getting together with God in a crowd. The common experience is exactly that – common. We usher in the holiness together and farewell the fast as a community. However, this year we will be spending more time alone or at home than in the fray. From where can we draw guidance and inspiration to pivot our perspective and still meaningfully encounter Hashem?

First, we have to acknowledge the change to our perspective that is required. Rosh Hashana is the day that we crown Hashem our King. The liturgy of the day provides the song sheet for Hashem's coronation. The focal point of the service references Hashem's sovereignty – malchuyot. We follow up with the fanfare heralding the King's arrival – we blow the shofar.

The principle underlying the public celebration is expressed in the idiom "In the multitude of the nation is the King honoured". Jewish law prioritises the performance of certain mitzvot in as large a group as possible in order to honour Hashem. It is not surprising that we may feel at a loss about how to meaningfully mark the beginning of the Jewish year. We have thousands of years of history and tradition that have hardwired us to expect a very public celebration. Shifting our perspective to try and meet God alone is challenging.

Perhaps we can find a path to a personal connection with Hashem by looking to the experiences of Sarah and Hannah. The Torah and Haftara readings for Rosh Hashana tell their stories. Both encountered God in very personal ways.

The prophesy of Sarah occurs 'behind closed doors'. Sarah eavesdrops on the conversation between Avraham and the Angels and learns she is to have a son. Later, she receives the prophesy and then acts on it by advocating for her son to take on the legacy of the Jewish people. This all occurs within Sarah's tent. Furthermore, Sarah and Avraham's success in bringing the message of ethical monotheism to the world was largely achieved through their openminded conversations with others – by literally and figuratively bringing people 'into their tent'. Sarah teaches us, amongst other things, that we can converse with Hashem, harness our potential and then act on it by influencing others, all without leaving the front door.

While Sarah is about action, Hannah is about reflection. She offers the ultimate model of personal prayer – her lips moved but no sound came out. Hannah's infertility is a catalyst for her to pour out her heart to God. Our Rabbis recall that not only does she express her sorrow, but she shows her anger and argues vehemently with Hashem. However, ultimately she acknowledges the gifts bestowed on her. Hannah's story gives us a sense of the torment and passion that she shares with Hashem. This year we may want to 'pour out our hearts' to God about a lot of things. We may want him to know of the myriad of our losses, that we are angry and that we are sad. Hannah gives us a model of how to do this and to keep our relationship with Hashem intact.

As we gather together but apart this year, we can shift our paradigm away from looking for Hashem in the crowd by drawing inspiration from Sarah and Hannah to make the most of our 'one on one' with Hashem.



RABBANIT JUDITH LEVITAN

Rabbanit Judith Levitan is a lawyer with over 15 years' experience in the social justice sector, currently working at Legal Aid NSW.

She is one of the first Orthodox women to receive smicha (rabbinic ordination) in Australia.

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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