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Shana Tova.

Shana Tova means “a good year.” It can also mean “a good change.”

I sometimes wonder if people really can change? I mean, on the one hand, of course we change, all things change... on many levels we couldn't stop changing if we tried because we are always anticipating, reacting, proactively, interactively.... On the other hand, how much can we say we've really changed since last Yom Kippur?

So much depends on our being able to change as a country, as a nation among nations and as a species. Why are we so afraid of change when really what we should be afraid of is staying the same!! On every sphere: personal, communal, national, Israeli/Palestinian and Foreign Policy in general, our relationship to the environment.... On all these fronts the danger of maintaining the status quo threatens to send us into the worst despair. We need a *shana tova*, a good change!

The rabbis taught that there are special times in the year that are propitious for change, the strongest being today. They used many metaphors to underscore their belief in the power and possibility of change, the most familiar ones being the Book of Life and the Gates of Repentance.

Tomorrow afternoon throughout the Jewish world people will gather together to listen to the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet. Here again, the rabbis chose this tale for *Yom Kippur* to illustrate the difficult nature of change. It is also the story of a personal awakening and the eventual response to God's call.

“And the word of God came to Jonah, son of Amittai saying,
‘Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against her, for
their wickedness has ascended before Me.’ ” (Jonah 1:1,2)

As you may remember, Jonah did not want to go.

The story of the ambivalent prophet who “pulled a geographic”, that is tried to move away thinking he could avoid his responsibilities when God called him to service,

is an apt and compelling metaphor for many of us. Who among us has not run the other direction, or moved across the country when called upon to do something difficult or in some way too challenging for us? Who has not sunk into depression when faced with something we just did not want to do?

The text says Jonah tried to hide from “God” – but let’s use Rabbi Rami Shapiro’s translation, where he substitutes the word God with the word “Reality”. So, Jonah was trying to run from some internal or external Reality.

The story tells us that while Jonah was aboard the ship headed in the opposite direction of God’s intentions for him, a storm threatened to bring destruction. Afraid for their lives, the sailors drew lots and cast Jonah overboard into raging waters where a great fish came along and swallowed him.

The text says, “.....and Jonah was in the belly of the fish 3 days and 3 nights” Jonah sunk into the darkness. And yet the darkness doesn’t signify utter futility; it does end. Light emerges from the dark. Seventy-two hours of soul searching passed and then at last he cried... a feral cry, the chest –heaving cry of a man overcome by emotion, PERHAPS it is the cry of one who is has hit rock bottom, he cannot sink any lower, he will die if he doesn’t find a way out of the whale, or the hell he has gotten himself into.

At the height of the storm, Jonah could not pray, for the waters threatened his life. But eventually he finds his voice---- finally, a prayer emerges:

“I will make sacrifice unto You with the voice of thanksgiving. I will fulfill my vows, for You are my Savior.” Sound a little born again? He’s been saved and he is changed and he is ready to do what God asked of him.

Or at least he thinks he is.

How many of us, after vowing some behavior, have stuck to our resolve? Kept our side of the bargain when things DID turn out the way we wanted? Or are we more like Jonah, who, when the fish spit him out onto dry land, immediately made his way to Nineveh to deliver God’s message, but then soon became sullen again, despairing and depressed.

How is it possible that Jonah could be upset when he has helped save a city from destruction? How can it be that even with God as a personal tutor and advocate for the innocent, we are not left at the end of the story with a different Jonah, one more cheerful, more amiable, more devoted to God? Why isn’t Jonah able to appreciate all he has done to bring a change for the good?

Jonah accepts the call. He goes and does the very thing he has been avoiding and he is successful in every way; but he is no less miserable. God has to remind Jonah that his prophetic mission was prompted by Divine compassion, not wrath. “Should I not care about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons and much cattle?”

“Strikingly,” writes Devora Steinmatz, “Jonah does not respond to God’s final words. The book ends with the prophet’s silence.

Of course like each of you, I have my own personal story around best intentions gone awry and the hard work of sticking to resolves. My psycho-spiritual work this last year has been directed toward becoming a more comfortable and frequent host. I enjoy having people in our home but I come from a family with anxiety issues, and my mother, *alav hashalom*, may she rest in peace, was an anxious host, afraid of failure, she was afraid of doing something that could reflect poorly on my father. So, having company was always a REALLY BIG Deal. Like we’re talking we had plastic seat covers on the living room furniture – which, still we were suppose to save for the guests!

So, combined with my own fear of failure and lack of energy I haven’t become the host I’ve wanted to be. And year after year a feeling of disappointment within me grew; and I became angry with myself for succumbing to the excuses and the fear and not fulfilling this wonderful mitzvah of hospitality. For me becoming a relaxed host means so much more than not having the silver polished in time. It means individuation. It means, choosing to not take on my mother’s worries.

Finally, I realized, (on my Sabbatical) our lives are too short to be spent in fear, laziness, and anger. We know in the deepest recesses of our hearts, that such a life is a life wasted. And we can’t afford to waste our lives. Today, we look at our own fears: our fear of the unknown, our fears of anxiety, our fears of failure. Today of all days, we are honest with ourselves. We admit our fears. And when we can say in all honesty to ourselves and to God, “I’m afraid”, or “I’m ready” and “I’m willing to take a risk” -- we have begun to change. We’ve begun to affect our fears instead of letting our fears affect and control us.

However, lest we think that recognition is all there is to this business of change. The late Alan Wheelis, a psychologist and wonderful writer, said that the most common

illusion in therapy, both of patients and even experienced therapists, is that insight produces change. The most common disappointment of therapy is that it does not. Insight is instrumental to change, it's often an essential component of the process, but insight alone doesn't directly achieve change.

In the Jewish tradition, WHILE introspection and insight (*heshbon hanefesh*) is important, its actions that matter. Our tradition is quite expansive in terms of what people feel, what people understand and believe, but the tradition is much more demanding when it comes to *doing the right thing*. One could give many examples; one of my favorites is our choice for the Hebrew word for giving money to the poor, *tzedukah*, which means righteousness. You give money because it's the right thing to do: feelings play little part in your obligation.

This approach is quite different from the meanings embodied in the words charity (from the Latin, *caritas*) and philanthropy (from the Greek, *philio*), both meaning love. It's your actions, not your feelings that ultimately matter and this approach can be applied to change as well. In order to change who we are, the first step is to change, even if slowly, what we do.

It is Jonah's very silence that I think speaks most eloquently, for we must look, finally, not to what Jonah says, but to what he does. Jonah asks to die, but he embraces life; Jonah complains about change, but he himself changes and brings about change.... The message of this book is conveyed not through the prophet's **words**, but through the prophet's **silent actions**" [A women's Companion to the High Holidays, p. 321].

As for follow up on my resolutions? Well, we have guests coming for *shabbes* dinner this week; and I'm hosting a class and occasionally a committee meeting. It's not every week and that's not my goal. I simply want to feel the sweetness of having people in our home and the success of having rewritten an old script.

In terms of leading change in our community there are some projects already underway that I am excited about and that I see us participating in even more fully, such as our congregation based community organizing with the San Francisco Organizing Project and the Reform Movement's Just Congregations. Do you realize that Sha'ar Zahav is credited in our city's progress toward providing universal healthcare? As we

continue to lobby and advocate for healthcare reform and immigration reform – we show up for our neighbors across lines of race, faith, class and we show up for ourselves.

President Obama spoke to over 300 rabbis on a conference call earlier this month. First time in history a president reached out to rabbis before the holy days to ask for help in carrying home his message. He said so passionately, “If the essence of our coda is to treat each other as one family- the fact is right now this is not happening. 46 million Americans don’t have health insurance and 20 million Americans are underinsured; so 1/5 of our population, in the wealthiest nation in the world is too comfortable with the status quo to see that the whole family has their basic needs covered. Is this the legacy we are leaving behind for our children and grandchildren. – debt and deficit? We are not going to be able to care for our seniors; this is Not a partisan issue.”

Everyone agrees that change is needed; that if we don’t change we hurt our country morally and fiscally and yet there is still such resistance. Research regarding healthcare reform shows that most people are happy with what “they” have and so they are afraid of change. Change sounds good in theory but in reality it calls for real sacrifice and addressing our fears head on.

I believe we are doing something concrete to help our President gain the support he needs to bring a real change for the good, a *shana tova*.

Another *teshuvah* we are making is to return to the precious and challenging work of respectful dialogue on difficult subjects. I want us to be the address where people can come and know that they will be able to learn about the issues facing the Israeli and Palestinian populations from different perspectives and be able to ask questions and struggle with loving rebuke AND praise for Israel. I want Sha’ar Zahav to have open gates to all who are wrestling with Israel and Palestine and peace. To that end, we are about to launch a survey to those of you who are our members, in order to better understand how wide the range of viewpoints are within our community. I hope that when you receive it electronically next week, you will make time to help me and all of us DO something other than feel helpless. When we do something as a collective, we make it infinitely richer for everyone.

And lastly among the changes you can be expecting us to try our best at, is tomorrow’s experiment with the *Yom Kippur mincha* hour.

For years now, I've noticed with sadness that a relatively small number of people attend the service, in which the *Haftarah* portion of Jonah is read. I know it's due to a variety of factors; some of which I have absolutely no control over.... Like when your four year-old needs a nap (or your husband, for that matter). Or you do, because let's face it this can feel like a marathon! Some might say why fight gravity. But to me, I saw an opening to try something new. I want our congregation to experience the message of the middle of the day – to be in sync with the tides that bring us this jewel of a tale, a mirror and ideally a catalyst for change.

So, our team of creative genies and ritual wizards have gathered, along with our wonderful cantor and me, and we've set out to make something new...which honestly feels risky. It's a risk on many different levels: if we change this service, we risk disappointing those for whom *mincha* has worked just fine. For others, whether they come or not it is *Yom Kippur*, the holy of holies, and we have the *chutzpah* to try and change it- with contemporary music and modern dance, with light and sound and video footage of the stormy transformation.... Yikes... could be fantastic; I don't really know if it's going to work. I do know it is a cutting-edge experiment that we are taking together. It may take a few tries to land on something we would want to repeat. Or maybe the point will be to have something new each year. Whatever it is and becomes, we're experimenting together! The question tomorrow night will be – was it worthwhile? Was it worth the energy to initiate the change? I already know my answer.

From Jonah we are reminded that sometimes the change that needs to happen – the process, isn't always obvious. Sometimes we need a bit of REALITY to show us that we need to take initiative. But what more evidence do we need to move us to act with our whole selves? We've got congregants without healthcare; we've got a painful infighting within our community regarding Israel and Palestine; and we have a spiritual practice that needs exercising to be authentic and useful. We have reality staring us in the face – we cannot run away. We can change.

One of the aspects about Jonah's story that I appreciate most is that it does not end with Jonah's return to God and the doing of the task he had initially resisted. Instead it continues past the resolution of the initial problem, past Jonah's own resolve to do what

he did not want to do, all the way to an intimate scene between God and Jonah in which Jonah reveals his puzzling distress over all that has transpired.

Jonah is angry with God and expresses his doubts about the process of transformation and in so doing subtly articulates OUR own doubts about the very process of transformation in which we are engaged and are celebrating.” [Steinmatz, p. 323].

“Like Jonah, despite our doubts, despite our knowledge that next year may look very similar to this year, despite that we have been forgiven before but have sinned again, we choose to go on, embracing life and accepting the challenge to transform and shape our lives” [Steinmatz, p. 323].

Jonah leaves us with a model, not of perfection, not of something unobtainable, not of something we can never achieve and therefore never hope to be. Instead he models for us the slow change, the doing despite our reluctance to do, the willingness to show our emotions, to feel them, to admit them, and to rightly act, sometimes despite ourselves.

Jonah shows us ways to make profound changes in ourselves, and to know, even as we do, that “profound” does not necessarily mean vast or complete. Even slow change, even unsteady change, even comparatively small change can nonetheless be profound change.

As we leave here in silence tonight, whether we’re on the MUNI or in our cars, at some point in the hours that lies ahead, let us offer our own prayers that that we may have the courage to actualize our deepest aspirations despite our deepest fears. May we have the patience and perseverance necessary to keep going, while recognizing and honoring our very real limitations. May the changes we seek to make be realized for the good, for each of us and for the whole world. *Ken Yhi Ratzon. Amen.*