

Of Perils and Possibilities
Rosh HaShannah 5779
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Still don't know what I was waitin' for
And my time was runnin' wild
A million dead end streets and
Every time I thought I'd got it made
It seemed the taste was not so sweet
So I turned myself to face me
But I've never caught a glimpse
How the others must see the faker
I'm much too fast to take that test
Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes
Turn and face the strange
Ch-ch-changes
Don't want to be a richer man
Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes
Turn and face the strange
Ch-ch-changes
There's gonna have to be a different man
Time may change me
But I can't trace time

Turn. And face the strange changes.

There are two events in my life that, for many years, I thought defined my personality and identity.

The first took place on a family trip to Niagra Falls right after moving to the east coast from Sioux City Iowa. After seeing the falls and marveling at the wonder of our natural world, I was given five dollars to get a souvenir from the gift shop. What would I choose, I wondered? A stuffed animal? A snow globe? A paper weight with some typical New York slogan on it? Candy?

Wouldn't you know it, but I was paralyzed by the weight of this decision. As a five year old it felt like one of the biggest choices in my young life. My mom walked over with a time limit warning that we were leaving soon. I had to make my choice fast. But I was stuck. I started crying, out right sobbing, right there in the middle of the gift shop. I did not know what to get. I also was not too keen on the choice of just pocketing the five bucks for some other opportunity.

In the end, the choice overwhelmed me, and I walked out empty handed, with tears streaming down my cheeks, with no keepsake from our trip. I still have trouble making decisions sometimes.

The second story happened when I was a bit older. Tenth grade in my high school was the year of chemistry, which I hated. I couldn't see it's practical application in my life. Plus there was math involved, and lab reports, and formulas. It was not my cup of tea to say the least.

The end of the year was approaching and I had some assignments yet to turn in. I figured that it's just one class, and I didn't really want to put in the work. So I didn't. The work was not completed. I was resigned to my fate and I would accept whatever grade I earned and just move on from there. I earned a D in the class that semester.

At the time that was fine with me. As I mentioned, I didn't care for chemistry and I saw it as a small blemish on an otherwise relatively high achieving academic transcript. Plus, I thought to myself, I earned it. I deserved it, I thought.

To my surprise, the teacher, Mrs. Gail Rose – a supremely compassionate woman of whom I have fond memories despite hating the subject she taught – gave me another chance to complete the work and bring my grade up. I didn't take it.

In retrospect, I should have. But also in retrospect, it didn't matter. I'm not a chemist and will never be one.

I share these two stories because for a long time they defined my identity as a person who has trouble making decisions and might not have as strong a work ethic as I should. On a slightly deeper level, these experiences expressed the parts of my personality that on the one hand, wants to get things right the first time, and on the other hand is willing to accept the consequences, even in the face of a reasonable remedy. This is who I was, at least in part. I didn't believe that I could change and over the years different versions of these stories kept playing themselves out and reappearing.

I suspect that each of us can point back to similar moments in their life that serve as frame stories – templates for our current behavior and action in the world. How many times have you remarked about yourself, 'That's just the way I am'? Or, "I'm not a person who can do that"?

Yet here we are on Rosh Hashannah, the day of the creation of the world, where we will listen to and hear the sound of the shofar, reflect on stories of our ancestors – their deeds and misdeeds – when we will pray and connect to God and each other in service of being better versions of ourselves than we were this past year. To do as Bowie says, turn and face the strange changes. Easier said than done I imagine.

Change is scary. Change is difficult. To change means that we might be someone other than we previously thought. We take comfort in the known state of our beings even as we are aware of the components that we would like to be different. And we have so many devices and strategies - some conscious, some not, - that prevent us from making the meaningful adjustments to our behavior, to our thinking, to our being. These are the natural reactions to the fear and anxiety that looking deep inside can evoke.

Moreover, parts of our contemporary culture fuel the idea that, in fact, we don't have to change at all. All of us are perfectly ok just the way we are. We convince ourselves that the world is as it is, and so am I. A pervasive view of "I'm ok, you're ok", of identity politics, of tribalism, all stand opposed to the work of turning and returning we seek to engage during this season.

One example of this is the rise in popularity of mindfulness meditation. I rather appreciate and

value the practice, but taken to the extreme, mindfulness, with its teachings to non-judgmentally direct our awareness to what is going on right now – be it physical sensations in our body, our breath, our thoughts – can be toxic to the process of doing something in response to our awareness. We can become stuck in the noticing and content to stay in the space of ‘what is’. Rather mindfulness, as I have come to understand it, as a tool of consciousness, in fact intends the opposite. Cultivating our consciousness is an act of freedom – allowing there to be space between stimulus and reaction – a space in which there is something else; possibility. It is from that place of possibility that at times our reaction is to lean back and go with the familiar instead of leaning in to what could be.

All of this is a long way to ask a simple yet profound question – Why don’t we change? Maybe it’s just not possible. We are who we are. In his introduction to *Hilchot Deot*, the Laws of Character Development, Maimonides cuts it both ways. We all have inherent personality traits that guide our instincts from birth, that are encoded in us, *lefi teva gofo* – according to one’s bodily nature. And there are other qualities that one can acquire throughout one’s life. In almost the same breath Rambam is admitting to the fact that in some ways we cannot change and in some other ways we are always changing.

If it were true that our natures are set from our earliest days, the entire month of Elul, Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, the concept of Teshuva itself – would be rendered meaningless, the rituals stripped of any purpose or potency, and our gathering here together – while lovely on the social and communal level, would be revealed to be nothing more than spiritual theatre. We could all go home proud of the game of dress up we played, content in the knowledge that we made it through another year of High Holy Days without doing the deep work of identifying our less than desirable character traits and mapping out a plan to course correct.

And if it is true that we are always changing, better yet, always have the capacity to change, then the work we focus on during the High Holy Days is not limited to this time of year but is available to us anytime we seek to activate it.

I’m being a bit more than cynical perhaps, but that’s because this worldview – the one that claims a static personal and cosmic reality – is simply not Jewish. Jews are not optimists by and large, that’s true. But we are a people of possibility. That is to say, our tradition declares time and again – in our insistence and attention to repairing the world, in our commitment and devotion to learning, in our daily petitions for forgiveness, in our prayers for healing and blessing, in our constant and sometimes stubborn aspirational waiting for the messianic age, - that the realities that confront us are not all that there is, and our past – while rich with meaning and power – need not continue repeating itself. Rather the world that we inhabit can, and I would say must, compel us to see the possibility that often hides just out of sight in our blind spots. Just a small turn of the head and it comes into view.

HaYom Harat Olam – today is the birthday of the world. It’s clear that the compilers and authors of our Machzor understood this to be a statement, at least, of historical fact. But I can’t help wondering whether they also intended it to be a statement of the present. Today, actually today, right now perhaps, is when the world is created anew. To use the words of the daily liturgy, *hamechadesh betuvo bechol yom tamid ma’aseh breishit* – the world is renewed daily in the light of God’s goodness. By extension we have the opportunity, and yes the challenge as well, to recreate ourselves, reimagine ourselves, refresh ourselves – and to lean in, scary as it

is, to the dynamic possibilities that lie before us.

To adopt a perspective like I am suggesting is to give honor not only to the nature of the world but to the Creator as well. It is an outlook that is quite well suited to the spiritual life. It asks us to appreciate and value open-endedness as opposed to certitude and finality. To hold an opposing view is perhaps to reject a foundation of our faith.

It's worth noting, perhaps as an aside, that Rosh Hashannah takes place in the seventh month in the Jewish calendar and not the first. In the first month we observe another beginning – the birth of our nation and our freedom from Egyptian slavery. It is also not aligned with the Gregorian New Year of January 1. The image there is of an old man transforming into a baby at the stroke of midnight. Our Rosh HaShannah in contrast is in the middle of the calendar year. We are not reborn as it were to emerge on the other side as babies. On the contrary for Jews. Our creation and recreation takes place in the middle of the year hopefully preparing us for the road ahead.

This has so many applications that extend beyond the individual work we undertake at this time of the year. It can have national and societal consequences as well.

For example, take a look at our political culture in America. Party loyalty, tribal allegiances, and identity politics, – with their attendant policy implications – to my mind are functioning within a framework that claims people cannot change. These features and others insist that we cannot escape our past behaviors. That one tweet, one Facebook post, one vote in congress, one moment of attendance at this rally or that one, is definitional. Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting we ignore patterns of behavior. I'm simply saying that there is always the possibility of flipping the script. Rosh HaShannah calls out to us with this promise.

In our conversation about Israel and our relationship to the land, the people, and the state that dwell in our historic homeland, - we have by and large rejected the notion of a different way; a way in which possibility and creativity are at the heart of our approach. Instead we retreat to the comfort and safety of labeling some folks as naïve who can't see the world for what it is, and on the other hand marking some as ethnocentric, ultra-nationalists with no compassion and no heart. Again, let me be clear. We encounter the actual realities of what is in front of us. However, how we make meaning of that reality and our response to it is always up to us.

And so it is for our personal work as well. This year, will you be beholden to your past as necessarily determining your path forward, or will you have a more expansive view to allow a free and courageous choice. In addition to the small behaviors we want to change in ourselves – to be more kind, to exercise more, to eat better, to learn more Hebrew or take on a new mitzvah, to volunteer and contribute more, to use our screens a little less, to be more present with those around us – I want to invite us to adopt a more foundational change –namely to change the way we see the world. To see it for it's possibilities instead of it's perils.

That shift can help us tell the story of our lives with more excitement for the unknown that lies ahead, instead of the narrative we might create over past failures and missteps.

I never got my treat from Niagra falls and I still have a D in chemistry from 10th grade. Those facts are not going to change. But how I relate to them can. We each have that opportunity not

only today but everyday. Our histories have no unique meaning in and of themselves. We give them meaning by how we tell our stories and in the response that we choose to bring forth.

We begin that work today in this Holy community and on this very High Holy day, a day we not only recognize the gift of the prior five thousand seven hundred and seventy eight years, but the possibility inherent in tomorrow, in next week, in next month, next year and the beyond.

As a newcomer to Temple Beth Shalom, I welcome the opportunity to walk this path of possibility with you. It might be scary and we of course do not know what waits around the corner. But together, and with resolve and commitment to living in the space of possibility, of 'what if?', I am confident that the new world we create in 5779 will be filled with blessings, with hope, with sweetness and with a renewed sense of the life ahead of us.

Shannah Tovah Umetukah.