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What Works: Personalizing the High Holy Days

"The High Holy Days only 'work' when people have done the spiritual work of preparing for them," says Rabbi Laura Geller.

This past year, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills created an opportunity for congregants to do that work. Every temple member was invited to send in a story of a moment in their lives when the High Holidays were particularly meaningful. Carey, for example, wrote of her mother's kugel (noodle pudding), which she makes for the daughter who never knew her grandmother. Jeff described his High Holiday experience as a 13-year-old surrounded by his paternal grandfather, father, grandmother, and mother—all gone now. Still, he reflected, "those warm feelings have been deeply embedded in me. I can draw upon them every High Holiday season."



On each of the twenty-nine days of the month of Elul, one person's story was sent by email to every member of the congregation to help prepare people for the upcoming Days of Awe. The stories were also printed in a booklet distributed to the congregation on Rosh Hashanah. Several rabbinical sermons then focused on the power of personal stories to illuminate spiritual journeys, and congregants were given the opportunity to share their own stories with one other.

"Our Elul Reflections have profoundly deepened our sense of community," Rabbi Geller says. "Many people said that in synagogue they looked at the congregation a little differently...first of all because they realized how diverse and interesting the congregation was; and second, because they understood that everyone in the congregation has a story, just as they do. As one congregant wrote: 'This [experience] makes me feel connected and compassionate. It actually opens my heart.'"

For the last two years, Rabbi Paul Tuchman of Congregation Or Chadash in Damascus, Maryland has also experimented with a very personal High Holy Day approach involving taking stock during Elul. In advance of Rosh Hashanah 5768, he asked congregants to write answers to "What are you optimistic about, and why?" Then, rather than delivering a Rosh Hashanah sermon, he asked congregants to read some of the responses (edited to preserve anonymity). In one case a man with grown children read the words of a young mother, and in another, a college professor envisioned the success of a Little League team—but, as Rabbi Tuchman says, "The overall message shone through: These are the hopes and dreams of a congregation on the verge of a New Year." Encouraged by positive feedback, before Yom Kippur 5768, he asked the congregation, "In the light of Jewish tradition, what do you stand for?" and before Rosh Hashanah 5769, "What blessings have you received? What blessing do you seek? What blessing can you give?" (note: Rabbi Tuchman recommends not repeating the process more than once a year after the first year so as not to water down a much-anticipated temple event).

"Worshippers came to see each other in a new way and on a higher plane," he says, "recognizing depths and values in one another that are rarely revealed in ordinary conversation...and concentrating on what is best about themselves."

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