

Memory & Eternity

One fall when I was in rabbinical school, a friend texted me: Do you want to see a musical about 9/11?

I did not know that we were making musicals about 9/11.

I was surprised that, not even two decades later, there would be an audience for a musical about a relatively recent national tragedy.

I am so glad I said yes to the invitation to see *Come From Away*.

To call *Come From Away* a musical about 9/11 doesn't do the musical justice.

It tells the story of the 30+ planes that landed in Gander, Newfoundland with very little warning on September 11, 2001. Nearly 7,000 people were on those 30+ planes. The people of Gander welcomed these passengers—these *Come From Aways*—for four days while US airspace was closed. The population of Gander was only 9,000 people. The passengers who landed on September 11 nearly doubled the population of the town.

Most of the people who landed in Gander could not have located Gander, Newfoundland on a map. Gander was once famous as the place that trans-Atlantic flights refueled, but as planes became more sophisticated, the Gander airport became less important.

Until September 11, 2001, when it became the temporary home of thousands of people who were grounded while the world reeled from the tragedy of 9/11.

Today marks 25 since that terrible day in 2001.

Some of us in this room have strong memories of that day. We remember where we were and how we learned of the attacks and the aftermath of grief and mourning.

Some of us in this room were so little that we don't have any conscious memories of that day. We grew up knowing that those who raised us had lived through a horrifying reality.

And some of us in this room were born after September 11, 2001. We were born into a world where 9/11 had happened.

But all of us gathered here tonight have lived most of our lives in a post-9/11 world.

How do we sum up the past 25 years?

We've lived through H1N1, Ebola outbreaks, and Covid-19.

Natural disasters in Haiti and Nepal and New Orleans have killed thousands.

Police violence and gun violence have rocked communities throughout the United States.

The Arab Spring, unrest in South America, European Union politics, and a widespread refugee crisis have all impacted our global community.
The October 7 attacks in Israel were horrifying and heartbreaking.
The rise of antisemitism in our lifetime has been frightening and painful.

There have been positive developments too in the past 25 years.

The government repealed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”
The Supreme Court ruled for same-sex marriage in Obergefell v. Hodges.
Mars Rover Curiosity landed on its target.
Apple announced its first iPod.
A podcast called Serial set off a podcast craze.
The Cubs finally won the World Series.

Perhaps every generation says this, but the last 25 years have felt like an unstable whirlwind.

Tonight, on Erev Rosh HaShanah, we choose to sit together in this space to bring in a new year.
Tonight is the first night of 5787.
I take some comfort in knowing that in 5,787 years, the last 25 are probably not the absolute wildest in human history.

Jewish tradition has many names for Rosh HaShanah.
One of those names is Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance.
We ask God to remember us like God remembered our ancestors.
We are commanded to Zachor—Remember—several times throughout the Torah.

Remember that we were slaves in Egypt and that God freed us (Deuteronomy 5:15)
Remember what Amalek did to you when he attacked the most vulnerable of the Israelites on our way out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 25:17)
Remember the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8)

Memory is central to who we are as a Jewish people.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, a famous professor of Jewish history, wrote powerfully about the difference between memory and history. History can be explored through quantifiable data. Memory, Yerushalmi says, “seeks meaning” and “is spun from the soul.” “We create history,” he writes, but “memory creates us.”¹

On Rosh HaShanah, we ask God to remember us and we remember our history.
The times of great joy and of communal sorrow.
We pause from our lives to make memory a feature of our Jewish practice and we fortify ourselves by remembering that we are the descendants of Sarah and Abraham, of the scribes of Torah, of the sages who reimagined Judaism after the destruction of the Temple, of Jews from every age and place that sustained Jewish life.

¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor

Today—especially today—is a day of remembrance.

We also call Rosh HaShanah Hayom Harat Olam.

You’ve probably heard this translated as “today is the birthday of the world.”

The translation I prefer is “today is pregnant with eternity.”

The rabbis of the Talmud taught that the world was created on Rosh HaShanah, so today is the anniversary of the first day. A birthday.

But Hayom Harat Olam, a phrase that comes from the Rosh HaShanah afternoon shofar service, is an idea that goes beyond a simple anniversary.

“Today is pregnant with eternity” means that as we look to the year ahead, every possibility stands before us.

There are infinite potentialities that could come into existence.

The future that will exist will come into being by the choices that we make.

We should feel both excitement and awe at this prospect.

Yom HaZikaron asks us to look backward at where we’ve come from.

Hayom Harat Olam asks us to look forward to what might yet come into existence.

Tonight, I invite us to sit with both of these ideas: memory and expectancy.

To remember the 5,786 years that have led to this moment.

To hear the quiet whispers of hope in the recesses of our hearts.

To hold our wonder and our anxiety and our faith, that the future is not predetermined and our actions matter.

In Gander on September 11, 2001, nearly 7,000 people unexpectedly disembarked in a strange place.

Somewhere in the airport, there was a large map of the eastern seaboard.

Someone in the airport circled Gander and wrote “You Are Here.”

This phrase, “You Are Here,” becomes a refrain throughout the musical.

You are here, they sing

At the start of a moment.

On the edge of the world where the river meets the sea.

Here on the edge of the Atlantic,

On an island in between there and here.

Disoriented, afraid, and grieving, the 7,000 passengers needed someone to tell them where they were.

Someone can tell us our physical location.

Ultimately, though, only we can decide where we are and where we are going.

Tonight, we are here.

We begin the Days of Awe, ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.
An island in time between here and there.

Tonight, we are here.
On the anniversary of 9/11.
On the first evening of 5787.
Expectant with hopes and fears and wild dreams.

Tonight, we are here.
Where have we been?
Where will we go tomorrow?
