

Sermonette one

Since we were very young children, many of us have been taught that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about teshuvah/repentance, missing the mark, improving, maturing, and getting better. The assumption is that if I do something new, I am working hard to not do something else not so good. What do I mean? I am working hard to lose weight because being overweight is bad for my health. I am working hard to save one night a week to go out with my partner on date night because my marriage suffers when I work all the time. I am changing because what I am currently doing is unhealthy for me or harmful to others. And that is what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can be about. But it is not all it is about. On a more fundamental level, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about self-reflection and self-evaluation, much of which leads us to at least *want* to change, if not *actually* change. But not all change, not all growth, not all newness is a result of avoiding something bad. Sometimes it is just nice to do something new for the benefits of the new activity, not to change away from something problematic. According to a recent study published in [Alzheimer's & Dementia: The Journal of the Alzheimer's Association](#), people can reduce their risk of cognitive decline and dementia by making positive lifestyle changes. These changes are things we should be doing anyway, like doing cardiovascular exercising, quitting smoking or eating a balanced and healthy diet. And then there are the others which are in a different category. There are two I would like to highlight today. The first is to continue your education in any stage of life. Did I mention the synagogue has many different forms of adult and cultural arts offerings that would continue your education? And the other is to challenge yourself. Challenge ourselves to do new things, not because they are necessarily better than what we were doing before but because doing new things keeps our life fresh, exciting, interesting, and meaningful.

In an article entitled "The Benefits of Trying New Things Posted," the contemporary author, Alex Blackwell, describes the benefit of doing new things. He explains how easy it is to fall into a rut, to feel like we are going through life as a robot, getting up in the morning, eating food, talking to people or not, going to work or not, and then climbing back into bed at the end of the day. Overstated maybe, but point well taken. How many of us really wake up in the morning, truly feeling grateful for another day? Ironically, the people the most grateful for every day are those who are battling a life-threatening disease. Do we really have to be threatened with a life-threatening disease to appreciate life? Avoiding the ruts in our lives is

not the only benefits Alex Blackwell describes for trying something new. He encourages people to try new things because they help us see the value of life all around us. I do not know about you, but I often feel that way when I go on vacation. When I return home, my life here looks different. Not because it is, but because I see it differently when I return; I have changed. Trying something new is like taking a *staycation* right here at home. It gives us a new way to look at the same things. In the same way, meeting new people gives us different perspectives on life and we become renewed and refreshed. New things keep our minds, hearts, and souls nimble, creative, and thinking. Some might say they keep us alive.

When Jews make fun of ourselves, we often laugh at how many questions we ask or rather how we answer a question with a question. Someone asked Dear Abby, a newspaper columnist, “Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?” She answered, “How should they answer?” Many of you have heard me say that in graduate school, one of my professors constantly emphasized he did not care what answers we found; rather he cared what questions we asked.

Amos Oz, the famous Israeli author, wrote, “Fundamentalist live life with an exclamation point. I prefer to live my life with a question mark.” Where do my questions take me? What worlds do they open up for me? How do they keep my life interesting, exciting, and fresh?

Change can be about learning to be better than I was and change should be about augmenting who I am-sometimes the old and new are both good-sometimes it is just time to change.

Sermonette two

Some of you might know the contemporary singer, Mindi Abair. She sings a song entitled *Change*, where the chorus is, “We all must change: that’s what makes us the same.” This year the changes at CJC are important transformative changes. They have the potential to springboard us into the future in exciting ways. Our two-year process to analyze our dues structure, financial set up, and the Jewish perspective on money and dues led us to an overwhelming vote in the spring to move to a new dues structure beginning with the summer 2017. At that time we will go from a traditional American Jewish dues structure to a

sustainability model based on pledges. During the coming year, you will have many different opportunities to help mold this basic model into the financial basis of our congregation. Regardless of what we decide to do, it will be new and different. And since whatever financial structure we use will create the community we are willing to pay for, it will define who we are able to be in the coming years. At a recent board meeting, a member shared how scared she was that the new structure might not raise enough funds for us to do all the things we would like to do. The truth is that it is scary. Change is scary. For many of us, CJC is not only the place we come for High Holy Days, have our life cycle events, learn in our adult education programs, raise our children, enjoy the cultural arts offerings, go on field trips with friends made here; it is the place that we call our religious home. Even when many people move away, they want to come back and find the home they left years ago. But time has moved on and the congregation they have returned to is not the same as the congregation they left years before. I remember returning from college and my parents had converted my bedroom into a guest room. Now to be fair, they had asked me before they changed the room if it is ok with me. And I said yes, sure. But when I came home, let us just say I was not so sure any more. Change is hard; the unknown and the unfamiliar are scary.

Months after we decided to embark on this exploration of this new dues structure Cantor Morrison announced her retirement. We will have the privilege of celebrating the many contributions that Cantor Morrison has given to this community on June 11th. Tomorrow she will give the drosh describing her understanding of this transition. We will have many opportunities in the coming year to both let her know how much she means to all of us and explore what a new cantor could bring to our community. Change is hard.

Recently for the first time in a long time at CJC, I have been hearing a lot of “either/or” language. “Either Cantor Morrison is amazing or the new cantor will be a wonderful change.” Rarely does the same person say both in the same sentence. And yet both have the opportunity to be incredibly true. Cantor Morrison has left her mark on CJC in so many ways that I will go into in more detail in June and the new cantor has the potential to bring something to the table that we did not even know we were missing or could benefit from. Transition times are hard-they are scary-the unknown is just that -unknowable.

How we live in this time of change probably says more about CJC as a community than any decision we make. CJC created three important committees filled with congregants from

many different constituencies within the congregation to guide us. These committees have already met countless hours, making sure they have developed all kinds of mechanisms for two-way communication. They are actively trying to reach as many congregants as possible. They are taking their responsibility seriously and are informing their work with many different points of view. They are listening and then acting, knowing that inaction is an action as well. We might not yet know the end result, but the process has been and will continue to be filled with Jewish values, patient listening, active dialogue, and many different compromises. The means will definitely justify this end. One poem that I think about often is "Life is a Journey," by Alvin Fine. I won't read the whole poem, but here is an excerpt.

Birth is a beginning and death a destination;

But life is a journey.

A going, a growing from stage to stage:

From childhood to maturity and youth to old age....

We see that victory lies not at some high place along the way,

But in having made the journey, stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage.

Birth is a beginning and death a destination;

But life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage,

Made stage by stage...To life everlasting.

May our journey this year be a sacred one stage by stage and next year be filled with new and exciting challenges on this journey called our life.

Sermonette three

I said earlier that I have heard a lot of "either/or" thinking here at CJC recently. The truth is that in our news today, there seems to be a lot of "either/or" thinking. It reminded me of the only Pete Seeger song I ever heard that I really did not like. The song is Whose side are you on?

Written by Florence Patton Reece, like many of Pete Singer songs, the chorus is quite simple: “Whose side are you on?” But it is the third and fourth stanza that makes the point of the song :

They say in Harlan County

There are no neutrals there

You'll either be a union man

Or a thug for J.H. Blair

Oh, workers can you stand it?

Oh, tell me how you can

Will you be a lousy scab

Or will you be a man?

Even as a child I disliked this song. The idea that one had to choose sides and that there was no middle ground to meet on felt unfamiliar, not part of my life experience. You see, I was raised to live in the middle, to try to understand the other point of view and to seek a compromise that we all can live with. “Either/or” thinking would require that I say either I like the services or I don’t go; either you are right or you are clearly wrong; either you are educated and agree with me or you are ignorant and just plain wrong. Either you are attacked or the attacker. Either you are the problem or the solution. I find this thinking paralyzing. It makes me feel like a wishbone being pulled at from both sides. Yet the only way the wishbone stays whole is if both sides stop pulling long enough to discover the sacred possibility in the other’s point of view. When we stop long enough to acknowledge the imperfection of our own absolutely right point of view, we take a step towards the place of the unknown. For most of us, the unknown place is the place where we let go of what we hold to be true to find something we have yet to discover. This year’s campaign for president of the United States has been one of the most difficult campaigns that many of us have witnessed in a long time. It is filled with name-calling,

accusations, and pithy verbal assaults. And it is not over. We will be asked in the beginning of November to vote for president, senators, and representatives, among other local positions. Regardless of who wins, we will have a new president. Change is so hard.

Whose side are you on? May we be on the side of justice, wholeness, compassion, peace and empathy. Not only for those we more or less agree with, but also for those to whom we are diametrically opposed. For the sacred image of Gd that they portray may be the hardest for me to see. Imagine what it could look like if I worked really hard to see the humanity behind all the slogans and position papers to see the person deep inside who, like me, was made in the image of Gd.