

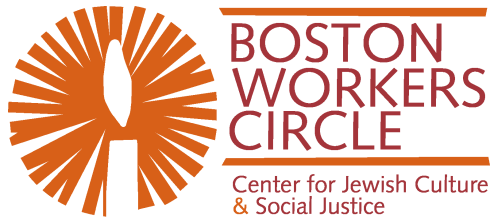
D'varist: Jonah Sidman  
Yom Kippur  
Sept. 16, 2021 / 5782

Good morning and good yontif. When I was asked to reflect today about my experiences during the last year and a half, I didn't feel incredibly enthusiastic. Usually, I have a lot to say and even when there's no one there to listen, so this would normally be the kind of thing I would jump at. But this year I didn't really feel like I had much to talk about. All the isolation has left me not feeling very engaged with the world, made worse from arguing with friends and loved ones over things like the 2020 election, and Israel, and masking and vaccines. I've been barely following the news, letting my partner be the one to keep track of the effectiveness of different kinds of masks, and how the local and national case numbers are trending.

Fortunately, I was asked to talk about my own experiences, and not about everything happening in the world. But still, I haven't found anything about this pandemic to be particularly enjoyable or inspiring or revelatory. But today is Yom Kippur, and even if sharing my experiences fails to be interesting then that failure itself would be thematically appropriate to the concept of missing the mark—so really there was no way I could lose!

I'm being a bit hard on myself—I have been keeping busy and there really are some wonderful things in my life right now. As Judy mentioned when she introduced me, I've been teaching a whole lot of Yiddish classes here at the Boston Workers Circle. Usually, we offer spring and fall classes only, but last year I figured that there might be an increased interest so I asked the Workers Circle if they would be interested in my teaching winter and summer classes as well. I've received a lot of thanks for the great service I've provided to our community. Considering that I was laid off from my regular full-time job due to COVID, I'd like to extend a thanks back to the community for nobly stepping up to keep me employed this whole time.

But actually, teaching Yiddish for BWC has been an absolute joy for me. I've discovered that I myself am a terrible student over Zoom during the several times I've taken remote classes as a student, so I've really appreciated the consistent dedication of the dozens and dozens of people I've met over the past year and a half of teaching. They say that ideally, a teacher will end up learning more from their students than the other way around. As any teacher can tell you, that makes absolutely no sense. But if there's any shred of truth in it it has to apply to Yiddish classes, which in my experience consistently draw a truly intergenerational mix of students with a huge range of knowledge and experiences, reasons for wanting to learn the language, and interests in the Yiddish-speaking world. I can pretty much always count on there being someone to fill all the very large gaps in my knowledge, whether it's the Hebrew etymology of a



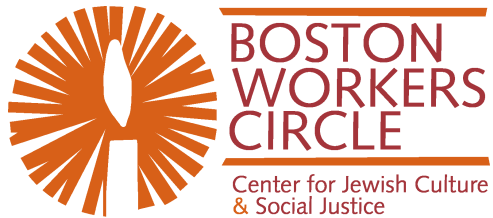
word, or the Talmudic origins of a Yiddish curse, or the history of Yiddish labor politics. So I do learn a lot. And more than that, every time I start with a new group of beginners I actually get a little thrill when I remember how significant a moment it was in my own life when I first started learning Yiddish in a Boston Workers Circle class and that it's likely also the case for my students as well. Learning a language means discovering a whole world of a beautiful living culture, and with a language like Yiddish in particular this can be a very personal journey. I myself began my study of Yiddish right here at BWC, so it really feels like an honor and a privilege to me to be a part of this moment for other people.

In addition to teaching Yiddish here at BWC, I've also been the Shule music teacher through our transition to Zoom classes and will continue to teach music as we transition back to in-person learning. And I also feel incredibly lucky to work with our Shule students, who log onto Zoom every couple of weeks with an unbelievable amount of enthusiasm to learn about Jewish culture through a screen.

So I've been busy, arguably even useful (my 7-month-old baby who I've been parenting full-time might particularly approve of my efforts). But I still feel I haven't been my best self, and when I was asked to speak today I had to remind myself that probably none of us feels like our best selves right now, that probably most of us rarely feel like our best selves even when there isn't a pandemic, and that if anything, the expression of this feeling is probably never more appropriate than it is on Yom Kippur.

So I'll just go ahead and list all the marks I missed during this pandemic. My lofty goals for self-improvement back in the early days included learning to speak Armenian, setting aside time every day for activism, improving my Klezmer violin playing, practicing Irish bouzouki, baking Challah and bagels every week, and getting any exercise at all. I haven't even managed to attend most of the BWC events I normally would—it turns out that staring at a dozen little boxes, constantly trying to figure out when to unmute and never quite doing it, doesn't quite fill my human need for social engagement. I'm going to have to try to forgive myself for not quite doing all the things I might have liked, and appreciate that at the very least, my students and my baby would agree that I did a few things pretty well and that in so doing I filled a particular need in my community.

And that makes me think about all the little bits or big bits of work that all of you have done to contribute to our community over the last year and a half because the fact is that our community is thriving. Our social justice committees continue to share calls to action and provide educational opportunities. Despite not being able to actually sing together, our Besere Velt chorus put on an amazing multimedia online concert that's still receiving active views on



YouTube. Our last two B'nai Mitzvah classes pulled off amazing online and hybrid graduation ceremonies. Our education programming has served over a hundred adult students.

Regardless of how tired and isolated we may have been, we've all added to our community's activism and its full calendar of social and cultural events. It makes me proud to have contributed with you and to know that we are all here to pick up the slack for each other where we can. Our community is alive, healthy, relevant, righteous, fun, and loving, and I'm looking forward to another year with you all!