

Rabbi Rachel Joseph
 Congregation Beth Israel
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 “Embracing Change”

I moved this summer, from the house I lived in the longest since my childhood home. (I became a “West-sider” – don’t hold it against me.) Packing and unpacking is a pain. But it can be reflective -- for me at least. In previous moves, I hired movers to put everything in boxes -- did you know they’ll even box up your trash?! For this move, I committed to going through everything in the house first and it was amazing what I discovered. I found so many baby toys, a high chair, and even a diaper pail -- my son is almost 9 years old! I found furniture, knicknacks, and other stuff from my ex that we never got around to separating when we divorced five years ago. I sifted through a file box from my early career in Washington, DC. The pictures, credentials from national marches, gallery passes from important congressional votes. Some things I threw away, others I couldn’t imagine throwing away. Not because they were useful, but because they were memories of a different time in my life. A different me: full of different dreams of what my life would look like. I still wanted to hold onto them. I am not ready to let go.

I used to say I wasn’t sentimental; I was just busy. Turns out, I am sentimental. I like to grasp every item in my hands, and examine the artifact. (Everyone tells me I need to watch Japanese organizing consultant Marie Kondo.) I review, evaluate and account for every item. I have to decide: Should I keep it? Or throw it away? Is it meaningful to me? It takes time.

A few weeks ago, I stopped at Starbucks on my way to work and ended up in an impromptu birthday celebration and catch up session with a few congregants. The topic of High Holiday sermons entered the conversation ... “what are you going to talk about, rabbi?” and my response: “what do you want to hear?” The conversation quickly turned reflective: “we are all carrying around so much baggage -- year after year, the same stuff -- how do we get rid of it? What do we put in its place?”

Throughout my move, there were times when I wished that some burglars would’ve just stolen everything. We’d be starting over. Fresh. No baggage to hold us back. Everything going forward would be new. We wouldn’t hold on to our past. It would be easier, right?

It sounds appealing, but it’s not the Jewish way. In Judaism, we honor the past as we look towards the future. Tonight begins Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is often translated as “head of the year.” That translation isn’t incorrect. Of course *rosh* means head, and *shanah* means year. But Hebrew is a deep language. Words that share roots are variations on a theme. And because of that, “Rosh Hashanah” also has a deeper meaning. *shanah* holds hints of another word in its word-root family tree: *shinui*¹, which means change. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of change.

5780 years ago, our tradition suggests, everything was clean and fresh. Everything that God unpacked was brand new. Today, our world is no longer new or fresh. Many things are

¹ Shmuel Bolozky, *501 Hebrew Verbs*, p.816.

broken and need to be repaired. Other things just need freshening up. So now, as we do at this time every year, we go through our stuff and take stock. What will we keep and what will we trash? We take an inventory, and put everything in its rightful place. Every box we unpack fills us with memories. Each object we grasp from the distant past or recent months holds a memory. That is the blessing and opportunity of these days.

The question is, in the face of all of this change, what is our response? Will we face it, honor it, and allow it to transform us? Will we grow?

Change is inevitable. Authentic spiritual life requires us to be open to change. Because change is always happening, whether we want it to or not.

Our morning liturgy contains a powerful verse that is all about daily re-creation, daily change². “*Uv'tuvo m'chadeish b'chol yom tamid, ma'asei v'reisheet*—In Your goodness, You daily renew creation.” Creation renewed daily. What a concept! We look forward to what each new day can offer us. We recognize the goodness that God provides for us. The world was created in six days, declares the book of Genesis, but it didn't stop then. The world is constantly being reviewed, repaired and renewed.

We are also constantly being reviewed, repaired, renewed, and changed.

Relationships change for us all; we know this when we take stock of our personal lives.

Sometimes that's truly dramatic -- two people decide to marry, or to end a marriage. Sometimes it's subtle -- a friendship slowly disintegrates, or slowly deepens and becomes something rich and new. For families who are working to mend after a time of estrangement, for any of us who receive a worrisome diagnosis, for all of us who have been shaken by the hate in the world, relationships change. Because we change.

In my seven years at CBI, I have gone through so much change and I have seen so much change in all of you...

For the parents who take their child to college for the first time...and then experience them home for college breaks for the first time; for the adult children who help aging parents into assisted living, for the widow living with loss; for the retirees downsizing their homes (going thru far more boxes than I did...); for parents, like myself, who see their children snuggle less and begin to spend more time outside the house; for all of us, relationships change.

Our emotional lives change. We move through periods of grief and periods of joy. When life feels sweet, it's natural to want to hold on to that sweetness. And when life feels bitter, it's natural to yearn for a life that's "better than this." That may be especially true when the bitterness afflicts someone whom we love, because watching a loved one suffer can be harder than suffering ourselves. When life hurts, the promise of change can bring hope. When life is sweet,

² Yotzeir Or prayer, part of Sh'ma Uvirchoteha

the promise of change can feel threatening. But either way, the fact of change isn't optional. (Pro tip: there is no change that isn't sometimes difficult.)

We don't get to choose change. Whether change is pursued, or foisted upon us, here's what we do get to choose: whether to fight change, or to embrace it and flow with it. It may seem as though the opposite of change is comfort and familiarity. But the opposite of change is stasis, and ultimately stasis is death. If we're alive, we're changing. We don't get to choose not to change.

But we do get to choose how gracefully we allow change to shape us. When change comes, we can choose to let it make us more brittle, or we can choose to deepen our resilience. We can choose anger and fear, or we can choose to renew faith and trust. When change comes and we feel a sense of loss, we can choose to resist it, or we can choose to let it flow through until a newfound sense of freedom lifts us up.

We cannot choose change - but we can choose how we respond. Will we face it, honor it, and allow it to transform us? Will we grow?

In their meditation for change, Rabbi Irwin Kula and Professor Vanessa Ochs suggest we recite the following to God: “God, help me to take a good look at my life and give me the courage to make the changes I want to make. Guide me on my journey as I strive to make good changes, in myself and in the world in which I live.”³

In my family, at the end of each day, we go around the table and everyone shares the best and worst part of their day. This is much better than the alternative question: how was your day? And the inevitable response: fine . ;-) A few weeks ago, I discovered new questions while visiting my sister, and her family -- she asks her children: “How were you brave today?” “How were you kind today?” “How did you fail today?” -- (based on the writing of Meg Conley.)⁴ Each question is an opportunity to uncover powerful truths about ourselves. And by uncovering these truths, we have the ability to evolve and change each day.

Our annual review during these Days of Awe begin with this type of inventory. While Conley's “best and worst” inventory isn't specifically Jewish, we are a people of questions: “Where am I today, where do I want to be in the future; and what do I need to do to get there?” Am I content or frustrated? Motivated or ambivalent? Hopeful or fearful? What do I need to change so that I better understand how God wants me to live? How can I embrace the best of what our sacred tradition teaches us about repentance and renewal?

One way to become our best selves is by asking ourselves these questions as part of this essential inventory, which our tradition calls *heshbon ha'nefesh*—an accounting of the soul. We examine our days and our deeds and ask key questions that guide our lives.

³ based upon a writing by Rabbi Irwin Kula and Prof. Vanessa Ochs in Elkins, RH Readings p. 230-232

⁴ <http://www.megconley.com/published-work> We Ask Our Kids the Same Three Questions Every Night

When we unclutter our lives and simplify them, we can devote more energy to what matters most—becoming whole and holy with ourselves and others.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg writes: “The High Holy Days teach us that we can change. They challenge us to break the curse of apathy and begin to live more intensely, to care more deeply. By becoming conscious of what we are doing, by being willing to change, we turn from serving time to living life. We create a new self: more loving, more vital, more connected to others.”⁵

Imagine how your life would be different a year from now if you make just one change during these Days of Awe. What is holding you back? What will it take for you to start? You don’t need to move, but maybe you need a wake-up call?

Rosh Hashanah and the sound of the shofar shakes us out of our narrow places. It is an alarm that reminds us that now is the time; this day, this moment, when we need to make a change, when we let go of the things from the past year that are holding us back, and open our arms wide to the potential of the new year.

We read tomorrow morning how Abraham thinks that sacrificing his son Isaac is the only way to fulfill God’s command, but it turns out that God had another way in mind and shows him the ram tangled in the thicket. Our midrash adds to the story by explaining that the ram kept trying to pull itself free but kept getting tangled up in the bushes. It’s kind of like the old children’s finger trap toy: the more you struggle, the more trapped you stay. But in reality, it’s a metaphor for the Jewish people who get caught in their sins and mistakes year after year.

Rabbi Yaffa Epstein teaches that: “It is not simply that the ram was caught by its horns in the thicket, but that the ram was repeatedly getting itself stuck. Just as it managed to free itself, it found its horns stuck in the next thicket. Many times in our lives, we are stuck in some problem or another, and just as we are getting over that problem, just as we are making progress, we find ourselves caught up in another issue, and another. It feels as though we can never change, grow, or move on. ...The cry of the shofar however, reminds us to raise our heads; to have faith in our potential to change. ...to see more clearly, and avoid those pitfalls that allow us to stay stuck. ...it is a wake-up call to us to have faith in our own potential for growth and change.”⁶

At this time of year, the clarion call of the shofar implores us: Repair yourself. Repair the world. Become whole once again. How do we do this? Through *heshbon ha'nefesh*, our soul review.

I want us to take a moment -- right now -- to think back to Rosh Hashana 10 years ago. Where were you? Who were you with? What did your life look like? For some of us this is a painful reminder of the people who are no longer sitting next to us in this new year. For others, we can look at the almost adult next to us and remember going to the tot services instead. There are those among us who had let the day pass like any other, . . . And where do we want to be?

⁵ Dov Peretz Elkins, *Moments of Transcendence, RH*, p. 118

⁶ Rabbi Yaffa Epstein, Pardes, <https://elmad.pardes.org/2018/08/the-pardes-rosh-hashanacompanion/>

Picture yourself in one year, in five years, in ten years...That picture is more hazy. You can't control how your life will change. But you can accept that it will.

The shofar itself teaches us a life lesson. The horn is curvy, not straight — and from that we learn that we, too, need to bend in the new year. We cannot hold ourselves stiff and unchanging; we need to be flexible if we are going to grow and change.

The shape of the shofar goes from narrow to wide — the same direction that it grows from the ram's head. The shape teaches us that we need to widen our view, that growth should make us more open-hearted to the people we love, more open-minded in the world and more open to change.⁷

This is the wake-up call that it is time to get unstuck, to get out of that narrow space and move towards something better.

Uv'tuvo m'chadeish b'chol yom tamid, ma'asei v'reisheet—In Your goodness, You daily renew creation.” This phrase resonates strongly and looks forward: In Your goodness, You daily allow us to change. Our High Holy Days provide us with the framework, the symbols, the rituals to repair the brokenness in our hearts and homes. Wholeness surrounds the brokenness that we can fix. And when we do, indeed, we become the person we are supposed to be.

It's Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of change. Will you let life change you this year?

What would it feel like to be more fully alive?

What would it feel like to let go of our expectations for who we'll be in 5780, and instead open ourselves to the flow of our own unfolding? We can't hold on to yesterday, no more than we can hold onto baby toys. But if we open our hands and our hearts, we can receive the changes of tomorrow.

On your way out of the sanctuary this evening, I want you to take a piece of dissolvable paper. We have the next ten days, until Yom Kippur, to look through our baggage and write down what we want to discard and dissolve it in water. Tomorrow, our community will gather at the SW Waterfront for a *Tashlich* ceremony -- an opportunity to release the mistakes and brokenness from last year and cast it off into the water; an opportunity to get rid of our baggage; an opportunity for change. Please join us for this important ritual. And if you are unable to join us tomorrow, I encourage you to find time to do this on your own before we gather on Kol Nidrei.

We all have lots of work to do. I know I do. I am mindful of this sacred opportunity to continually renew, continually be God's partner in creation and change so that I can become the person I want to be. Tonight, we find the power that God gave us to create ourselves anew. Tonight, we move assertively, courageously forward into this day of regeneration, of Rosh Hashanah, of change.

⁷ Inspired by Ba'al Tekiah, Ben Sandler, RJE.

This sacred task does not end the day after Yom Kippur. It is part of the process of daily renewal, of daily change. We have to return to those boxes, dig through them, keep what is essential and discard what takes up space.

God gave Jews the possibility to change.

The desire to change is all up to us.

So I ask you: can you make change?

Can WE make change.

Will we face it, honor it, and allow it to transform us? Will we grow?

I believe in you. I believe in us.

Shana Tovah!