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resident; at the close of *Neila*, I wanted to run a victory lap around the sanctuary. But after nearly ten years of leading services, I know I'll get through it; now I need more to make the experience meaningful. I must still find a way to pray with intention while pushing aside the responsibilities of leading a community in prayer. I remain committed to finding some truth while still orchestrating this multifaceted experience for others — whether out of selfishness, religious obligation, or the complex and complicated desire for authenticity.

In the last few years, I've begun to hold near the holiness that is right in front of me. During the long hours of *tefilla*, I think about my congregants' lives and try to interpret the words on the pages of the *machzor* from their perspectives. As I meditate on these words, I think about the conversations we've had over the past year — a recently retired man who is wondering what to do next, a woman who has been in remission from cancer for a year re-

learning how to live, or a parent struggling with the knowledge that his child is not like other children. I feel so much awe in the truth that underlies these stories, the imperfection and the resilience of human experience. I feel so much tenderness for the people who live within these narratives.

It also feels honest. One of the holiest aspects of being a congregational rabbi, for me, is helping to build a sacred community where the narratives of people's lives matter. The ongoing work of listening to these stories, and helping people find the perches within Torah that make their stories meaningful, gives my work wings. My questions, prayers, and frustrations about these stories are part of what I hold in my heart as I stand before God. For now, this works. Although it may prove to be unsatisfying in future years, today I value the honesty of this encounter, and in the honesty, perhaps some measure of holiness.



Obstacles to Holiday Holiness

Richard Hirsh

Way back in rabbinical school, I learned that the root for the Hebrew word *kedusha*, K-D-SH, had the radical sense of “separate-sacred” and that things that were *kadosh* (most often translated as “holy”) were characterized by a composite of “separation-elevation-illumination-radiation.” In more simple terms, holiness is present when we experience a sense of the sacred intruding on the mundane, when we sense a heightening of our spiritual sensitivity, when we see things in a different light, and when we are touched and transformed by our contact with *kedusha*.

The themes of the *Yamim Noraim* are familiar: *teshuva*, atonement, forgiveness, reconciliation, renewal. These are the key ideas to which Rosh Hashana and especially Yom Kippur are devoted. They represent goals for the soul, compelling concepts that challenge us to reflect and repent. These are worthy, even indispensable, ideas. We are richer and deeper human beings for engaging with them.

But the experience we seek together in prayer, reflection, song, and study (aka “services”) is one that both transcends and encompasses these concepts. Although people are

seeking a sense of *kedusha* — moments of insight that point to a different layer or level of reality than the spatial-temporal realm in which we go about the business of our lives — something intrudes on this often unarticulated search for the sacred. Here are four obstacles to that search.

1. Breaking the Liturgical “Fourth Wall” In theatre, an engaged audience forgets that there is a boundary between themselves and the stage. “Breaking the fourth wall” happens when something breaks the spell.

In many engaging davening settings, individuals can forget that they are “in a service” as they become connected to, and participants in, a sacred liturgical drama that undulates and unfolds in a complex and sophisticated manner. A sense of *kedusha* becomes tangible. But then something happens to break the rhythm, to disengage us from the drama, to remind us that we are 21st-century Jews sitting in a room holding a book filled with words written centuries ago. Once the liturgical fourth wall is broken, we revert to being observers, not participants, and the *kedusha* dissolves into a sense of separateness.

2. “Tefillus Interruptus” This term,

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taught to me by Cantor Lori Lippitz, refers to the tendency of rabbis and other *shlichei tzibbur* (prayer leaders) to insert into the davening comments, stage directions, explanations, and, increasingly, *kavanot* (spiritual directives, as in “as we prepare to recite the *Sh'ma*, we think of the many places in our lives that are not ‘One’ so let us think of how we yearn for a sense of wholeness...”).

Rather than elevating us, such intrusions more often distract us. There are ample opportunities at transitional points to insert comments, or teach about the history of the liturgy, or offer supplementary readings. Tradition provides a series of liturgical punctuation marks with the *hatzi kaddish* and the *kaddish shalem*, for example. If those leading prayer would confine their comments to such transition points, our attempts at ascent through prayer might succeed.

3. The Liturgical Marathon A playwright anticipates the attention span of an audience. A composer anticipates how to arrange and modulate a piece of music so as to keep the emotional energy moving. Why is it that those leading prayer so rarely take into account the necessary balance between preserving the core integrity of the liturgy and a reasonable awareness of the average span of spiritual attention?

Somewhere between the second and third hour of a *Yamim Noraim* prayer service, the daveners start to feel their energy wane. There is often a collective spiritual brown-out followed by a series of individual burn-outs, and the power people brought that could have been used to illuminate the collective experience goes off-line.

The goal is *teshuva*, not to finish every page of the prayerbook. What daveners bring to prayer is, as it were, battery-powered — it can only last so long. All forms of illumination require energy.

4. “Know Before Whom You Stand” This well-known biblical aphorism is usually interpreted to mean “remember you are in the presence of God” (and so, presumably, behave appropriately). This might better be understood by those leading the *tefillot* to mean “You are standing in front of a community gathered for a sacred purpose, and a large (captive) audience does not give you license to offer controversial and divisive sermons about social issues, or use scripture as pretext to talk about politics.”

If one part of *kedusha* is transformation, then the teachings from the *bima* ought to correlate in some way with the themes of the holidays. Preachy pseudo-prophetic pronouncements about global social issues are transparently obvious, politically partisan, and predictably irrelevant.

The individual people gathered are unlikely, for example, to be able to correct for global warming; they already know that economic and ethnic discrimination is a problem; they agonize over the violence that haunts and hurts so many; and they deserve more credit for being able to understand the complexities facing the State of Israel. Their ability to effect global change on these or any other such issues is minimal.

What those people before whom you stand *can* do during this season of *teshuva* is work on themselves. What they need to hear are the debates and discussions from Jewish tradition about sin, repentance, atonement, and forgiveness. What those privileged to teach from the *bima* can provide are insights into Jewish views of human nature and the wisdom that inheres in the millennial discussions of the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer hara* (the good and evil impulses within us). What might be helpful to those gathered in religious community would be Jewish insights into the redemptive power of guilt and of grief, and suggestions for what we can reasonably expect of ourselves, and what we might reasonably imagine God expects of us.

Such teaching could truly be transformative, and could thereby serve as a gateway to *kedusha* — inviting those gathered into sacred time and sacred space, and trusting them to be partners in the project of self-renewal.

