

Hope is within our grasp

Rabbi Danny Rich on a period of time like no other



Rabbi Danny Rich on a break after lockdown

ON one thing we can surely agree: these High Holy Days will be like no other, and not least because the overwhelming majority of us cannot recall a time when our synagogues were (physically) closed for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The High Holy Days are, of course, a moment in both personal and communal lives for looking back, taking stock and beginning to contemplate the future.

It is many years since I was a full time congregational rabbi although, since I stepped down from my post at Liberal Judaism in March, I have fulfilled a locum post at Kehillah North London until the arrival of Rabbi Leah Jordan and virtually preached most weeks at a variety of Liberal Judaism constituents including the LJS, Finchley, South London, Kingston and Manchester. I am much looking forward to High Holy Days at Wessex and serving Three Counties and Stevenage Liberal Jewish Communities in the coming year.

Meanwhile I have been very impressed by how educational, prayer, pastoral and social activities have been provided across the range of Liberal Judaism constituents, encouraged and nurtured by the leadership at the Montagu Centre.

New national opportunities at, for example, the Biennial Weekend and on Shavuot were created. At a local and regional level the sharing of knowledge and resources has been mutually enriching. We should be proud of the Liberal Rabbinate and Cantorate and our musical, technical and other resources, whether paid or voluntary.

In the face of the sudden closure of our buildings, we have learnt Zoom, Teams, Meet and other electronic media which has enabled us to create community in ways we never imagined – and in numbers we never expected either!

Many have seen great advantages although personally I await the restoration of the physical minyan, distanced or not.

I am indebted to Rabbi Leah Jordan and her husband, and my friend and colleague, Rabbi Benji Stanley, who in a Tisha B'Av study session shared with their students this paragraph from an essay by Rebecca Solnit titled *On Hope and Expectation*, published in *The Guardian* in July 2016.

It is important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and destruction. The hope I am interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act. It is also not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the every-thing-is-getting-worse one. You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings. "Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naivety," the Bulgarian writer Maria Popova recently remarked. And Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, early on described the movement's mission as to "provide hope and inspiration for collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation, rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams."

This seems to me to aptly capture my thinking as I approach these most unique of High Holy Days.

We have experienced a remarkable period of loss, restriction and perhaps mourning for a way of life that was. Yet, whilst we may have actions we regret, thoughts and words we might have put differently, Judaism teaches us that the possibility of repentance, of atonement, of change and of hope is within our grasp. It merely requires the honesty, effort and vision to open ourselves to it.

Wishing you all a healthy and fruitful year ahead.