

YK 5764 Drash
by Jeff Bogursky

*Dedicated to the memory of Joe Gulotta, my
brother-in-law who just a month ago, lost his brave
battle far too young, and is much missed.*

As religious Jews, our lives are bound by the changing of the seasons and the revolutions of time, the phases of the moon, the counting of the days. Many of you know that Marly and I lived for a time on a farm in upstate New York, and that our beautiful daughter Sasha was born there. It has always struck me that in our modern society, it is virtually only farmers, Wiccans and religious Jews who know what phase the moon is in, or exactly when dawn, dusk and other celestial occurrences happen.

This tradition has been faithfully carried over the generations. My paternal grandparents, may their memories be a blessing, did not remember a single date; they marked every happening in their lives by its proximity to a holiday: "we were married a week before Rosh HaShana 1927. You were born during the ten days 1958" -- you get the idea. As a boy, I assumed that they just didn't have calendars in Poland. Now, I realize the deeper significance of marking time along with the changing of the seasons, or as the Rabbis put it in Ma'ariv,
משנה עתים.

Thirty Yom Kippurs ago today, Egypt and Syria made their best attempt yet to destroy the Jewish State. Three Rosh HaShanas ago another war not of our choosing was begun against our brothers and sisters in Israel. And, two years ago, a week before Rosh HaShana, that war opened a second front against New Yorkers and Americans. We all have followed the news stories, the faces of the victims, here and there, the faces of the killers, the suffering, the fear, the impotence, the lack of clarity despite a world that seems to have become more black and white.

And, yet, the moon keeps doing its thing, the night turns to day, the festivals of Tishrei keep coming, the seasons keep changing.

Well, Something's got to change, right?

Change can seem so easy sometimes. Like when, in this minyan this Fall season, we look around at the blossoming of so many beautiful young women [*and men*] called to the Torah for the first time. This kind of change is an attractive thing of ease and grace

But this is usually not the case; Perhaps that's why our liturgy talks about change so rarely.

David Kraemer spoke movingly last week on the need for repentance; Anne Mintz on *tzedaka*. These are the most obvious, and difficult expressions of each New Year, the outreach to our fellow humans, the need for healing the rifts of the

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world. Yet, paradoxically, the one thing that would seem to be obvious for this time of year, the paradigm of הימים הנוראים, the *days of awe*, would be change. Change in ourselves, change in the world, or as we can put it in hebrew, לשנות כיוון, *a change in direction*.

Why is it avoided? Simply, put, change is gutwrenching. Because משנה עתים, the changing of the seasons is a stark reminder that change is coming, will ye or won't ye. It is the same reminder one gets when both of your parents have passed away, and the path ahead of you is clear. Change is to be avoided because it smells of age, of the inevitability of death.

We talk about organic change; sea change, inevitable change. Change is often described as geologic in time span. Nothing disturbs us more than *rapid* change, *catastrophic* change. We feel that unlike every other aspect of our lives today, change should be slow, natural, and without undue stress.

Is that reasonable? Is that desirable? Should change resemble comfort in any possible way?

The hebrew root of word *change*, שנה, has an interesting set of meanings. As I mentioned, it carries most strongly, the sense of changing seasons, משנה עתים, and from that comes its very common meaning, shanah, year, as in Rosh HaShanah. In Syriac Aramaic, it also carries a strong mental connotation, as in changing from sane to insane, but this really depends on how much you entertain during the holidays.

This strong sense of constant change, of the changeability of weather, and of people, is a very noticeable theme that plays out in our relations with God. As Malachi puts it so beautifully in his *nevuah*:

כי אני ה' לא שניתי ואתם בני יעקב לא כִּלְיִתֶם.

For I am God, I do not change. And so, you, Children of Israel, shall not be consumed.

This is what demonstrates conclusively the difference between HaShem and us. We change with every hour, every season, and he DOES NOT CHANGE. We are unreliable, fearful, weak as water. He is constant, immovable, everlasting.

But for us, the changing seasons, and the repetition of Rosh HaShanah after Rosh HaShanah, remind us that our time is rushing, rushing, rushing, that our hair is thinning, that our teeth need more rescue work. That for most of us, our end is closer than our beginning.

This is why on the Kabbalistic holiday of Yom Kippur Katan we quote from Psalm 102:

אַל תַּעֲלֵנִי בַחֲצֵי יָמַי בְּדוֹר דּוֹרִים שְׁנוֹתַיךְ :

Please, God, don't cut my days in half, your years stretch across the generations.

The Psalm continues to tell God that "You built the earth, you built the heavens, they will end, but you will endure." All the things of this earth, including we Humans, are like a piece of clothing that wears out, becoming thinner and thinner, and that eventually will vanish.

God is permanent. Our years, our *shanut*, are merely the record of our changing, of our passing way, of our wearing out, and our eventual vanishing. The only antidote to this dematerialization, are the two major themes of the Days of Awe: remembrance and change.

The first, remembrance, enshrines the past, our relationship to God, to the heavens, to our ancestors, our deeds.

The other, לשנות כיוון, *a change in direction*, sanctifies our present and our future. Change brings death, yet, there is no life without it. And it is only by practicing change as a life strategy that we can prolong our lives past ourselves, and make an impact on the world, and make it better.

שנוי - also a form of the word change, is also a term of art for us Jews. It is a way of calling attention to one's rote actions in such a way as to make prohibited 'normal' activity sufficiently different to be acceptable. For example, you are invited to lunch on Shabbos, to an apartment on the 25th floor. You can't walk up all those stairs, there is no helpful doorman. So, you press the elevator button, but you do it with your elbow, to call attention to the fact that your action is not a "normal" one. Its a way of making difficult situations solvable. It's a way of softening the obdurate changes of life and converting them into liveable adaptations.

Is the **שנוי** of Yom Kippur -- the lack of eating, sex, washing, the enforced togetherness, the bowing, the wrapping within our fringes, the ultimate aid to the adaptation of wrenching change -- a way to call us to the hardest work of our lives - repentance and commitment to **לְשִׁנוֹת כּוּוֹן** - and make it seem almost achievable.

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Back when Marly and I were living on that farm, the first year we got there, we wanted to live at one with nature. So, we started a compost heap, I started rebuilding the house with only hand tools -- didn't believe in no power tools -- and we put in a big garden, about an acre. I became a vegetarian, I was living at one with nature. Now, being a boy from Brooklyn, I had no experience with just how fruitful the land could be, so, figuring that every tomato plant produced about 2 or 3 tomatos, I planted 36. I planted a half acre of sweet corn. 3 or 4 rows of brocolli, arugula, cucumbers, pumpkins, carrots, and on and on. Well, everything was beautiful, for about 4 weeks. And then it happened. One morning I came out to survey my acerage, and all the arugula was gone. Chomped down to the stumps. And the next day, all the carrots. One more day, and the beets were all eaten. Well, that was about all I could take of being one with nature. At that point, I realized that I was going to have to change direction, either by giving up on gardening, or giving up on a "live and let live" attitude. So the next day, I got a dog from an neighbor, and from then on, my vegetables were safe, but I can't say the same for the local rabbits and woodchucks.

My intentions were impeccable. But they ran smack into the greatest test of all - real life. Sometimes, you just have to confront some of your long held assumptions, some of your comfortable, but un-tested positions, and make a change in direction.

Well, *I'havdii*, but during the last three years, we in the United States, and our brothers and sisters in Israel have had many of our assumptions dashed against the hard rock of life. And some of them have not survived the violence.

We, in this room, many of us like me, a child of the *baby boom*, have had the luck and opportunity to have grown up during a time of prosperity, freedom and individual choice never given to any generation in the history of humanity. The music and styles of our generation have dominated the world for fifty years. We have literally changed the age of age. When I was a kid and my grandmother was fifty, I thought she was an old lady. Well, some 40 years later, my grandma is still an old lady, but few of us around 50's would even agree to call ourselves middle-aged. Our belief-structures, our prejudices, our loves, our politics, our philosophies play a role greatly out-sized to our historical moment.

When I was a child I met a women who claimed to be a former slave. There were a still a couple of civil war veterans alive. Well, we all know the world they faced, and what so many of them accomplished.

Some day not too far off, someone will say the same thing about the those people who were at Woodstock. The question is, what will we really leave behind? Will we have risen to our generation's challenges? Or rested on the fact that there were so many of us?

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It was easier when all the people used to come together in the courtyards of the Temple for the awesome service of the two goats. One would be sacrificed to HaShem, and carry the hope for forgiveness up to the heavens. The other, the goat for Azazel, would be driven to the wilderness, a heavy rock tied to its horns by a red thread, and then pushed from the precipice into one of Israel's very impressive gorges. We knew that if we performed this service well, if we followed the laws of our great *Kahuna*, our hereditary priesthood, we would be forgiven, and prepared for another year.

Today, we have no such assurances. Today is not ancient Israel, Today is not the Pax Americana. Today, the clarity is lost in a whirlwind of different opinions, different Judaisms. We, very sensibly, and logically, want to apply equality to every position, and equanimity and fairness to all.

But, today we just can't afford to. Today, unfortunately, is one of those times that I used to envy my in-laws, or my grandparents for having lived through. What the Chinese are purported to call interesting. The times when the decisions we make, the actions we take, or not take, will have an impact that goes far beyond our lives..

And that's why something's got to change.

I speak to all of us as a collective. Both in this minyan, and in the United States. Many of you are committed to Israel in many powerful ways. But now, more than at any point in most of our lives, Israel and the Jewish people need us, and we have got to figure out how best to serve them.

Israel is no longer simply the Israel of our grandparent's white and blue pushkas on the kitchen table. It is no longer the romantic songs of the Palestinian Halutznik. Israel today is the largest single community of Jews in the world, on its way to becoming larger than all the Jewish communities in the world put together. Israel is the center of the Jewish world, and endangered as it may be, it is where our people's future, not just our past, lies.

I know that many may differ on the latest demographic studies of Jews in America, but I don't know of any group that believes that the American Jewish Community is in a growth phase. And more importantly, as we lose our parents, we also lose a generation that didn't differentiate, one that supported general Jewish institutions because that's what you did. In the past year, a major foundation, committed for years to supporting Jewish groups decided that giving to non-Jewish ones was just as important. There are many who supported this move, as a positive step, as displaying confidence and strength.

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A community of great strength can have this confidence. Forgive me my particularity, but I do not believe in that level of continued strength. Not without change.

Israel needs us standing with Israel right now. We all have nuance in our positions, we all have misgivings. Israel is a beautiful country, but like all things, and certainly all Jewish things, is rife with injustices, poverty, hatreds, stupidities, stiffneckedness, disagreements, pettinesses and corruptions.

The prophets sing about just such an Israel during the Bayit Rishon . And during Bayit Shani, the different Hasmonaean princelings fought each other by allying themselves with Rome or Parthia, thinking that their microstate could glide effectively between the two great powers. This was nonsense then, and it is nonsense now. Frankly, we don't have time for battles amongst ourselves. We don't have time for selfish *cris du coeur*. Just yesterday, I had the great pleasure of listening to the Syrian Ambassador to the US on CNN, quoting the former Speaker of Israel's Knesset rehearse his shame for the State of Israel.

It is an illusion that israel is powerful, secure and permanent. Just as it was an illusion that being a boomer growing up in the midst of the greatest prosperity the world has ever known, and probably, will ever know -- was a permanent state of affairs

As Jews at Yom Kippur we see ourselves and our future quite literally suspended between the two goats.

As Jewish Americans - at this time - in this place we must stand with our People.

The people in this room are critical to the safety and preservation of Israel. Many of you teach our youth. Many of you are communicators, and facilitators. You have it in your hands to help change Israel for the better, and to change the world's opinion of it. This is not a time to wait it out on the bench. This is not a time to promote a more correct political line.

Some will accuse me of advocating support at the cost of acceptance.

To them I say, you're right.

But, when your brother is ill, do you wait until he stops smoking to visit him? When your mother doesn't pay attention to your prescriptions, do you refuse to call? I would argue that any family requires some level of non-critical acceptance. *Kol VaChomer*, the State of Israel. I would argue we need to take responsibility for each other.

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Finally, we moderns are very funny. We doubt the efficacy of prayer, or the ability of a few individuals to make real change. And yet, through the miracles of chaos theory, we accept the notion that a butterfly flapping its wings in the South Pacific can wreak a tidal wave in Japan. I ask all of us in 5764, to wreak a tidal wave.

First, and foremost, visit Israel if you haven't in the last two years. Believe me, you will be welcomed better than in France or Italy. Second, talk to other Jews about doing the same. Write letters, get involved, accept that we don't have to accept the unacceptable. And to those of you with more ability, or better connections, do more. Teach the rest of us what we need to do.

Support the government of the State, even when you disagree with it. Realize you actually do have more in common with most Israelis even the ones you can't stand. Because we all have those.

As we pray this Yom Kippur, let us realize that we ask from god so much all the time. We ask for God to hear our cries, to heal our sick, to listen to our misheberach list. To make it safe when we ride the bus or eat at a restaurant.

Today, while you are praying, ask yourself, what are you putting on the table? If we are serious about desiring a covenantal relationship with the creator of the universe, then can we be content to borrow only on our ancestors' account?

Don't we have to dig or, at least, redig the wells dug by those who came before us?

Let this year be a commitment to commit to ourselves, to our kehilla, to our people and to Israel. And may our prayers, may our attempt for lishanot kivun, be heard and be accepted. Amen.