

Sermon
Erev Rosh Hashanah
Taos 2018

Return again, 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.
Return again...

We chant this refrain throughout these High Holy Days,
acknowledging that no matter how far we have strayed, we can
change and return to our essence. We return to who we are, what
we are, and where we can be our highest self.

This year, I returned to the land of my soul.

I arrived in Taos in the fall of 1976, a newly single mom with a
four year old, a five year old, and a job at Da Nahazli, the “hippie”
school. I had spent the previous five years in Mexico City working
with the Mexican Jewish community along with my Israeli
husband, and had been teaching and directing theatre in the Jewish
community as a way of connecting with my own soul.

During my first months here, the TCA staged a knockout
production of “West Side Story”, and when I saw the
announcement for the next production, Fiddler on the Roof, I
stepped up. “I am not a great actress”, I confessed “ But I do have
some experience as a director.” Sold. On the first casting call,
Tevye showed up. It was Ron Kalom, who is Tevye in every inch
of his being, and who in so many ways has kept the Jewish soul of
Taos alive for the last fifty years. Unlike Tevye, Ron was not a
dairyman, but a pizza man, holding services in his restaurant,
House of Taos. Like Tevye, he served up philosophy and learning

with every delivery. Of course, his wife Carol Kalom made the perfect Golda.

The production of Fiddler provided the bridge between my Jewish world and this unknown raw land of Taos. I now understand that Fiddler, which “returns again and returns again” to the Broadway stage, provides that bridge for many of us coming from an Eastern European background. Many of our grandparents and great grandparents were so committed to becoming “real Americans” that they did not share the stories of a world left behind. My own grandparents were from Kiev and Odessa, but I had very little idea of how they lived their lives before arriving via steerage to Ellis Island. The fantasy of “Fiddler” provided the chance, if only for a brief moment, to walk in their shoes, to return to a time gone by.

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. The Rabbis fought change by rejection of new ideas, but the doors were opening. As for Tevye, he could not control the fate of his five daughters- yes, - as the script says -daughters!

Despite the efforts of Yentl the Matchmaker, one daughter married for love, one moved to Siberia, and his favorite daughter, in the ultimate test, married a Cossack. “On the other hand” Tevye philosophized.. “There is no other hand”! To accept this change, intermarriage of Christian and Jew, was beyond the Pale, a boundary that could not be crossed.

Waves of pogroms decimated the villages, as Tevye struggled with his Jewish soul. Eventually, there was little choice. The Jews of Anatevka loaded their belongings in carts, carrying their

candlesticks and tefilin and fell into the vortex of change that was America.

Change. The Jews have faced change ever since Abraham left his comfortable home in Haran for God's promise of a new land in Canaan. Moses led a nation of slaves to freedom, from Egypt into a howling desert before reaching that Promised Land.

We are told that because of four things the Israelites were 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".

(Leviticus Rabbah 32:5)

Language? The Jews of Anatevka brought with them a vital world of Yiddish theatre, literature and music, and within a few decades, Yiddish became a language spoken only so that the kinder would not understand.

As for names, Rabinowitz quickly became Robbins, Shlissel became Keyes, and Zimmerman even became Dylan!

Speaking Ill? The German Jewish community, who had settled in America decades before, often had harsh words for their fellow Jews. The Yiddish speaking Jews who crowded the tenement of the lower east Side, my grandparents included, were an embarrassment to Jewish establishment of New York's upper east side.

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. Again, 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. The new immigrants from Eastern Europe happily adapted to their new world. They changed.

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 2015 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!

What part of our Jewish tradition is essential, unchanging, and what part will change, must change, in response to the challenges of the time? And where is the boundary that we can not cross if we are to remain as Jews?

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.” 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 72AD. 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, “I would sit in my seat by the Eastern wall”, offering prayers, not sacrifices to God. And could Tevye even imagine the re-establishment of a Jewish State in Israel? The Wailing Wall was but a picture, a dream.

There are changes that evolve from within, and cataclysmic forces that impose change from without. The rampaging Cossacks appear 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 places 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 Jewish New World.

We have changed, and have not changed, despite the challenges of the last century.

In the words of Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai:

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 as Jews?

The Israelites were given Ten Commandments at Sinai as an eternal covenant, an unchanging covenant between God and the Jewish People.

“Shamor V’Zachor- Keep and Remember the Sabbath day.

But how are we to remember and observe? Can we turn on the lights? Drive our cars? Change our melodies?

Tevye did not have to answer such questions.

The Ten Commandments, as given at Sinai, are the bedrock of our Jewish foundation, but they do not stand-alone. The entire Torah carried in an unbroken chain by Jews across the centuries with 3000 years of commentaries, wrestles with the nuances of change. The Torah can be re-interpreted, but not a letter written in the scroll can be changed.

V’Ahavta et Adonai Elochech b’chol levavcha, u’b’chol nafshecha, u’b’chol m’odecha,

“You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your soul, all your might. Teach it to your children”. Does that include women?

When asked by a Roman to teach him the essence of Judaism on

one foot, the sage Hillel replied “ Do not do unto your neighbor what you would not want done unto yourself”. But who is your neighbor? Only Jews? All humanity?

As Jews, we are commanded to “ change and repair the world”. And our actions as Jews must reflect that desire for change. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us in the Haftorah read on Yom Kippur morning, the biblical commandment to fast on Yom Kippur has no meaning if we do not repair our broken world.

In the words of Isaiah:

“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.

Do not worry so much about eating a morsel of bread on Yom Kippur if you ignore the cries of hunger in your land.

Tikkun Olam .Repair of the World. But each one of us is a small world requiring repair. Thou Shalt change!

During these ten days, 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 we are off course, and offering to change.

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

“Return again, return to the land of your soul. Return to who you are, return to what you are... What forms the unchanged essence of my being? What habits and behaviors have I taken on that are not really me? Am I dedicating my life to what is really important, or

are my actions a distraction?

Change. Don't change.

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 Untetaneh Tokef prayer that we declare on Rosh Hashanah and 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.

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", it said "Is nothing like the brochure." Life is nothing like the brochure.

5779. Time to change the date on our Jewish calendar. We have reached a New Year, a year guaranteed to be full of change. The word "Shana" in Hebrew means both "year" and "change". Shana-change Tova-Good. I wish all of us a Shana Tova, a year of Good Changes, and may each change bring you closer to the land of your soul.

