

Erev Rosh Hashanah

Drosh one

Rosh Hashanah is the New Year, or in Hebrew, the head of the year. During this season we talk a lot about beginnings, starting over, and/or renewing ourselves. Of course, it is a new year, no longer 5777, but now 5778. No longer 8th grade, but now 9th....no longer 50 something...now 50 something plus one....We talk a lot about making new goals and trying a new way. But what we do not often talk about is how to do it. How are we going to begin again? What does beginning again mean to me this year? What tools do I have at my disposal? And where am I going anyway?

Within our congregational life, there are many different reasons why we might think of new beginnings this year in particular: I don't know, a new cantor, a new dues structure, a new –temporary-High Holy Day location. Sometimes the world feels very new. But the truth of the matter is that being new is often built on endings. We might like talking about the newness more than the endings; but it is hard to start something new without ending something else. I attend school; I no longer stay home. I graduate, I no longer attend school. I get a new job; I no longer work at the old one. I get married; I am no longer single. I am divorced; I am no longer married. I am an empty nester; I no longer have children at home. I have received a chronic diagnosis; I no longer have the possibility of getting better. Even I am born; I no longer am protected in the womb. You get the idea. For every beginning there is an ending.

Although emotionally we might want to gloss over the ending; but when we do that we never really allow ourselves to fully feel the newness, the possibility, the beginning. So for this first third of my drosh, I want to share a few thoughts about endings-the kind of endings that lay the healthy foundation for our new beginnings.

I do not want to gloss over the fact that some endings are against our will. Sometimes people die, we lose jobs, people become estranged, friends do not return calls against our will,

and our body will never walk as far or as fast again. Sometimes we are pushed into these new beginnings kicking and screaming. At times like these our endings can loom larger than life. They take over our life, hindering our ability to begin the next chapter. Bette Howland described these endings in her poem, "Obstacles"

For a long time it seemed to me
That real life was about to begin,
But there was always some obstacle in the way.

Something had to be got through first,
Some unfinished business;
Time still to be served,
A debt to be paid.

Then life would begin.

At last it dawned on me
That these obstacles were my life.

We talk about shutting the door on the past, closing it off. Sometimes it sounds like amputating an infected limb-sorry for the mixed metaphor. This anonymous poem illustrates this thought completely

Yesterday's Door by Anonymous

Shutting the door on yesterday opens your mind and spirit up for today!

I've shut the door on Yesterday,
It's sorrows and mistakes.
I've locked within its gloomy walls
Past failures and heartaches.

And now I throw the key away,
To seek another room,
And furnish it with hope and smiles
And every springtime bloom.

No thought shall enter this Abode
That has a hint of pain;
And envy, malice and distrust
Shall never entrance gain.

I've shut the door on Yesterday
And thrown the key away -
Tomorrow holds no fear for me
Since I have found Today.

If only it was that easy to end. And for some of us maybe it is. But for most of us, endings are a tug of war with ourselves. We want to hold on even when we acknowledge there is nothing there to hold onto anymore. We want to return to a past – the good ole days- whether they were that good or not. We want to fight the new for as long as possible, hoping that our fight will allow us to go Back to the Future. We forget that our brokenness; our scars are part of the present we carry with us. As Rabbi Naomi Levi wrote, “Sometimes we forget this simple truth: The broken pieces of ourselves are often our greatest teachers. It is from them that we learn compassion, wisdom, understanding, devotion, faith, and insight. It is from them that we learn how to pray, how to cry, how to listen, how to reach out for help. It is from them that we learn how to strive for better, how to empathize and offer help.” Ultimately isn't that what growing is all about? This struggle is not only an individual one, but a communal one as well - one in which we are trying to figure out what to let go of and what to bring with us into the future. Samuel Osherson in his book, Rekindling the Flame, suggests that this communal struggle is the purpose of all Jewish endeavor, to struggle, to wrestle if you will, with our past to create a new and exciting present.

He wrote:

“The individual struggle with holding on to and letting go of the past is at the core of contemporary Jewish struggles. In constructing Judaism in our lives, we all confront the fundamental anxiety of separating from the past, of living our lives differently from our parents (think of parents in the broadest sense: our cultural parents, all the way back to Abraham and Sarah). In finding, or creating, the rituals that matter to us, in finding our own Jewish voices, we are different from the past, and there is some loss and sorrow in that. It is a fundamental fact of human life that growing up and maturing also means doing some violence to the past.”

I must admit violence to the past sounded a little overstated-at least in this stage of my life. But there were times in the past where I was accused of doing violence to the past in order to create a Judaism I could live and thrive within.

After all when I was ordained, there were only a handful of ordained women in congregations and even fewer lesbian or gay men who had positions where they could be out. There have been times in my spiritual journey where the change I symbolized was met with anger, pain, and sadness. Sometimes endings are violent.

At other times, the endings can be the natural outcome of what has been coming for a long time-what is expected to happen. I knew that my older two sons, like my younger one soon enough, will graduate from high school. After all, they had been working towards that goal for a very long time. Sometimes our parents or ourselves suffer from horrible protracted illnesses, in which we know death is the only outcome. Sometimes that promotion or new marriage is exactly what we always wanted. Even at these times when the endings are expected, we might feel a tinge of sadness, the need to reminisce, or the awareness that something has truly shifted in our lives that will propel us in a new direction. Shannon

Alder wrote:

“When someone you love dies, you are given the gift of "second chances". Their eulogy is a reminder that the living can turn their lives around at any point. You're not bound by the past; that is who you used to be. You're reminded that your feelings are not who you are, but how you felt at that moment. Your bad choices defined you yesterday, but they are not who you are today. Your future doesn't have to travel the same path with the same people. You can start over. You don't have to apologize to people that won't listen. You don't have to justify your feelings or actions, during a difficult time in your life. You don't have to put up with people that are insecure and want you to fail. All you have to do is walk forward with a positive outlook, and trust that God has a plan that is greater than the sorrow you left behind. The people of quality that were meant to be in your life won't need you to explain the beauty of your heart. They already understand what being human is---a roller coaster ride of emotions during rainstorms and sunshine, sprinkled with moments when you can almost reach the stars.”

As we turn to the Barachu on pp. 62, as we enter into this section of prayer where we enter into our own personal dialogue with the prayers, feel free to allow your mind to wander, to begin to think about your endings, the foundation on which your present and ultimately your future is built. If you are capable, please rise.

Drosh two

Sometimes when we begin again; we forget that we possess many different skills and talents hidden in our tool box. What skills and resources, human and otherwise, support us, guide us and help us define this coming year.

For good or bad, we are a product of what came before us. Not only particular events, as we discussed earlier, but also societal influences; we have inherited a world, an understanding of science, a religious experience, parents, and schooling that reflect a certain time period. I know that I would not have existed as I live my life today if those who came before me had not paved the way. I know that the knee jerk angry parenting response that flies out of my mouth when I am tired and sick, was experienced at some other time and place. I am aware that my education, economic status, gender and racial identity, religious affiliation and sexual orientation influence how I walk through life. I know that as much as I have influenced my life-and I have-I have also been influenced to be who and what I am in the world. By acknowledging the different influences that led to our present, we give ourselves permission to decide which ones we want to define our present and which ones we want to let go of. As Craig D.

Lounsborough wrote:

“Starting over is an acceptance of a past we can’t change, an unrelenting conviction that the future can be different, and the stubborn wisdom to use the past to make the future what the past was not.”

But the past is not the only thing in our tool box. In order to move beyond our past, we must discover what is missing in our present. As Rabbi Naomi Levy wrote: “In order to change, we have to be able to look honestly at our lives and experience our own dissatisfaction. We have to allow ourselves to fully feel our hunger for a better life. ...If we’re unhappy but have no direction or passion, we have nowhere to go. ...We have to be willing to leave the security of our present lives behind in order to step into an uncertain future. And we also have to be willing to face failure.

If we're not willing to allow for the possibility of failure, we're not going to be able to take a dramatic step into the unknown." We have the possibility to keep learning, to keep growing, to keep maturing whether it is through programs in the synagogue or programs in our neighborhood. We are lucky to be living in a community with an abundance of teachers, mentors, and resources to continue our maturing into whatever new adventure we are hoping to move into. But mostly, we are blessed with the gift of time. For as long as we are alive, we are able to make choices about how we are going to live our life.

As Arnold Bennett wrote:

"The chief beauty about time is that you cannot waste it in advance. The next year, the next day, the next hour are lying ready for you, as perfect, as unspoiled, as if you had never wasted or misapplied a single moment in all your life. You can turn over a new leaf every hour if you choose."

After all isn't that what the prayer *elohai neshamah*, that we sing every morning, means. We are given a new soul. This soul is ours to use any way we want. *B'ezrat Hasham*/with Gd's help, we will get a new one tomorrow. But I don't know that for sure. All I know is that today is my time to do with as I choose. What am I going to do with this New Year? Am I going to rectify my mistakes? Am I going to say goodbye to the past that no longer exists? Am I going to find mentors, friends who encourage me, activities that support me? Am I going to give back to others who have less? Am I going to strengthen my community with my support? Am I going to turn just ever so slightly to the new chapter that awaits me? What if every time I came to services in the next ten days, I turn just a little farther, just a little more towards the new that I hope to become? After all isn't that what listening to the shofar cry is all about. On pp. 98 we announce tomorrow's animalistic cry encouraging us to turn a little farther, and change a little more, approaching the person we always hoped we would be. *Keyn yehi razon*/May it be so.

Drosh three

I must admit I have spoken about this before. I am constantly amazed by how important hope truly is in our ability to change and begin again. Hope allows us to imagine a different life. Hope encourages us to continue to push through the pain. Hope picks us up when we are down. Hope propels our imagination to work overtime. Hope finds the tools, the supports, and the strength when life gets difficult. When psychologists study people who have truly transformed their lives, beaten the odds, and created an alternative existence for themselves, there is one thing they usually find in abundance: hope. Hope expressed by one or two people who believe in them and hope they had internalized into themselves. As many of you know, I have been involved with the immigration discussion going on in our country. I cannot think of anything more hopeful than moving to a new country. The incredible belief that life can be, will be, should be better is remarkable when one considers how few real facts on the ground there are to support that belief other than it cannot be much worse. When I see long lines of people carrying their children and life possessions on their back, I see hope, possibility, faith, and rugged determination. Thankfully, most of our changes, most of our beginnings are not that dramatic. We are truly blessed to have been born here and not there. And yet if we really expect to be someone different than we were last year, we must hold on to that same hope, that same belief that life is filled with possibilities. Not promises, for failure is also a part of beginning again, but rather hope for something to be learned from that failure, hope that life can get better, and hope that I am not stuck in now.

The truth is I can't be stuck in now even if I wanted to be. For the passage of time is the one constant we can be sure of. We know at the end of today there is tomorrow. The question is how will we use it?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote throughout his career about the sanctification of time.

He believed that this gift of a new beginning did not come only on RH or YK or every week on Shabbat, but rather every moment we lived time as an intentional sacred experience. As he wrote,

“It is the dimension of time wherein we meet Gd, wherein we become aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations. Time is the presence of Gd in the world of space....”

If we believe that we know that time is the greatest gift then how we choose to use it is filled with the hope that can propel us to new beginnings.

Having said that I am quite aware that hope is not an emotion that we can turn on and off at will. It is something we have to nurture and develop over time. It is a skill we strengthen just as we strengthen our muscles.

As John O'Donohue wrote:

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.
It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

May we find the strength to believe we, too, can be something we never thought we could be, the faith to hope in the possible, the support to actualize our dreams, and the ability to begin again. May 5778 be a year of renewal, rejuvenation, and beginnings for all of us and let us all say amen.

If you are capable please rise for the aleynu on pp. 1202.

