

The More Things Change...

Once upon a time, a Jewish man moved into a Catholic neighborhood. Every Friday, the Catholics got irritated because, while they had to eat fish due to church law, the Jew would be outside barbecuing steaks.

So the Catholics worked on the Jew to convert him. Finally, by threats and pleading, they succeeded. They took the Jew to a priest who sprinkled holy water on the Jew and intoned:

“Born a Jew -- Raised a Jew -- Now a Catholic.” The Catholics were ecstatic. No more delicious but maddening smells on Friday evening -- now he would have to settle for fish, too.

But the next Friday evening, the scent of barbecue again wafted through the neighborhood. The Catholics all rushed to the Jew’s house to remind him of his new dietary restrictions.

They found him standing over the bbq, cooking steaks. He was sprinkling water on the meat, saying:

“Born a cow -- Raised a cow -- Now a fish.”

* * *

Change -- it seems so simple. Too often, we take for granted that change will be seamless, easy, quick. Our consumer culture doesn’t help. We are constantly barraged with quick-fix advice to change what we eat, what we drive, what we wear, what we read, and what we tweet -- as if happiness will simply and immediately follow.

Change is inevitable. But unfortunately it’s not inevitable that we take the time and space we need to consider the less glossy, less flashy, less marketable truth about change: it is difficult. It always involves loss. It is destabilizing; it often leads us to question our leaders and also to question our own groundedness. When bedrock foundations that we thought we could always rely on are pulled out from under us, we lose our way, become disoriented, and, at worst, fall into a tailspin of anxiety.

For many of us, the easiest way to deal with change is to pretend it’s not happening. As the story goes:

One day, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. They set up their tent, crawled inside, and fell asleep. A few hours later, Holmes woke his faithful friend and said: “Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

Watson replied, “I see millions of stars.”

“What does that tell you?”

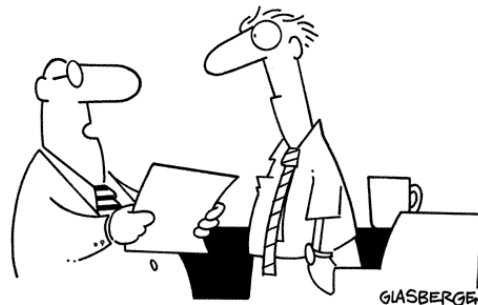
Watson pondered for a minute and then said: “Astrologically, I see that Saturn is in Leo. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell *you*?”

Holmes stared at Watson incredulously and then said: “Watson, you idiot, someone has stolen our tent!”

At least, in Watson’s denial, he was able to look on the bright side. But if seeing the silver lining blinds you to the dark cloud, you won’t be very well equipped to deal with the consequences of the change that -- ready or not -- has come.

There is a subtler form of denial, too, that tries to sweep change under the rug of business as usual. A cartoon I saw recently shows a boss handing a job description to a new manager, and offering this advice: “I want you to find a bold and innovative way to do everything exactly the same way it’s been done for 25 years.” (Maybe we could turn that into a slogan for Reform Judaism: “finding bold and innovative ways to do everything exactly the same way it’s been done for 5000 years”!)

Copyright 2004 by Randy Glasbergen.
www.glasbergen.com



“I want you to find a bold and innovative way to do everything exactly the same way it’s been done for 25 years.”

Sometimes we think that we can contain, control, or co-opt change by dressing it in familiar clothes -- by pretending it’s not really anything new. But, just like trying to ignore it, trying to hide it will leave us unprepared to deal with its consequences.

There is yet another form of denial in the face of change. This kind embraces change so eagerly that it “forgets” what came before. Here, it’s not the change that gets pushed aside, but the legacy of the past, as well as the pain of those who remain, understandably, attached to it.

I am reminded of the true story of a teenager in the 1980s who went into a record store in search of an album by the band Wings. The shopkeeper, seeing that the teen was a Paul McCartney fan, asked him which Beatles album was his favorite. “What?” replied the boy. “Paul McCartney was in a band before Wings?!?”

Sometimes, as in this story, this type of denial happens out of ignorance. Sadly, it can also happen with intent to forget or distort the past.

* * *

Tonight, on the eve of the new year 5771, it's a fitting time to reflect on change and how we deal with it. The name of this holiday, *Rosh Hashanah*, has three different meanings embedded in it, which teach us how we should deal with change. First, the plain meaning of "New Year", where *rosh* is "head" or "beginning" and *shanah* means "year". But *shanah* can also mean "change," from *l'shanot*. And its third meaning seems to contradict that one: *shanah* can also mean "repeat."¹ Rosh Hashanah, then, can mean: the Beginning of the Year; the Beginning of Change; and the Beginning of Repetition. A paradox, perhaps, to contain both change and repetition. But isn't this the truth of how we experience change? So the questions we should ask ourselves on this "new year's eve" are: what has changed? And what remains?

For Rollin and me, the changes have been dramatic. We have moved far away from the life we had created in New York -- far from family and friends, from familiar places and spaces, from our lives as students, from the routines and habits that wove the fabric of our life and our home.

But with all change, there is repetition. As we have before, we are settling into our new home, with our familiar things around us. We are creating a new network of friends, and a new place for old friends and family to visit (*and believe me, they're already lining up!*). We are starting to shape the routines and habits that will form the fabric of our lives here. (By the way, some change is purely good: unlike in NYC, we have a washer/drier in our house and -- the height of luxury -- two sinks in our master bathroom!) Most importantly, we are becoming part of our community and helping to shape a community of meaning for the future.

For this congregation, what has changed, and what remains? We have gone from a long history of Gideon Kaufman's devoted volunteer leadership, through years of painful and divisive transition, to today. Now there are two new clergy to meet, new initiatives and directions in worship and education, new personalities and styles and responsibilities to adjust to. It could all be overwhelming, especially for a small town, and especially for those of you who grew up celebrating and mourning life's highs and lows in a different way, with a different style, singing a different tune.

¹ In fact, in the V'avavta, when we say *v'shinantam l'vanecha*, usually translated "you shall teach them to your children," it really means "you shall repeat them to your children."

But with all change, there is repetition. There are still Jews seeking meaning, community, and a sanctuary in time and space where we can celebrate and mourn. There are still religious leaders, and we are eager to connect with you, to walk life's path with you, to make this congregation your spiritual home. There is a living, breathing Jewish community here. It will be different from what came before in exactly the same way that every generation's Judaism is different from its predecessors.

* * *

The challenge for all of us is to inhabit this paradox. With one hand, to reach for change; with the other, to grasp what remains the same.

After all, that's exactly what we're praying for and singing about on Rosh Hashanah. At the end of the Torah service, we come to the words: *Hashiveinu Adonai eleicha, v'nashuvah. Chadeish yameinu k'kedem. Cause us to turn, Adonai, to you, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old.* The verse comes from the end of the Book of Lamentations, and our tradition has for centuries noticed the paradox here: *Renew our days as of old?* How can our days be both new, *chadash*, and as of old, *k'kedem*?

To answer this question, another story:²

There once was a community whose beloved rabbi was aging and nearing retirement. He had served them for the majority of his long life, and they had developed a close bond with him. They were used to his style, content with his leadership, and comfortable with his personality.

So with a heavy heart, members of this community began the task of finding a replacement for their irreplaceable rabbi. As it turned out, the decision was surprisingly easy: their rabbi's son was also a rabbi, so they decided to hire him. This, they believed, would be the perfect solution! Surely he would be a rabbi just like his father before him.

As planned, the beloved elder rabbi retired, and his son became the community's new rabbi. It probably won't surprise you to learn that it wasn't too long before congregants started to notice that the young rabbi's manner was different from his father's. He followed different customs, he worked with a different style, and he used a different approach to leadership. The congregants were upset, confused, and worried.

The elders in the community got together and decided they needed to have a talk with the rabbi. They would clarify what was wrong, and straighten things out. So they

² from "Finding Your Own Voice," in *Three Times Chai*, Laney Katz Becker (Behrman House, 2007), p. 69.

invited the new rabbi to an emergency meeting. They sat him down and started immediately with their questions: “Why don’t you behave like your father?” they asked. “Why do you do things so differently from him?” they demanded.

The new rabbi paused, and took a slow, deep breath.

“Well,” he said to them. “Actually, I do exactly as my father does. My father never imitated anyone, and neither do I.”

Change is inevitable. The world our children grow up in may bear little resemblance to the world of our childhood. And so it will be for their children.

But, contrary to the popular saying, change is not the only constant. Repetition is inevitable too. What doesn’t change? Our core values, our spiritual foundation. We will always be searching for meaning, yearning for connection, hungry for relationship. We all want to know what our lives mean, to know that we matter, that we count, that we stand for something, and with someone.

This season of new beginnings is about reconnecting with those core values, wherever we are in life. About excavating our foundations again so that we can continue to build and rebuild our best selves.

And so we pray that we enter *this* new year the “same way” we always do: with a new heart, and a new spirit,³ more open to all that we have been, and all that we still could be.

And to this we all say: Amen.

Note: I am indebted to Rabbi Joe Black (Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel Denver as of July 1, 2010) for the inspiration for this sermon topic. Thank you, Joe, good luck in your new pulpit, and shanah tovah!

³ See Ezekiel 36:26.