

Change and Transition
Rosh Hashanah Talk – 5769
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In the film classic *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the famous story by Shalom Aleychem, there is a scene in which the main character, a poor milkman named Tevya, is making his final end of the week deliveries in the small Eastern European village of Ana Tefka. It is late on a Friday afternoon and he is trying to finish his work before the arrival of the Sabbath. Suddenly, Tevya is struck by how different his life would be if fate (or God) hadn’t consigned him to a life of poverty and struggle and he launches into the song, “If I were a rich man,” in which he details the many ways he imagines that his current troubles would dissolve in the face of prosperity. He imagines having time for things like study and prayer. He imagines having a large and well appointed home complete with multiple forms of livestock and a team of servants whom his wife Golda takes great pleasure in ordering around. It is clear from this song that Tevya is longing for change in his life, but this is not typically the kind of change that we are used to thinking about around this time of year.

While no one would deny that some part of Tevya’s misery could be alleviated by an increase in his socio-economic standing, many of us would also be quick to warn him not to expect resolution to all of his problems based only on a change in his external circumstances, welcome as it might be. And we might even suggest that he prepare himself for a whole set of new ones that would invariably crop up if his life were to undergo such a change even when the change is seemingly moving him in such a positive direction.

This story may seem somewhat out of place on the first day of Rosh Hashannah. After all, we know well that the kind of change evoked by the High Holy day period is not supposed to be about getting a raise, or moving to a new neighborhood, or starting a remodeling project on our home.

No, at this time of year, we understand that the tradition urges us to focus on life at the level of our souls. We are supposed to ask ourselves questions such as: Are we relating to others in wise and compassionate ways. Do we have a sense of where we are headed in the big picture? Are we prioritizing our interests and responsibilities in such a way that we could, many years down the road, look back with satisfaction and contentment on the choices we have made?

These kinds of internally oriented questions are clearly the spiritual bread and butter of this period of the year. And yet, I have actually found myself thinking quite a lot about various kinds of external change as the holidays began to approach this time around. One factor contributing to this is certainly that the word, “change,” has been at the center of the election year language of both political parties. The Obama campaign has been built around this term from the outset of the primary elections and more recently the

McCain campaign has also placed change at the center of its message. Who could have predicted that the race for president would sound so much like a High Holy Day sermon?

But beyond the political rhetoric, what I think has motivated my recent attention to this issue even more significantly are two much more close-to-home realities: One is the fact that after nearly eleven years in one location, we have finally moved into our new home here at the Ratner School. And the second is the fact that within the next month, I will begin to use my Sabbatical time to return to the role of being a student for the first time in over 13 years. The process of making both of these decisions involved a significant amount of research, discussion and soul searching on my part and on the part of our community.

The meetings we had with the leadership at Ratner took place in several distinct phases, over a three year period and involved a few different versions of our space committee, during which we went through the process of identifying what our core needs would be if we were to move to a new location. These meetings culminated in some very energetic negotiations during the past six months as we explored a wide range of hopes and concerns that emanated from both institutions. We even had the unusual opportunity to “test drive” the building on several occasions prior to making a commitment to moving in.

A parallel process took place in relationship to the choice of how to spend my upcoming sabbatical time and of how to put structures in place so that this experience would also be a positive and growthful one for Kol HaLev. While initially I was drawn to the notion of using this time to begin a doctoral program in Religious Studies, I went through a major revolution in my own thinking about what I wanted to know more about and what would be the most useful way to take advantage of this unique learning opportunity. In the end, I chose instead to apply to the Master’s program in Positive Organizational Development at the Weatherhead School of Case Western Reserve University, affectionately known as MPOD. In the course of coming to this decision, I had several meetings with the MPOD staff and faculty. I also made a point of speaking with a few of the program’s graduates who work in religiously oriented positions. I even had the surprise pleasure of discovering that several Kol HaLev members were MPOD graduates and so made sure to speak with each of them in order to further solidify my sense that my interests and my orientation would be a good fit for this program.

Despite this vast amount of due diligence, and despite our deep and growing sense of excitement and enthusiasm as each of these dreams has moved closer to becoming a reality, it has struck me that our very success at these endeavors has raised new questions for us, and in general stirred things up in some interesting ways.

For me, the prospect of beginning this program has evoked a few nagging questions that refuse to stop fluttering around my brain. In the context of all the excitement, I have also caught myself wondering how I will handle a demanding academic environment after having been outside of one for nearly a decade and a half. Or, how will I be able to give balanced attention to my responsibilities as a father and husband, to my responsibilities as

the rabbi of this community and to the responsibilities of being a student in this program dedicated to acquiring new understandings and developing new skills?

I have detected a similar dynamic within our community at large. As we have gone through the initial process of moving from the Agnon school to the Ratner School, there has been much enthusiasm and appreciation for our new location. At the same time, conversations have arisen about how to make certain that we maintain our community's culture of welcome and informality within a space that offers so much in the way of aesthetics, but which is also more fixed structurally than where we had been previously. We have also talked about the delicate balance between asking our new institutional partners for the help that we need settling in to this new space, without unduly infringing on their own programming, or communicating any lack of gratitude for the generosity and openness with which they have welcomed us into their home.

So here we have two examples of broadly supported initiatives leading to a significant change in our communal life and in my life professionally. And yet, along with generating energy and appreciation, both of these shifts have also revealed new questions and sensitivities that require thoughtful attention and management. What are we to make of all this?

Author William Bridges has done quite a bit of thinking about this issue. In his book entitled *Transitions*, Bridges analyses the process of individual and communal transformation by drawing deeply upon the practices of aboriginal cultures as well as on the wisdom embedded within classical literature.

The first and most basic point that Bridges makes in his book is that there is a clear distinction between change and transition. By change, he means the shifts on an external level that take place in our lives such as where we live, the type of work we do or the configuration of our family. But transition, in his lexicon, refers to the internal process of growth and adaptation that often occurs in response to or in anticipation of the external changes. He argues that we live in a culture that is obsessed with change, but completely ignorant of the transition that should ideally accompany it. Not unlike Tevyah, many of us behave as if a change in some external arena will, in and of itself, deliver a comparable change at the level of what we seek to experience internally.

But, according to Bridges, there is a very clear path for negotiating change laid out by ancient cultures and by classical myths that we must follow if we truly want to grow and develop in new and energizing directions. And following that path requires attention to phases of transition that are typically completely overlooked in our standard Western focus on external change. In Bridges' terms these phases are called "the ending" and "the neutral zone." The ending phase involves our ability to recognize and experience the loss entailed in any change process, even one in which the change was freely chosen and desirable. And the neutral zone phase requires our willingness to spend some time within the no-man's land that lies between the reality we are moving away from the one we are moving towards. If we do not attend to these first two phases and instead try to jump immediately into a new beginning, Bridges warns that we will invariably flounder as we

try to move forward, and perhaps even be pulled back toward the place we had intended to move beyond.

There is no better example of this type of struggle than the master story of the Jewish people, the Exodus from Egypt. In this story we see a group of people who had lived as slaves for multiple generations and who were finally set free and led out into the wilderness. But, as many of the classic Torah commentaries point out, it was relatively easy to take the Israelites out of Egypt. What was really hard was getting Egypt out of the Israelites. The former slaves do not seem to have gone through the stages of internal transition and so they were not able to readily adapt to their new reality of freedom. How many stories are there in throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers in which the recurrent theme is the disappointment of the Israelites with their new situation and in many cases, their impassioned plea to return to the harsh but familiar life Egypt.

To take a more modern example, we can simply observe the large number of cities in our country which have made the building of a beautiful new sports stadium the centerpiece of a change project, only to discover that the long-term impact of these initiatives turns out to be negligible.

This is surely in part due to the small amount of attention that is typically paid to the internal dimension of the change sought, and certainly no recognition of the need to spend some amount of time in the neutral zone. What is it about this neutral zone stage that is so critical for the success of the overall change and transition process?

Again Bridges explains: “The process of transformation is essentially one of death and rebirth rather than one of mechanical modification. Although our culture knows a lot about mechanics, it has a lot to learn about death and rebirth. For traditional cultures, the symbolic return to chaos, or the neutral zone, is indispensable to any new creation. In this sense chaos is not simply a “mess.” Rather it is a primal state of pure energy to which a person or organization or society must return for every true new beginning.” It is in fact in the neutral zone that the real work of transformation takes place.

Although we have completed our move in an external sense to our new home, I am convinced that we are nonetheless, at this very moment, still in the midst of a transition from a former identity to a new one. Bridges points out that sometimes we can go through an internal transition which then leads to outward change while at other times we encounter change which in turn creates an opening, a window of opportunity to move through a transition, a period of growth and renewal. We are a community with many wonderful qualities and we have articulated a compelling vision of our future into which we aspire to grow.

That vision has to do with how we celebrate with and comfort one another, how we learn from one another and from our tradition, how we discern the spark of Divinity in each moment and how we together find ways to help our world become a more holy, wise and compassionate place. I want to make an appeal to every person sitting in this sanctuary today that we resist the temptation to prematurely conclude our current process of transition. That we be open not only to the satisfaction of meeting in this lovely and

inspiring building, but also to the ways in which being in this new place may reshape our internal dynamics and support our revitalization and our recommitment to the pursuit of the best that is within us.

We as a community have an opportunity over the coming months to break new ground with regard to how we think about ourselves and how we conduct ourselves with one another and with the world in general. Using Bridges' language, we can enter into transition through the doorway of change. The key to making this happen is our willingness to live for a little while within the fertile but unsettled neutral zone between one reality and another. It may lack the comfort and ease of more familiar surroundings, but it is certain to bring new vitality and new creativity into our collective life. May 5769 be a joyful, sweet and energizing year for all of us!

Le Shannah tovah tikateyvu.