

Rosh Hashanah Shacharit

Eternal Renewal: The Blessings of Change

The legendary king Theseus ruled Athens. In gratitude for his heroism, his people turned his ship into a memorial in the harbor. Over the years, its wooden planking began to rot. Seeing this, the Athenians replaced the rotting planks with fresh ones so that future generations would continue to enjoy visiting the ship.

The story became the basis for a famous thought experiment: once you begin replacing the planks, is this still the same ship of Theseus? To put it another way...can things stay the same even after they experience change? This question has special meaning for our community today.

Rosh Hashanah is all about change. Its Hebrew name (literally: Head [of the] year) hints at this. The word shanah, meaning “year”, has the root letters shin, nun, hey. That same root can also form the words l’shanot, “to change”, or “change” itself, shinui.

Every year has a regular cycle of changes as the seasons progress. And each year has its own unique potential. Jewish tradition is very consistent: this dynamic quality is a Divine gift! And while we commemorate it on this festival morning, it’s also part of our daily liturgy.

In the morning blessing for Creation, we recite the passage: *Ha-m’chadeish b’tuvo b’chol yom tamid ma’asei Bereshit.*¹ We praise God, “the One who renews, in God’s goodness, daily and always, the works of Creation.”

A few weeks ago, Lorel gave us a teaching on this passage. She reminded us that we are ma’asei bereshit, too! We are part of Creation, and as such, we are made anew each day. One constant aspect of the human condition is that we change. *T’shuvah* – repentance – is a key part of that idea.

T’shuvah is more than a promise that we CAN change: it’s an imperative to do so! It’s a holy paradox: the great constancy in our lives is change itself.

This is how Jewish tradition offers one answer to the question of the Ship of Theseus: “can things stay the same even after they change?” Yes, they can. All things change at

¹ *Yotzeir* on both Shabbat and *chol* (morning service)

some level. What's important is to find holiness in the change – and to engage openly with it. As we do so, we connect with our Divine nature: our deepest being. This helps us to see that we're always ourselves, even (and especially) as we experience change.

That said, there are other ways to answer this question. I've recently been corresponding with Professor Noson Yanofsky at Brooklyn College, who teaches on this exact issue. He reminds us that change is true not only for people, but also for groups. While universities cycle their student body every four years, and their faculty and staff every few decades, we still see them as the same institution. Yanofsky says that this is possible because their **core properties** remain the same - their key qualities remain constant.²

Over this past year, our leadership and I have been asking questions about Beth El's essential identity. In Yanofsky's language, what are the "core properties" of our community? What are the beliefs and values that define us? How will we express and demonstrate them in 5782, following Lorel's retirement, and in the years to come?

We've been working together to see this transition as an invitation to start a process of discernment. We are taking a hard look at who we are and what we value so that we can choose a path that will keep us strong, united and vibrant.

There's a classic Hasidic teaching that captures the spiritual nature of this work: *Rabbi Zusya said, "When I come to stand before the Heavenly Court, I'm not worried that they might ask me, 'Why were you not more like Moses?' What I worry is that they might ask me: 'Why were you not more... like Zusya?'"*

Our task isn't to struggle to make ourselves into something we're not. Instead, it's to become ever-more ourselves; to renew ("I'chadeish", like in the blessing I mentioned earlier) our community, guided by our key principles.

This was the inspiration for the Beth El Visioning Committee's project, about which Jim spoke last night. In many ways, our Vision Statement is a distillation of our core properties. It's who we are and who we want to be. I offer it again, here:

Congregation Beth El is joyful, participatory Judaism.

² Derived from *The Outer Limits of Reason* and also "Mind and Physics"

We sing, learn, laugh, and pray together, and celebrate our varied backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

We connect with Jewish values and traditions as we strive to create a more just future for ourselves, our children, and our world.

This vision places relationships at the center of Beth EI, both between our members and also to Torah in its grandest sense: Jewish text, values and culture. And I love that it includes laughter - that's emblematic of the authentic, personal nature of our relationships!

I'm very grateful to the Visioning Team for all their hard work. It's necessary for us to express our values and principles. We also know this is not sufficient. So I'm grateful, as well, that our new Strategic Action Group has begun the next step in this process. Their task is to take the core properties from our Vision Statement and help our leadership integrate them into all aspects of our community's life. I'm looking forward to our continued partnership together in this work!

On a related note, I'm proud and excited to share something new with you.

Rabbis are generally trained more to preserve traditions than to serve as change agents. However, I know that an important part of my role over the next few years will be to balance remaining true to our existing sense of self while also encouraging us to see ourselves in new and healthful ways.

A few months ago, I successfully applied to become a fellow of the Clergy Leadership Incubator (CLI).³ This is a two-year program that teaches Jewish clergy to bring healthful and sustainable innovations to their communities.

One of my first CLI assignments was to define my congregation's best qualities: those core properties that we wish to nurture over the coming years. I named three:

A culture of engagement. This is more than attending services or doing a social action project: it's how our members invest time, energy and passion in creating and maintaining and expanding our community. We see this as our congregants claim ownership of our programs.

³ <https://www.cliforum.org/cli-fellows/cohort-5/>

A culture of curiosity. We encourage each other to grow as we explore our connection to Jewish life and culture openly and freely, from experimenting with personal spiritual practices to new recipes, from poetry readings to beer tastings. We always seek to deepen our relationship to Judaism and to each other, knowing that this makes us whole.

A culture of caring and unity. We strive, quite actively, to support each other across physical distance, generational divides, and backgrounds. It's when we say to someone: "Because we're both a part of Beth El, I feel that we're connected."

Each of these three qualities are clearly embodied in our community through our members. We each have a role in keeping them a vibrant part of Beth El. There's a Hasidic teaching that expresses this very point:

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Mendel entered the House of Prayer. He looked at the people who had gathered from across the region. "What a fine crowd!" he said. "And I want you to know that I can't carry you all on my shoulders. Every one of you must work for themselves. And that is how we might continue together."

Ultimately, it falls to you – to our members – to continue to embrace these values of engagement, curiosity and caring. No one can sustain them as effectively and as meaningfully as you can. This is true wherever we are in life's journey.

We need our elders to share the wisdom that comes from years of experience. We need our empty nesters and retirees to lend us their sustaining energy as we cultivate the next generation of leaders and learners. We need our parents and professionals to bring their full skillset to us, helping us to stay fresh and on the cutting edge of modern Jewish life. And we need our students to share their curiosity with us, inspiring us with their insights and their joy at growing up in the warmth of our temple home.

If you don't identify as one of those categories – we need your engagement, just as much! And if you don't know where your skills could best be used, ask me or Jim. Ask anyone on our board.

This isn't always easy. A year-and-a-half of wrestling with COVID has left us overwhelmed and worn out. I am deeply grateful to the many people who, nonetheless, stepped forward to help us not only to continue, but to thrive! And this leads to a final holy paradox.

As we give, we find ourselves receiving, as well.

Time and again, our members have told me that they were refreshed by serving on committees and helping with our programs. In answering the call to help sustain us, they found their relationships with one another deepened and enriched. This is a very real way that we can see ourselves renewed, daily, along with all Creation.

Three days ago, in our Torah service, we read: “This thing is very close to you – it’s in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (Deut. 30:13). The process of engagement is more than accessible to us. It’s integral to who we are as individuals and as a community. And it’s all the more powerful when we invite new people to join us in our work, in our study and in our celebrations!

This is our community’s answer to the question of Theseus’ ship: “How will we stay the same as we experience change?” We do this when we allow our core principles of being caring, curious and engaged to guide us, deepening the relationships that weave us together. And those connections are strengthened as we continue to engage, wholly and with open hearts, in the life of our community at every level.

There is so much that we love to do together – and we do these things well! I know that we will continue to learn, to laugh, to sing, to share meals (speedily and in our days) through the years to come.

We will navigate this time of change healthfully as we hold one another close. Each of us is integral to maintaining this *kehilah kedosha*, our holy community, that blends engagement and curiosity and caring to make a wondrous and wonderful whole. That is our shared strength and that is the holy spark that will keep our light blazing brightly for generations to come.

L’shanah tovah u-metukah - may this new year bring health, uplift and joy to you, to our community and to all who dwell on earth.