

Sometimes it seems that history is variations on a theme. A major theme for us is communal religious practice, and like our ancient ancestors, we are right now finding it necessary to create a whole series of new variations. During the turbulent time leading up to the final destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, synagogues were gradually being established to serve as new centralized locations for worship that took place at the same time the offerings were being presented in the Temple – a sort of proto-livestream to give people the feeling that they were actually there. Soon, an innovative world of prayer replaced the old world of sacrifice, requiring heightened personal engagement and commitment. Our ancestors could take this form of worship with them wherever they went, creating many new and beautiful variations as they formed communities all over the world. Without this essential innovation, Judaism would not have survived.

Like our ancient ancestors, we find ourselves in a situation where we are unable to gather as usual for worship services and holidays. And like them, we have had to innovate to maintain cohesion and some semblance of normalcy. But unlike our ancestors, we have a whole array of modern media at our disposal, which thanks to creative minds and willing hearts, is serving us well. Livestreaming is one option, but we Jews do enjoy being active participants and interacting with other congregants. Enter Zoom, Skype, and Co. and a bit more normalcy is a mouse click away. Of course, things can and do go wrong, provoking emotions running the gamut from hilarity to fury; but for the most part, people have adjusted extremely well. Like so many congregations around the world, we have regular online Kabbalat Shabbat services, we have celebrated Pesach and Shavuot online, and have just come together for online Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur services. In this variation on the theme, quality takes precedence over quantity, and people have had to make some creative liturgical choices. My personal variation on this theme includes much communal participation. I love davening *with* people, not *at* them, something the pandemic has rendered impossible – unless it's done online, each participant safely at home. We can mute our microphones, or we can make what I like to call a “holy cacophony.” There is something irreplaceably precious about hearing each other's voices while singing and davening.

Now we are entering the week of Sukkot, and enjoying a meal huddled together in a small sukkah is out of the question. So is shaking the *lulav* and passing it from hand to hand. Virtual sukkot are popping up all over the world, but how can we fill them with meaning? One of the central themes of Sukkot is hospitality: “And you shall rejoice in your Festival – you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are within your cities.” (Deuteronomy 16:14) Since most of us can't be together physically outside of our immediate households, we once again go online. And in doing so, we can evoke an innovation of Isaac Luria in 16th century Safed: Welcoming the *ushpizin* into our sukkah. *Ushpizin* is the Aramaic word for *guests*, the 7 supernal “shepherds of Israel” mentioned in the Zohar, the 13th century foundational book of Kabbalah. Like the days of Omer counting between Pesach and Shavuot, each day of Sukkot is associated with one of the 7 lower *sephirot*, attributes of HaShem, and each day has its corresponding *ushpizin*. Recently their female counterparts have been added, with many variations on this theme. Here is one of them for you to ponder as you sit in your virtual sukkah:

- Day 1: *chesed* (love, compassion) – Abraham / Sarah
- Day 2: *gevurah* (discipline, judgment, restraint) – Isaac / Miriam
- Day 3: *tiferet* (balance, beauty, harmony) – Jacob / Dvorah
- Day 4: *netzach* (victory, endurance) – Moses / Hannah
- Day 5: *hod* (splendor, but also humility) – Aharon / Avigail
- Day 6: *yesod* (foundation, connection) – Joseph / Huldah
- Day 7: *malchut* (kingship, royalty) – King David / Queen Esther

And my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Rebecca Kushner, has created a practical idea for an edible *lulav*: Leek, Italian kale, carrot or beet greens, and a lemon. Tie everything but the lemon together. Go outside, or at least open a window and breathe deeply. Hold the bundle in your right hand and the lemon in your left, put them together and recite the *Shechiyanu*. Then shake the edible *lulav* in all directions. Afterward, you can make a stew, adding lentils and whatever else strikes your fancy. Put it in your favorite bowl and bring it into your virtual sukkah to enjoy with your friends.

Someday the pandemic will be behind us, but many of the innovations it has spawned have the potential to enrich our services with new, delightful variations on the theme of communal religious practice. The future is full of possibilities.

Shabbat shalom and chag Sukkot sameach!