

Drasha for Kol Nidre 5771 - Change Happens

- Rabbi Ariel Stone

introductory

“You can’t step in the same river twice.”¹

Here we are again: *Kol Nidre* eve. Yet we have never been here before. That’s one of the wonderful paradoxes of life. I may be standing in exactly the same place, I might even be wearing the same clothes (after all, how often do you see me in white?) - but I’ve changed since last year. And since I’m part of the equation that equals “here and now” for this Shir Tikvah *Kol Nidre* moment, the change in me means that this moment cannot be the same since last year. And now, multiply the change in me over the past year by every soul in this sacred space. This is definitely not the same river.

It’s not the same river in more than one way. We occupy a lot of different “rivers”: our beloved and beleaguered State of Israel is on the cusp, we pray, of a good but difficult change. The American political discourse in which we participate continues to astonish. And our own little Shir Tikvah congregation has certainly undergone transition in this past year. Our congregation now has a steering committee made up completely of members who joined Shir Tikvah after its founding.

The curious thing about it is that, while change is inevitable and natural, it can still be so hard. The philosopher Hegel compared human existence to a river: there are currents, eddies in which you can waste a good deal of frustrated time feeling stuck, white water rapids, and some good-sized rocks submerged in there that can wreck your kayak - or your convictions. Think about the dams blocking salmon runs in Pacific Northwest rivers that are being blown up: the Sandy River, the Rogue River. Currently “heavy excavators are digging a channel to re-route the Elwha River. The 72.4 kilometer-long waterway has been blocked by the Elwha Dam and Glines

¹ Heraclitus, Greek philosopher, lived circa 500 BCE

Canyon Dam for 100 years.”² Sometimes change comes gently and incrementally, and sometimes it explodes upon us.

We, the people of memory, know as well as anyone on our planet that history is not easy. Jewish history has been full of rapids, and other challenges. Once in a while, something blows up: a peace process, or an organization, or a personal relationship. And you can never step in the same Jewish history twice, either. It has been suggested that the right image for Jewish history is not quite linear. Think of of a spiral,³ not a straight line; it never quite repeats. We rise each year, a few rungs farther up the ladder, a little closer to who we are meant to be. Like salmon, trying to make it up the river.

That rising requires us to grow, to adapt, and to change. But ever since we were wandering in the wilderness with Moshe, we’ve been sulky about it. Why must we fear change if it is inevitable? and, along with Job and so many others from our Jewish life story, we ask: why does it have to hurt?

I. Change is inevitable

Think of the chrysalis in which the caterpillar becomes a butterfly. Breaking out of there can’t be easy. But we have to do difficult things if we are to grow. We leave home and go out into the world. We make choices and regret them, and have to do the difficult work of making other choices, and making amends for the choices we made that didn’t work out. We come to know the narrow places that confine us, and we are challenged to break out of them, to blow up the damming of our spirit. One thing is for sure: to live is to change. Things happen to us, and we happen to them.

² <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/usa/Dams-Demolished-to-Make-Way-for-Salmon-102882339.html>

³ This insight is from Rabbi Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Curiously enough, though, when I started trying to read up on change in the traditional sources, I found that change is not particularly a Jewish concept. It's rather like happiness, it seems: one doesn't focus directly upon it if one wants to achieve it. In Jewish tradition, happiness results from doing *mitzvot*. Similarly, change results in the best possible way as a result of confronting the ethical challenges that take place in one's personal spiritual development.

I looked through a lot of Jewish literature trying to get a grip on the concept of change in Judaism. It's not so Google-able. But in the old tomes of Jewish classical religious philosophy there are some assertions about change.

In Jewish theological philosophy, the discussion begins from the proposal that change implies imperfection. Change is only necessary when life isn't perfect. Think about it. When, during a perfect sunny summer afternoon (I'm asking you to dream here) when you have been doing - or not doing - whatever it is that makes an afternoon perfect, have you ever thought, "time for a change"? It doesn't happen. Change implies a lack of perfection.

Jewish religious philosophy proceeds from the idea of that perfect afternoon:

1. God is perfect and does not need to change
2. we are imperfect and must change in order to develop toward perfection
3. change in in the human condition is an inevitable part of our limitations,
4. so, for example, change in *halakha* is inevitable
5. and change is of value only as it moves us toward redemption.

Have you ever known someone who became dissatisfied with life and made changes that turned out to be rash, ill-considered, or just plain stupid? Change itself is not necessarily good. To change simply for the sake of change is not encouraged in Jewish ethical literature.

What change, then, is considered good? (1) Change that comes about in your life because you are joyfully and excitedly moving toward your best self? that's good change. (2)

Change that comes to you because life is about relationships, and they begin and end and it hurts? that's necessary change. (3) Change that occurs because people are born, and we die? that's very difficult and painful change, and we must grow through that kind of change, too.

Jewish tradition imagines life as a path; *halakhah* literally means "going". It is a guide to each step of life, and when thoughtfully applied it can help us shape meaningful responses to the changes in our lives. All our lives we are taking one step after another, with each choice we make. And *change happens* while we are on the path of life.

Jewish tradition sees that path as a ladder - which is a pretty steep way to imagine a path. But life *is* steep, and can be quite difficult. And we are ascending that ladder, the one that Jacob saw in his dream, every day of our lives. Sometimes we are descending, too, or even falling; hopefully, that's temporary. As the saying goes, one step forward, two steps back.

II. Making change a blessing

We don't simply climb; the process changes us. Inevitably, we are challenged to grow, and learn, and adapt, and change toward the realization of our potential, and of wholeness. It is a natural process which we share with all life and all history: from chrysalis to butterfly, from Jacob to Israel - and, someday, from scattered individuals to the community vision offered us at Sinai.

Remember the famous blessing from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*? "May you be like Ruth and like Esther...." We bless by wishing a certain kind of spiritual and ethical growth on those we wish to bless. The ritual of bar/bar mitzvah is a good example of change; it marks a life stage which signals the sufficient development of ethical conscience that one can now be counted in the minyan. Although he was Jewish, that stage is not one mentioned by Erik Erikson. Yet it is clear enough to any parent.

Growth is expected, and not just of children. Every spring we are all expected to break out of old patterns and nurture the young shoots of new growth in the garden of our lives. We are to clean house so thoroughly that nothing of the old remains. That's not just encouraging growth; it's betting one's life on it. And in the fall, we are expected to grow spiritually through weeding that garden, so that the tender shoots of spring may strengthen and survive the winter. There's always a winter, cold and dark, to survive.

The path is there; you are going to walk it, in one way or another. Growth happens. It's inevitable. The journey is defined not by the inevitable changes and transitions we will know, but by how we meet them. Our ethical teachings command *rakhamim*, compassion, *gemilut hasadim*, kindness, and the principle of *l'khaf zekhut*, assuming the best of others. How well do we remember to be good ethical Jews when we're stressed out by change, or angered by its results? How often do we remember to stop and say to ourselves: *what am I meant to learn from this?*

One's focus upon the way one should live will temper one's experience of change: a change that might not have been viewed positively in its own light is possibly exactly the right change when viewed from a larger perspective. Have you lost a job, ended a relationship, or come to the end of a leadership position? This kind of change challenges our sense of being worthwhile; our power has diminished, and it's hard not to feel that we ourselves are diminished. But remember the dams blocking the salmon runs: once the dust clears and we recover from the shock, there's a river there, still flowing, and new ways for you to find your way upstream.

Other changes are not so acceptable, even if they are inevitable. When death comes, those of us who witness it recite the blessing *Barukh Dayan haEmet*, "blessed is the True Judge". We are not giving thanks, but reciting a recognition that this change, too, is part of the natural cycle of life and death. And we who survive find that this change, too, brings us to new rungs on the ladder, new places on the path of life that we would not have seen otherwise.

We are the people who wrestle with God, and with life; the change we survive leaves us limping, as Jacob was when the sun rose after his all-night struggle with the messenger of God. None of us is whole; change leaves us scarred. But none of us can live without change. The challenge is to wrestle a blessing from that change.

III. Change must be ethical

I mentioned Erik Erikson, the psychologist of change: he developed a theory of eight challenges we face in life if we are to successfully navigate the necessary changes of our lives. Changes we face include transitioning from childhood to adulthood, from singlehood to intimacy, from self-absorption to generativity - and, finally, Erikson writes, we face the choice of integrity or despair. In a word, either we become wise, or we do not.⁴

Jewish mystical tradition offers us a similar image: life is a series of challenges that we must meet and overcome if we are to grow toward the *hokhmah*, the wisdom that is our highest human potential. We are created to reflect God, and this means that each of us is capable of growing toward a certain reflection of that Divine perfection. Our growth toward wisdom is a lifelong pilgrimage: from birth to death. Each step is meant to be taken with care; with physical integrity, with emotional balance, and with intellectual acuity. This is our modern version of the ancient Festival pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

⁴ Erikson's stages are:

1. infancy: birth to 18 months - Trust vs. Mistrust (developing drive and hope)
2. early childhood: 18 months to 3 years - autonomy vs. shame (developing self-control, courage, and will)
3. play age: 3 to 5 years - initiative vs. guilt (developing purpose)
4. school age: 6 to 12 years - industry vs. inferiority (developing method and competence)
5. adolescence: 12 to 18 years - identity vs. role confusion (development of devotion and fidelity) crucial to this stage is the transition between what was done to us to what we now choose to do
6. young adulthood: 18-35 - intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation (development of affiliation and love)
7. middle adulthood: 35 to 65 - generativity vs. self-absorption or stagnation (developing production and care)
8. late adulthood: 65 until death - integrity vs. despair (developing wisdom)

There are several kinds of change which happen to us while we are making our way along the mindful, careful, ethical path of Jewish spiritual growth:

1. natural development creates change: one grows up and “outgrows” certain things once upon a time we dreamed about how it would be when we grew up. Those dreams can never precisely come true.
2. tragedy creates change: the death of Rakhel while the tribe of Jacob traveled; she did not live to arrive home.
3. discord creates change: spies, calf-worshippers, Korakh et al, those could not agree with nor live with Moshe’s leadership, left the group.
4. and change comes about because some choose another path; Lot and Abram agree to part for the good of their households. I’m sure they missed each other, but they made their choices. The two men could not be who they wanted to be and stay together. It was an honest, if painful, change.

conclusion

Can we live without growth and change? no. The salmon are already returning to spawning grounds they have never seen - but somehow know how to find. The writer Michael Chabon has compared us Jews to salmon, always swimming upstream; we *will* find what it is we are looking for on the path of our lives, despite the fact that we have never been there before. There is much that we know in our hearts that we do not yet know in our heads.

Can we grow and change without pain? no. It’s hard to hold on when a dam, or a life’s expectations, is blown up. And there are those who will always argue against whatever change occurs, and those whose lives will be made more difficult because of it.

Can we support each other so that change is not so hard? yes. We are a religious community, and the value of our community will be measured by how well we help each other to

meet the changes that challenge us all. Here is where you can come to be reminded, when you need it, of the larger perspectives of change: Jewish principles of *rakhamim*, compassion, *gemilut hasadim*, kindness, and the principle of *l'khaf zekhut*, assuming the best of others. Here you're not the only Jew swimming upstream against the majority flow of American life, with its Christian undercurrents. No matter what blows up, the Jews are still here, still swimming. Here you have companions on this pilgrimage we all undertake who will study with you, struggle with you, and support you as, each day, through each change, you make it one more step, one more day, toward being the reflection of God you are meant to be.

Birth is a beginning,
And death a destination;
And life is a journey,
A going – a growing
From stage to stage.

From childhood to maturity
And youth to age.
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then perhaps to wisdom.
From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness –
And, often, back again.
From health to sickness
And back, we pray, to health
again.

From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding –
From fear to faith.

From defeat to defeat to defeat –
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the
way,
But in having made the journey,
Stage by stage –
A sacred pilgrimage.

Birth is a beginning,
And death a destination;
And life is a journey,
Made stage by stage
From birth to death,
A sacred pilgrimage.

- Alvin Fine (adapted)

G'mar hatimah tovah - may the changes in your life bring you renewed life in the coming year. *Amen.*