

KOL NIDRE 2016

CHANGE –DON'T CHANGE

It was a small headline in the arts section of the New York Times that caught my eye. TEVYE AS A FAMILY TRADITION: A STAR TURN IN 'FIDDLER'

“His father was among the most famous Tevye’s of all time, playing the role for years on Broadway. His grandparents were mainstays of the Yiddish theatre, at times performing the Shalom Aleichem stories that became Fiddler of the Roof. And this week, Michael C. Bernardi, age 31, who was just 19 months old when his father Herschel Bernardi, died of a sudden heart attack, will step briefly into the role so closely associated with the father he barely knew. He will be wearing his father’s brown leather boots.

Suddenly, I realized that tears were streaming down my face.

Yes, of course, it’s all about the shoes. But its about more than the shoes, its about the generations before me who have formed the essence, the unchanging core of who and what I truly am. My grandfather Israel Blank, an immigrant from Kiev, banging on the piano and playing Yiddish tunes on the trumpet. My maternal grandparents Etta and Sol, who came over on in steerage, seeking a new life in the “Goldene Medina”, America. My student years on the lower East Side of New York, unconsciously retracing my grandparents footsteps, living on Second Avenue and 10th in a walk up flat over the “egg store.” And Fiddler? It was the first play I ever saw on Broadway. I have seen it performed in Hebrew in Tel Aviv, Spanish in Mexico. I have directed endless community productions, performed numerous times as Golda, and can still see my five year old son Eli waving “Goodby Anatevka” from the back of a cart as it rumbled off stage. In the words of Michael Bernardi “Even if I never sang one note of ‘Fiddler’” this show is

responsible for my survival-its responsible for my life”. For so many of us coming from an Eastern European background, Fiddler is responsible for the survival of the heritage of our grandparents, many of whom were so committed to becoming “real Americans” that they did not share the stories of a world left behind. The fantasy of “ Fiddler” provides the chance, if only for a brief moment, to walk in their shoes.

So much has changed since the Jews left Anatevka, seeking opportunities in a New World. Tevye vaingloriously tries to hold back change with a rousing cry of Tradition! But the world of the shtetl was crumbling from the inside long before the Cossacks razed the village to the ground. The Enlightenment of the nineteenth century lured Jews to the city, where many became Socialists, seeking change in a new world order. As for Tevye, he could not control the fate of his five daughters- yes, daughters! Despite the efforts of Yentl the Matchmaker, one married for love, one moved to Siberia, and his favorite one daughter, and in the ultimate test, married a Cossack. “There is no other hand”, cried Tevye- To accept this change was to decree the end of Judaism. This was “Beyond the Pale”, a boundary that could not be crossed.

The Jews of Anatevka loaded their belongings in carts, carrying their candlesticks and *tefilin* and fell into the vortex of change that was America. In commenting on the original Exodus from Egypt, Leviticus Rabbah (32:5) states:

“Because of four things were the Israelites redeemed from Egypt: Because they did not change their names, because they did not speak ill of each other, and they did not change their language. And some say, because they did not change their clothing”.

The Jews of Anatevka brought with them a vital world of Yiddish theatre, literature and music, but soon names were changed from Rabinowitz to Robbins, and within a few decades, Yiddish became a language spoken only so that the *kinder* would not understand.

The German Jewish community, who had settled in America decades before, often had harsh words for their fellow Jews. As for clothing, while Orthodox sects continued to dress as if they were still living in the seventeenth century, the majority of Jews quickly adopted the fashions of the times. Above all, they wanted to be “real Americans”, blending into a culture where they might face exclusion and anti-Semitism, but there were no pogroms bent on their destruction.

What would Tevye think about the American Jewish community today, where, according to the Pew Research Center, over seventy percent of non-Orthodox Jews who have married since the year 2000 have married non-Jews. In this 2013 survey, roughly half of those interviewed who were raised as Orthodox now say they are no longer observant. Judaism is largely seen as a matter of ancestry and culture, not religious belief. Over two thirds of non- Orthodox Jews interviewed say that it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish! And what would Tevye think of this woman Rabbi? Tradition?

Tradition! But what part of our Jewish tradition is essential, unchanging, and what part will change, must change, in response to the changes of the time?

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, famously stated that “Judaism is an evolving civilization”, where “Tradition has a vote, but not a veto”. Kaplan brought Jewish prayer into the 20th century, but sometimes rabbis can go too far. He felt that Kol Nidre, which is really a dry formula in Aramaic that cancels obligations to complete a vow, (always suspect) was archaic. He tried to replace it with an upbeat melody to Psalm 100.No way-we love that melody- it’s a tradition!

So much that Jews regarded as ironclad tradition has changed since Abraham first listened to God’s voice. The sacrificial system of worship ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in

70AD. Tevye did not bring sacrificial goats and lambs in his milk cart to be slaughtered on an altar. “If I were a rich man” Tevye fantasizes, he would sit in his seat by the Eastern wall, offering prayers, and not sacrifices to God. And could Tevye even imagine the re-establishment of a Jewish State in Israel? The Wailing Wall was only a picture hanging on the eastern wall of his shul.

There are changes that evolve from within, and cataclysmic forces that impose change from without. The rampaging Cossacks appear almost benign compared with the calculated killing machine of the Nazis but one generation later. The majority of the Russian Jews who did not leave the shetl ended up slaughtered in camps like Babi Yar. Across Europe, those Jews who chose Enlightenment shared the same fate as their traditional counterparts .Six million Jews, fully one third of world Jewry, were annihilated between 1939-1945. We are still reeling from the depth of this profound change, and finding our Jewish footing in yet another New World.

What elements of Jewish tradition will change must change, and what are the essential, core elements of behavior and belief that must remain if we are to continue to exist as a Jewish people? What constitutes the unchanging core of our Jewish belief and what is open to a Judaism that must change in response to the times?

The words of my favorite Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai provide some insight:

My father was God, and I did not know it.

He gave me the Ten Commandments not in thunder and not in anger

Not in fire and not in a cloud

But gently and with love.

He added caresses and tender words, “would you” and “please”. And chanted (shamor v’zachor) ‘remember’ and

“keep” with the same tune, and wept quietly between one commandment and the next:

Thou shalt not take the name of thy Lord in vain, shalt not take...Not in vain, please don't bear false witness against your neighbor.

He hugged me tight and whispered in my ear:
Thou shalt not steal, shalt not commit adultery, shalt not kill.

And he laid the palms of his wide-open hands on my head with the Yom Kippur blessing:

Honor, love that thy days be long on this earth.

And the voice of my father- white as his hair.

Then he turned his face to me, as on the day he died in my arms and said: I would like to add two more commandments:

The Eleventh Commandment Thou shalt not change

And the twelfth commandment” Thou shalt change. You will change.”

Thus spoke my father, and he turned and walked away and disappeared into his strange distances.

What must we change, and what must we *not* change if we are to remain Jews? The Israelites were given Ten Commandments at Sinai as an eternal covenant. “Shamor V’Zachor- Keep and Remember the Sabbath day. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” But how are we to remember and observe? Can we turn on the lights? Drive our cars? Tevye did not have to answer such questions.

“Thou shalt not steal, shalt not commit adultery, shalt not kill. Honor , love that thy days be long on this earth”. The ten commandments stand as the bedrock of our Jewish foundation, but they do not stand-alone. The entire Torah scroll, carried in an

unbroken chain by Jews across the centuries, can be re-interpreted, but not a letter can be changed. V'Ahavta et Adonai Elochecha", You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your soul, all your might. Pass it on. Take care of the "widow, the orphan and the stranger" V'ahavta l'reacha c'mocha." "Love your fellow human being as yourself. This is the essence, the core of our Jewish soul. This teaching, **Thou shalt not change.**

But at the same time:

Thou shalt change. You will change

As Jews, we are commanded to "change and repair the world". The prophet Isaiah reminds us in the Haftarah read on Yom Kippur morning:

*"This is the fast I desire, to unlock fetters of wickedness;
And untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free;
To share your bread with the hungry
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your
own kin
(Only) Then shall your light burst through like the dawn.*

As God's partner in creation, we are commanded to change not only ourselves, but to improve and repair the world given into our care.

Each of us is a small world requiring repair. Rosh Hashanah literally means Rosh- the Head- of Change, Shana, which means both "year" and "change." On this eve of Yom Kippur we are called upon to take a *Heshbon Hanefesh*, an accounting of our souls. What must I change? What patterns and habits need attention? What changes must I initiate in my relationships, with my family members, with colleagues, with my friends? This is the process of "tshuvah": acknowledging where I have gone off course, and offering to change. Tshuvah is only complete,

however, when I am presented with a similar situation, but respond in a changed manner.

But at the same time... ***Thou Shalt Not Change***

Each year, with great gusto, we chant: “Return again, return to the land of your soul. Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are born and reborn again”... What forms the unchanging bedrock of who and what I am? Tshuvah is a return to the unchanged essence of my being.

On Kol Nidre evening we petition God to forgive our inability to change. “What ever we have sworn, and then forgotten, whatever earnest, well intentioned vows we might have taken up but not upheld, from all of them, we now request release.” Please God, release us from our vows. Do not judge us harshly.

But some changes are out of our control.

If you are breathing, your body is changing. With each breath our cells are changed, renewed. Eventually, however, the body slows down, no matter how much yoga we do or how much kale we eat. This change is profoundly unstoppable, despite some small temporary fixes on the way. We will age. We will die. The great Untetaneh Tokef prayer on Yom Kippur reminds us that death, the ultimate change, is inevitable, and not a question of “if,” but of how, and when.

And then there are the challenges of changes that seemingly appear out of nowhere. A cancer diagnosis. A marriage suddenly on the rocks. A child taken ill. A parent who is dying. A steady job that has vanished. An economic downturn out of control.

We can not prevent these changes, but we can learn to be flexible in order to survive them. I can still see the banner hanging on the wall where my late Aunt Helen was receiving chemo. “Life is

nothing like the brochure”, it said. Life is nothing like the brochure. Be ready for change.

On a personal level, I am facing the great change of retirement. After twenty years of serving as your rabbi, I will retire in July of 2017. A part of me is excited, but a part of me is fearful of this change. How will I fill my days without being on call 24/7? Where will I live? Will I have enough money to retire? But one thing will not change- I will always be connected to this congregation in my heart and soul. .

There have been so many changes in my life, and in the life of MJCS over these past twenty years. In those first years, we did not have a building, but a tent. It was very romantic until strong Santa Ana winds almost took it to the ground one Yom Kippur. There was no Shabbat on the Beach. There was no Shabbat morning service without a bar/bat mitzvah. Very few of the young people reading Torah today were even born. To quote Tevye. “I don’t remember growing older, when did they?”

“Sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset, quickly fly the years”. We have gone through so much together, so many simchas: baby namings, b’nai mitzvahs, weddings, dinner dances, Israel trips and birthday celebrations. We have shared so many losses as community, supporting each other through the most difficult times: deaths of parents and spouses, the passing of some of our founding members, pillars and visionaries, and most painfully, and even the loss of children. We have become the safety net for each other in times of joy and in times of trouble. Hold on, for the only certainty is that change will happen.

And when change does happen? We would do well to remember the story of the ring.

King Solomon was said to have the most powerful ring ever created. No one knew the secret of the writing that encircled its inner core, and Solomon never let the ring leave his hand. It contained the essence of all of his wisdom.

Whenever there was a festival of great rejoicing, the King would join in the merrymaking, enjoying life to the fullest. Whenever he had to confront death, he gave it all of his attention, with the ring on his finger, and a deep knowing inner smile. The wisdom of Solomon was such that he was completely present to whatever situation arose.

When the king was on his deathbed, his advisors begged the King to give them the ring. Are you certain, the dying king gasped, that you want a ring that is so powerful that when a happy person looks at it he becomes sad, and if a sad person looks at it she becomes happy? Yes, said his Prime Minister. Please give us the magical ring.

And so, in his dying gesture, King Solomon let the ring slip from his finger. As the ring rolled across the floor, they could see the glimmer of the engraving- a gimel, a zayin and a yud. The Prime Minister picked up the ring, and held it to the light, and read GAM ZEH YA'AVOR :This too shall pass. And with that the great king died, taking nothing with him but his eternal soul.

GAM ZH YA'AVOR;THIS TOO SHALL PASS

Twice, we have printed this as refrigerator magnets, but times have changed. This time, we offer the reminder as a clip for the only ring that is always with you- the ring that holds your car keys. May its message help us all to breathe, stay present, and remember "This too shall Pass".

Nothing remains stagnant. All life is change. We can not hold on, to the good or the bad, but we can be present in every moment to the fullest extent possible.

Gam Zeh Ya'Avor. Thank you for being so present with me through all of life's changes throughout the past twenty years. May we all be inscribed together for many more years of good changes in the Book of Life.