



# Days of Awe

'Tis the season to be maudlin and overstuffed – *Yom Tov*, the *chaggim*, or *Jewish New Year*, as you capitalize it to your work colleagues.

Aside from the *shprausy* new clothes, the indigestion and the huge bite taken out of your holiday allowance, the whole Rosh Hashana/Yom Kippur period has two defining elements for me, two great Anglo-Jewish institutions: the Rosh Hashana Express and the Yom Kippur Appeal.

Let's take them the wrong way round.

Because Kol Nidrei is the biggest gig in the Anglo-Jewish calendar, with a sizeable proportion of Jews of all flavours and shades making it to shul, we do the obvious thing. We make an appeal. We lay the collective woes of our people at the feet and bank balances of *landsleit* we'd lost touch with.

The Kol Nidrei Appeal Old Style pulled the guilt strings about two things: a sense of shame about not having given up our comfortable existences to go live on a kibbutz, so we should give something. Or about Soviet Jewry having a terrible time in our generation, so we should give something. You sense a theme emerging.

Nowadays, it's a little different – we're asked to give money to Israel, because we have neither the guts nor gumption not just to go live there but, for many of us, not even to visit. And because we feel terribly sorry about The Situation – we should give something. Maybe then we'll feel better.

It seems that today Israelis have taken over from refuseniks in the Diaspora conscience; now they have been allocated the hallowed status of 'They're the people we're glad we're not', and we, the Diaspora Jews, give to salve our consciences. *'Rather them than me.'*

I have a secular friend who says he's a three-times-a-year Jew – Purim, Simchat Torah and Chanukah. Why, he asks, would he want to do all that depressing mumbly stuff instead of the fun party stuff, if he's only coming a couple of times?

The Yom Tov Express is the train you take to *der heim* (Leeds, Bournemouth, Glasgow, Manchester) even if you've lived in London for 20 years and have three children, because family's family, and what's a Yom Tov without an argument?

So the train's heaving with everyone you've ever met

doing the same tail-between-their-legs shtick: it doesn't matter if you're the managing partner of a huge City law firm or a successful TV actor – when you go home for Yom Tov, you revert to being a recalcitrant adolescence.

I can't help wondering – at what point in a Jewish family are you allowed to grow up? At what point are you your own person, running your own life without helpful suggestions, regular newspaper clippings – in an era where everyone under 40 gets most of their information from the Internet – and a nanny-*shidduch* you don't know how to get out of?

And while reverting to teenagehood in the presence of your family may not be exclusive to the Anglo-Jewish experience (it's also the universal non-Jewish experience, viz Christmas), we do it in our own special way.

How we behave when we're with the family has been replicated in Jewish communal life. A handful of people run most communities and communal organizations, and while *they* moan about everyone else's apathy *we're* pretty comfortable largely abrogating responsibility to the *lamed-vavniks* with an outmoded sense of public duty. Just like going home when you're pushing 40 for Grandpa to lead the seder.

There's clearly a generational difference in how people perceive communal institutions today. My Dad and all his friends ran the shul in their 30s, while most of my thirty-something contemporaries have a relationship with their synagogue that resembles the one that they have with their gym: you pay your £500, you get your towel – you don't *owe* them anything.

Maybe how we behave over the Yom Tov dinner table tells us something about how we view our communal institutions. Perhaps we don't just need family therapy – we need community therapy. There are a few important issues around power we need to resolve.

*And all this because of a train journey?*

Maybe, in this the season of peace and goodwill to all men (whoops, wrong season; what season is it, again?), one of the lessons for us around New Year is to work out what our personal contribution – be it time, money or *chaishik* – to the future of our community should be. ©