

## **Tashlich During the Days of Corona**

Rosh Hashanah 5781

Since we celebrate Rosh Hashanah this weekend, I thought I would share some thoughts about Tashlich.

First, a quick refresher. The Tashlich ceremony includes a few verses from Torah and the symbolic throwing of bread, pebbles or twigs into water to “cast away our sins”. Ideally, the water contains fish but any body of water, including the water in your home sink, is considered kosher for the purposes of this ritual. Jews typically practice this ritual during the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashana. This year is an exception because the first day of Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat so Tashlich will generally be practiced on the second day of the holiday.

It is important to note that we are not commanded to observe Tashlich. As is the case with more Jewish rituals than we generally realize, Tashlich lacks the force of law and is merely a custom. Scour the Tanach and the Talmud you will not find a reference to Tashlich anywhere.

Most authorities say that Tashlich began as a mystical – some might say superstitious - practice in the 1400s, making it relatively new by Jewish standards. Several rabbis worked to imbue the ritual with powerful symbolism. Rabbi Moses Isserles who died in 1572, describes Tashlich as a moment to contemplate God’s control of the world and our need to follow God’s wisdom lest we invite disaster. He writes that the depth and expansiveness sea symbolizes alludes to the existence of a single Creator who created the world but can also destroy the world as God did in bringing on the flood.

Symbolism aside, many rabbis have expressed concerns about Tashlich over the centuries. In the 1700s, in response to the Kabbalah inspired Messianic fervor associated with Shabbtai Zevi, a rationalist school of Spanish & Portuguese anti-Kabbalists worked to expunge all traces of mystical superstition – including Tashlich – from their Jewish practice. Some argued that the custom was particularly dangerous because it created the impression that by literally throwing one’s sins into the sea one might “escape” responsibility for one’s sins without repentance or tshuva. I was born into that rationalist tradition and grew up thinking of Tashlich as a ‘bubbe meiseh’ to quote my Hungarian grandmother.

My family moved to Princeton in 2005 and we quickly became quite close with Rabbi Adam Feldman, Sara, Talia, Dena and Ilan. Our kids were roughly the same age and we lived close to each other on Prospect Avenue. When Rosh Hashana 2006/5767 came around, Adam told me that he wanted to organize a congregational walk down Prospect Avenue on the way to Tashlich at Lake Carnegie. He thought a big public walking group would promote the ritual and it would also make the nearly one mile walk to the lake more fun for his young kids. I started to offer my principled objections to Tashlich but he stopped me quickly. “Forget about that stuff,” he said, “just join me, Sara and the kids for a walk.” We waited outside our house for the Feldman-Bucholtz family that first afternoon of Rosh Hashana 5767 and were part of a Tashlich ceremony for the first time.

Over the following years, our walk to Tashlich became an annual tradition. More and more families joined. Some were TJC members but many were not. I never became comfortable casting my sins into the lake but I came to appreciate how Adam wisely saw Tashlich as an opportunity bring our community together. I especially enjoyed the chance Tashlich offered to pray outside with fellow Jews. Whether we realized it or not, when we davened and sang in full view of the Princeton rowers and the Route 27 truckers, we were making a public statement about our pride as Jews and our commitment to our rituals. I could not help but think that Adam made Rosh Hashana a little bit like Hannukah by advertising the joy and that comes from observing our traditions and spending time with our co-religionists.

Given TJC’s decision to cancel communal Tashlich, I plan to suggest that my family forgo Tashlich altogether this year. Even though Tashlich is about as Covid safe as any ritual, I still think casting one’s sins into the sea is a bubbe meiseh. After Rosh Hashana Zoom services, I intend to share my personal

Hashkafa, or worldview, with my kids while they are captive in my house and have no place else to go. But once the plague passes, and we can meet again as a congregation, I will look forward to following my Princeton minhag of walking with my fellow Jews to Lake Carnegie on the first day of Rosh Hashana. My personal beliefs are certainly important but my friend and teacher Adam Feldman Zichrono L'Vracha taught me that any opportunity for our community to come together is to be cherished above all else.

As we look to forward to the start of 5781, may we all strive to honor Rabbi Feldman's memory by putting our differences aside and by using our energy to find more opportunities to come together as a community.

Shana Tova U'Metuka