

Clearly, everywhere we look, all around us, today is not only Wednesday, but Yom Kippur.

As much as we might want today *not* to be Yom Kippur, we can't change it.

And I for one, do not want to change it.

Because believe it or not, Yom Kippur is my favorite holiday of the year.

When I shared this notion with a colleague last spring, he was very surprised.

My colleague wondered how Yom Kippur could be my favorite holiday when there is so much attention that must be placed on all the services.

This day is so demanding and with so much expectation, it seemed counterintuitive to consider it a favorite holiday.

Yes, it **is demanding**, and there is great expectation, but those are two of the primary reasons why **it is** such a favorite holiday for me.

As is the case with so many other things in life, when the demand and expectation is great, so is the reward.

And on Yom Kippur, the reward comes from three types of closeness I experience to a greater extent on this day than on any other day during the year.

By the way, I am not alone in this assessment of Yom Kippur. So does a woman named Ariel Elisha who posted the following on twitter:

“Yom Kippur is my favorite holiday because as a woman, I'm used to trying to eat less, while apologizing for everything.”

In all seriousness, allow me to elaborate on these three types of closeness and thereby demonstrate why Yom Kippur is my favorite holiday of the year.

First, this is the day when I feel closest to God.

And that is because I know in advance that almost all of my regular obligations and distractions are removed and set aside, during this day.

I find it liberating, starving, but liberating not to eat or drink on this day.

Think of all the distraction and pressure that comes along with deciding what and where you ate last night, and then again how much and with whom you will be eating tonight.

By not eating or drinking for a day we realize how much time and effort goes into that process.

By not eating or drinking for a day we have more opportunities to turn to God, to become close to God and it becomes more difficult to forget God.

Every other Jewish holiday is so dominated by food and that's okay – it is celebratory and joyous, but part of what makes this day my favorite is that for once, we are able to get past the food and find a deeper and more spiritual connection to God.

Perhaps you have noticed a certain sentence found in the machzor which I purposely recite aloud whenever we encounter it on Yom Kippur, and we only encounter it on Yom Kippur.

In English it reads: “We have *turned* from your goodly laws and commandments, but it has not profited us.”

The last phrase, "but it has not profited us," is a translation from the Hebrew, "V'lo Shavah Lanu," which can also be translated as, "it hasn't been worthwhile for us."

Today is the day when I really have to determine whether my turning from God's laws and commandments during the last year ended up being for a good enough reason.

Usually, if not always, in hindsight the answer is, "it really wasn't worthwhile.”

And the amazing thing is that nevertheless, when I plead to God, “Shma Kolaynu - hear our voice,” on this day, more than any other, I believe and trust, that God is indeed listening and says, you may have turned from God's laws and commandments, but I am ready to welcome you as you turn back.

This is an amazing day because today we understand that God recognizes our human weakness.

It is an amazing day because while there are more people in synagogue today than any other day during the year, it is also today when I feel I have the most quiet time with God, the most intimate connection to God, IT IS TODAY when I feel closest to God.

Secondly, today is the day on which I feel closest to all of you.

On this day more than any other, it feels that we are most aligned religiously, in terms of our religious observance.

Today, more of us are observing more of this holy day in the same way, than on any other day during the year.

Sure, almost all of us observe the Seder in a similar pattern.

And many of us eat and abstain from the same foods during Passover – there is that food connection again and it does bring us very close to one another.

But, there are so many other ways in which our Passover observances don't coincide.

Not so with Yom Kippur - we are all here so much of this day, concentrating on similar themes, more serious in our observance of Judaism than on any other day during the year.

And my connection to you builds throughout the entire day – it begins as we watch the Torah scrolls enter the sanctuary and then chant Kol Nidre together.

It grows to the most beautiful highlight of singing and pleading with Avinu Malkaynu - in the special melody reserved for that prayer.

And what a wonderful group therapy session we all share throughout the day as we beat our breasts and confess our sins.

It is sobering to actually turn to those closest to us in forgiveness.

And it is strengthening and supportive to stand with one another as we all turn to God and petition for forgiveness.

I know I am moved to do this because you are here with me, doing the same thing at the same time.

I am comforted and gratified to know that we have much more than a minyan for every service during Yom Kippur.

Of course this is my favorite holiday - it shouldn't surprise you – how pleased I am that by the end of Neila we have many more people here in synagogue than we do on a regular Shabbat morning, and *that crowd* seems small compared to what we have now.

Yom Kippur is a wonderful holiday because on this day, every Rabbi feels as if he or she is the pastor of a mega synagogue.

I am privileged to see all of you, in worship, repenting, working hard to get close to God, and that makes me feel so much closer to all of you.

Rabbi Steven Moskowitz of Long Island shares the following phone conversation with his daughter which is all too typical these days:

“I heard from your uncle that you and your cousin had a lengthy conversation.”

“Yes. We texted for a while about her summer at camp.”

“I thought your uncle said you spoke.”

“Abba, for my generation texting is talking.”

You could almost hear as well, “You’re so old!”

Rabbi Moskowitz continues and provides this analysis:

“Gone are the visual cues.

A smile forms on my daughter’s face as she tells me about a recent trip or a look of frustration appears as I, once again, offer unsolicited advice.

How can one truly converse without observing the body language that is so important to human interaction?

The thoughtfulness of well-chosen words and delicately fashioned prose are now replaced with staccato texts and abbreviated phrases.

Rapidity is valued. Immediacy is prized.

Despite the fact that we live in a hyper-connected society we feel increasingly disconnected.

We talk (actually text) more than ever but yet have become increasingly disconnected.

This type of face to face communication is becoming more rare in our daily lives.

It should not be taken for granted - rather for those of us who thrive on it as I do, it should be treasured.

Yom Kippur brings us together, face to face, closer to each other and that is the second reason why this is my favorite holiday.

The third reason why this is my favorite holiday is one that many of us share, or at least it is the reason why many of us are here today.

More than any other holiday, Yom Kippur prompts us to remember our loved ones who have passed away.

You may be aware that one of the names of this holiday is the plural form - Yom HaKippurim - literally, the day of atonements.

One reason why we use the plural form is that we rarely go through this process alone – we atone as a group, together, helping one another, facing one another, supporting one another.

We also atone according to tradition, not only for ourselves, or by ourselves, but also for and with, those who have died before us.

It is quite a compelling notion to consider – that death does not end the process of atonement - that even after our bodies die, our souls still need to be refined, purified and brought closer to a status of being At One with God.

Understanding these themes today and with all the extra time we spend in prayer and contemplation, it makes perfect sense that this would be the holiday on which we should feel closest to our deceased loved ones.

The power of this day is clearly evident for those of us who are observing Yizkor in memory of our closest relatives.

I will further discuss this important aspect of Yom Kippur in just a moment.

But let me first remind you that we remember not only our immediate loved ones on this day, but also many people we never even met – for example, three of my four grandparents who died in the Holocaust, including my mother's father after whom I am named.

And later, before we break for the afternoon, we will hold a brief and powerful martyrology service, remembering our martyrs from the past, while concluding with a stirring rendition of the Holocaust Kaddish.

Among all those I remember today, I especially observe Yizkor, for my sister Jackie who died three years ago and my father Max who died almost 2 years ago.

Now that some time has passed since that very difficult period in the life of my family, and after experiencing the many different rituals of mourning prescribed by our religion, let me share the most powerful ways I feel closest to my father and my sister.

On August 25, I drove to Rehobeth Beach in order to spend the day with my late sister's daughters, and their families.

We had a wonderful day together and it was especially gratifying to watch my sister's daughters and grandchildren laugh and play and remind me more and more of her.

Several times throughout the day my nieces told me I was acting like their Zayde.

Once I was even told that I smell like him.

I have discovered that more often than not, I get the greatest satisfaction in remembering my father, when someone tells me that whatever I am doing is reminiscent of him.

Usually that makes me very proud, and almost always it makes me very happy, even when accompanied with tears.

Just like many of you, I kindle Yizkor candles in my home to burn during Yom Kippur.

I also do this on the other three times of the year when we observe Yizkor, and in observance of my loved ones Yahrtzeits.

The most impactful moment of this ritual occurs not when I kindle the candles, but rather on the following morning when I come downstairs and enter the kitchen.

I am almost always startled when I notice the candles burning, because when I first see them it takes a moment to process why these unusual candles are there.

And then I REMEMBER!

And then I realize that what we learn in the Biblical Book of Proverbs is true:

Ner HaShem Nishmat Adam - The Human Soul is a light from God.

God is reminding me that my soul is connected to the souls of my loved ones who have died.

And that comforts me on this day, my favorite holiday, more than any other day of the year.

May Ner Hashem, the light of God, illuminate our lives and the lives of all our loved ones in this world and beyond.

and let us say

Amen