

Changing into More of Ourselves

Rosh HaShanah 5784 Day 1

The legendary king Theseus ruled in Athens. In gratitude for his heroism, his people turned his ship into a memorial in the harbor. Over the years, its wooden planking began to rot. So the Athenians replaced the rotting planks with fresh ones so that future generations would continue to enjoy visiting the ship.

This story became the basis for a famous thought experiment: once you begin replacing the planks, is this still the **same** ship of Theseus? Is there a point at which enough of the ship could be replaced that it would no longer be “Theseus’ ship?” To put it another way...**can things stay the same even after they experience change?** That question may be up for debate by philosophers, and it’s a great question for us today.

One of the major themes of Rosh HaShanah is change. This theme is part of the holiday’s name – “shanah,” meaning “year.” This word comes from the same Hebrew root for the word “l’shanot,” meaning “to change.” Throughout the High Holiday season, we are encouraged to balance ourselves between how much we want to stay the same and, of particular interest for us today, about how we want to be different in the coming year.

That being said, from a Jewish perspective, change actually happens far more often than once a year at Rosh HaShanah. Every morning, even on

holidays and Shabbat, we recite a blessing that says just how often change happens:

“Ha-M’chadeish b’tuvo b’chol yom tamid ma’asei b’reishit,”
God, in God’s goodness, renews the works of Creation every day always.

God ensures the continuity of our world through this process of renewal.

Since we also are part of Creation, part of God’s “ma’asei b’reishit,” we also change and can be renewed each day.

The saying “the only thing constant in life is change,” actually expresses a profound paradox about our existence. That we do not remain the same over time, that the world and we change continually – is woven into the very fabric of Creation. This constant change is a holy paradox. We have the opportunity to look for and to discover the potential for the sacred in our lives each time we make a step towards something new. Engaging in this mindful observation requires us to listen for the divine within our being so that we can become better versions of ourselves.

Better versions of **ourselves**.

That last word is important to bear in mind as we think about and encounter change. Even as we experience changes – personally or in the world around us – we remain ourselves.

Nevertheless, just because change is a constant and we are always ourselves does not mean that changing is easy or comfortable. Another paradox

about change is that it always involves creating or gaining something new while at the same time losing something old. Back at Tisha b'Av, I shared a quote from *Sandman*, the graphic novel series by author Neil Gaiman, recently made into a Netflix series. In a conversation between two main characters, one of them says:

“Destruction is needed. Nothing new can exist without destroying the old. Things are created. They last for some little while, and then they are gone. Empires, cities, poems and people. Atoms and worlds. One cannot begin a new dream without abandoning the last...”¹

Perhaps we hear something painful and irrevocable in the words “destruction” and “destroying.” When we recall the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem or any of the other historical events we commemorate at Tisha b'Av, that destruction **was** painful and could not be undone. And even if we can acknowledge the incredible new ways of life which emerged out of those destructive moments, the destruction itself still hurts.

Not all destruction has to hurt. Even when we have not chosen the destruction, we can choose to build anew or pursue a different path. Other times, we might choose to get rid of or let go of something in order to create something new.

As a lighthearted example, let me tell you something about my kids' experience with LEGO.

¹ “Brief Lives,” Chapter 8, *Sandman*.
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LEGO is a particularly brilliant building toy. You can purchase sets in which you follow instructions to build any number of objects, such as a car or a house, or even a dragon. When my kids would build sets, they often would display the finished products on shelves in their room. And then?

They would ask for more sets. Eventually, they ran out of room on their shelves, and we had to tell them they would need to decide which sets they were willing to take apart to make room for the new. My kids did not like being presented with this decision. They did not want to **destroy** what they had spent hours creating, even for the possibility of new sets.

The real brilliance of LEGO is not in the sets they offer. You don't have to buy a set in order to build LEGO. You can buy **just** the bricks, a big box of bricks and miscellaneous accessories, and build anything you can imagine. When my kids finally figured out which sets they were willing to take apart, they also discovered that they could save the pieces for rebuilding later, OR they could build something new from those bricks. Over the years, many of the sets became mixed together in various containers with thousands of LEGO pieces. My kids began to appreciate building things of their own designs at least as much as they enjoyed building a set with instructions. They had to be willing to break the completed sets to discover this new way of engaging with LEGO – destruction for the sake of creating something new.

Leading up to and during the High Holidays, our tradition encourages us to look back over the past year and decide, like my kids did with their LEGO, what we want to keep on our shelves, what we want to keep the same, and what we want or need to change – either by letting go of something or choosing a new approach. This year, in particular, I would like to suggest a framework for our spiritual reflections as we begin this process.

First, let's name, acknowledge, and make room for our emotional responses to change. Whether or not we have chosen a change we are experiencing, we may well have more than one feeling about it. On the one hand, we might feel excited about what opportunities or blessings might arise from a particular change. On the other hand, we might feel a sense of loss or grief at what we no longer will have or do.

As a very personal example, I experienced a **huge** change this year when I was ordained as a rabbi. Leading up to the big day, many people asked me if I was excited. I grappled with this question, because it felt more complex to me than those asking me seemed to imply. After some time reflecting on why answering a seemingly easy yes-no question was difficult for me, I realized that “excitement” was an inadequate description for my feelings. Yes, I was excited, but I also was relieved, a little wistful, and at times quite terrified. I felt thrilled to be returning to Temple Emanu-El, a community that already had been such a warm and nurturing place for me. I was relieved to be done with school

assignments, but I was sad to be leaving the beit midrash, the study hall where I had wrestled and learned and developed deep and meaningful relationships with texts and people alike. In short, my feelings about ordination were layered and somewhat complicated, even regarding a moment I had long anticipated.

After ordination, I took a few days away by myself to let the reality set in. I allowed myself to explore and express the many different feelings I had about this change. I celebrated the accomplishment – wow! I made it! – and I grieved the loss – oh, when next I walk through the doors of Hebrew College, I will not be seen as a part of the student community anymore. Rest assured, any sadness or worry I felt upon being ordained is more than balanced by the gains in my new role!

When you look back over this past year and the changes you have experienced, or when you look ahead into the new year and anticipate what might be different, what feelings arise for you? What do you want to celebrate or feel joyful or excited about? What do you need to grieve? There are no right or wrong answers, and each of us will have our own unique responses to our experiences. Allowing ourselves the time to identify and feel whatever emotions come up with respect to past or future changes will help us to step into the new year with a clearer sense of who we are and how we want to be.

Change does not only happen with individual people. Change occurs within groups – to families, neighborhoods, and yes to congregations. To state the

obvious and name the elephant in the room, Temple Emanu-El has experienced significant changes over the past few years. This year there are more new people than returning people on our bima team, and that's only the start of the changes within our community. Since 2019, when I was your intern, new people have joined the board and become committee chairs; we have a new temple administrator and a new religious school director; we are blessed also to have some new members! And... Temple Emanu-El has a new rabbi.

You likely have mixed feelings about these changes, and this is to be expected. Maybe there are changes or results of changes that excite you or that you want to celebrate. And maybe you feel some loss and need to grieve those losses. I invite and encourage you to give yourself the time and space to do just that. During these High Holidays, these Days of Awe, explore your feelings and allow yourself to express them. You might choose to share your thoughts and feelings with close friends or family, or perhaps you prefer to journal about your experiences. And, of course, after the High Holidays, I invite you to connect with me as well. You can set up an appointment using the Calendly link in the weekly email; call the temple office, or send me an email. I would be delighted to continue learning together with you in this new year. However you choose to engage with your feelings, it is through that process of acknowledging and honoring our feelings that we can find the potential blessings in the changes and embrace the possibilities for the future.

As you are engaging in this reflection about past changes, you might find yourself anticipating changes yet to come. Looking at how we have changed and how we might continue to transform is well within the spirit of this season.

Throughout your process of spiritual discernment, let's remember that change is an essential part of God's creation, that change is necessary for our world to continue. In fact, even in the case of Theseus' ship, as I mentioned at the beginning, the ship was still identified and recognized as Theseus' ship after many repairs including the replacement of significant parts of the ship. The ship was not being made into something else or even into someone else's ship. Instead, the ship was transformed into a memorial, a storytelling device for future generations to learn about their history. The ship was still itself, and it was something more of itself.

And so it is with us. When we experience change, individual or communal, one we choose or one which happens to us, we still remain ourselves. And we become something more than ourselves. We become m'chudash, renewed, just like our prayers describe – renewed each day by God's goodness.

As we enter this new year of 5784 together, may we honor our experiences of change, open ourselves to the possibility of sacred renewal in every moment, and embrace the blessing of becoming ever-more ourselves together in this new year.