

Jewish, Pregnant & Stranded in the Time of Covid



the elul project

It's safe to say that this is an Elul that none of us could have ever imagined. A year ago, it would have been unthinkable that many of us might not attend services on the next set of High Holidays, or that spending those holidays with our families would be impossible.

For me, there's an added extra set of unexpected circumstances — I'm pregnant with my first child, due right after the holidays, and, as an American expat from New York living in Sydney, half a world away from my family.

All of this makes for a complex High Holiday experience this year.

On one hand, my due date is just six weeks away — barely the blink of an eye. On the other, I have to get through all of the holidays in that time: I have to cook for Rosh Hashana, figure out how to make Yom Kippur meaningful without fasting or davening in shule, direct my husband (a tall and wonderful mensch, but not quite as handy as I am) in putting up and decorating our sukkah, cook for another two sets of two-day yontifs, all the while growing increasingly rounder, less sure on my feet, and probably more tired than I've ever been. It's certainly possible I could go into labour before my due date, which would complicate things considerably, especially if it happens on a chag. Everything is uncertain.

That's one level of what's happening in my brain. And on another level, I'm thinking about what the holidays will actually be like. By now we're all familiar with the COVID-19 precautions synagogues are taking — limited services, social distancing, masks, no choirs, no communal kiddushes or meals. It will be a total shock to our collective Jewish system. So much of what makes the holidays meaningful has been taken away.

But the differences don't end there. Both logistically and spiritually, I feel the entire experience of the High Holiday season has turned on its head.

Last year on the High Holidays, I knew what I could pray for, what would make sense, what I could reasonably expect. I was newly married and wondering if I'd be pregnant the next time the Yamim Noraim rolled around. I was in shule, surrounded by hundreds of other worshippers and immersed in an atmosphere of communal prayer and spiritual energy. I prayed that the coming year would be one of growth and positive change. I prayed that we would be welcomed and embraced by our new community at The Great Synagogue in Sydney, where my husband had just begun his job as Associate Rabbi. I prayed that I would learn and do my duty as a so-called rebbetzin, whatever that meant.

This year, I get to be thankful that many of last year's prayers were answered, and bountifully. I'm pregnant, and we're about to start our family; we enjoyed a wonderful first year in our new home, and we finally feel settled; we are happy, healthy, and ready to face the future.

But that's just one side of the story.



ABRA KAPLAN

Abra Kaplan is a New York-born writer and blogger living in Sydney with her husband Rabbi Phil Kaplan, Associate Rabbi of the Great Synagogue. She has degrees in English literature from Binghamton University and Hebrew University.

ABOUT THE ELUL PROJECT

An initiative aiming to share stories and teachings from Jewish women leaders in our community. Whilst many of us are stuck at home, or isolated from family over Elul and the High Holy Days, we hope this project will serve to inspire, nurture, and uplift during this difficult time.

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While the past year was certainly one of the best of my life, it was also a time of transition, fear, uncertainty, and chaos, both for me and for the world at large. I grew into my identity as a married woman and the partner of a community leader, but I also had many doubts about how I was doing in this complicated role. I became pregnant, but I was also terrified of something going wrong. I finally got used to the idea that we were going to be parents, and then the world abruptly shut down, and an impenetrable barrier sprung up between me and my family.

While I was preparing for my life to change in the most drastic way, suddenly all of life changed, and all of the expectations I had had were gone.

To some extent, this is true for everyone. I doubt the pandemic neatly fit into anyone's plans for 2020. For me, COVID-19 challenged every assumption I had made about my pregnancy and my baby. Most painfully, it means that none of our parents or relatives will be able to visit after the birth, and in fact, we have no idea when they will meet the first grandchild/niece/nephew to be born on either side.

I think that we're all facing something like this now. We all thought we knew what life would be like, and we were all wrong. There's clearly a lesson in this: we're not really in control, and we have to have faith that it's all part of a larger picture. In one sense, that's always been the central theme of the High Holidays: it's a moment when we bow to the bigness of divine destiny, when we acknowledge that we are at the mercy of God. COVID-19 has thrown this lesson into stark relief.

What I wish for all of us — and myself — is that with all of the uncertainty swirling around us this holiday season, we can find strength, and stay rooted, in the bedrock of our traditions, altered as they may be this year. Things are different, no question, and in ways we never saw coming. But there's comfort in the idea that whatever is going on in the world, we know who we are and before whom we stand. I don't know when I'll go into labour, when my newborn will meet his or her family for the first time, or what life will be like a month from now. I don't know what the holidays will feel like, or how the collective Jewish experience will be affected by this pandemic year. I do know, though, that some things won't change. We will be called to account, as we are every year, in moments of deep introspection, fervid prayer, fear and joy. The holidays will come, sweep us up with alternatively breathless momentum and endless tedium, and they will go. We will face the seemingly insurmountable heap of tasks to be done, and we will do them.

We don't know what will happen this year. But here's the thing: we never do. COVID-19 has simply removed the illusion that we, and not God, are the masters of our own universes.

So I'm going to plunge into this year's High Holidays, and my impending motherhood, with that in mind. I'm going to face the differences, the disappointments, the confusion and limitations, and I'm going to hold fast to this message at the center of it all: I may not be in control, but I trust the One who is.

Shana Tova u'Metukah — Have a happy, sweet New Year.



ABRA KAPLAN