

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2018 – 5779
Rabbi Ron Koas

The literal translation of Rosh Hashanah isn't "new year" like most people think. It actually means "head of the year." *Rosh* means head, and *shanah* means year. But one of the interesting things about the Hebrew language is that totally different words can share a similar root. The root of *Shanah* in Hebrew can also mean something different, a change.

We hear it every single year: The High Holidays can be the beginning of change. This can be a time to change our relationships, our choices, and our lives. But is change always good? Let me share two stories with you.

Story number 1

Two Non-Jews were lost in the Sinai desert.

One named John and the other named Henry. They were extremely hungry and thirsty -- they didn't think they could make it even one more day. Suddenly, in the distance, they saw a city. They couldn't believe it -- they kept walking and came upon a synagogue in the town of Eilat, in the South of Israel.

John said to Henry "Let's pretend as if we are Jews otherwise we will not get food or drink. I am going to call myself Moishe Cohen." But Henry refused to change his name. "My name is Henry and I will not pretend to be what I am not," he said. When they knocked on the door, the rabbi of the synagogue received both of them well and asked for their names. John said, "My name is Moishe Cohen." Henry said "My name is Henry." The rabbi turned to the synagogue caretaker and said, "Please bring some ice cold water and a three course meal for Henry." He then turned to John and said, "Well Moishe Cohen, I hope you are aware that we are still have 6 more hours until the end Yom Kippur..."

Story number 2

"One day a man fell into a septic tank. Right up to his neck. He tried to get out desperately but he couldn't. Then after sometime he started screaming, "Fire, fire, fire!" Neighbors heard the fire screams, called the fire brigade. The firemen came and looked everywhere, no fire. Then they found him in the septic tank, pulled him out and then they asked why were you screaming fire?' Then he said, "If I had told you my real situation would you have come?!"

In the first story, Henry didn't change his name and as a result of sticking with his convictions, he was able to eat and drink six whole hours before John did. In the second story, the man **had to** change what he said so that his situation would be taken seriously.

So what can we learn from this? How can we apply the lessons from these stories to our lives in the real world?

I've been thinking a lot since I stood up here last year and spoke with you.

Change can feel good. Change can be a relief. But in reality, change is also hard. Change is uncomfortable. Change is scary. Change takes some getting-used-to. In every change there are new rhythms and new expectations. Change always involves risk.

What I've realized is that there are two types of change that we can think about during the High Holidays. The first one is voluntary change.

I know this might not be so typical in a sermon, but I want to open up to all of you:

A few years ago, I had what some might call my mid-life crisis. All I really wanted was some quiet time, no stress, and someone to understand me. I wasn't in a good place for me and I felt I couldn't talk to anyone. I got divorced.

This was a change in my life. Was it the right choice? That remains to be seen. But what I do know is that it was important for me to navigate the changes in my life while still holding on to my values.

After the divorce, I got the quiet time I needed. There was a sense of relief, but at the same time, it was difficult for me. All my life I was a family man, taking care of my family and now what? I never *planned* on being divorced. "That happens to other people, not to me," I used to think to myself.

Above all else, I told myself, was my responsibility to my children. I spoke with my ex-wife and we came to the conclusion that even though there have been changes, we will still remain a type of family. It might be uncomfortable for us, but

it is important for the kids. Since then, we've celebrated some holidays together, and have always made it clear to the kids how much we love them.

I even decided not to take a lawyer (Sorry to all the lawyers here!) because I realized that my children are more important than anyone else and they should enjoy my money and asset.

It makes me very sad to know that my daughter Talia will not have the same family experiences as my sons Daniel and Yair. Sometimes it hits me and I still can't believe that I'm divorced.

One main thing to take away from this type of change is that when we initiate a change -- even if it doesn't go in the way we'd like -- we must accept the situation we're in. Authentic life requires us to be open to change. But that said, we can still do our best to influence the situation and make sure to hold on to what is most important to us.

This leads me to the second main type of change: involuntary change.

Like I said, this past year I've been trying to give Talia as many of the family-style experiences that I had while raising my boys. One of these was a trip to Israel in honor of Talia's Bat Mitzvah. Of course, while in Israel we had a lot of fun seeing family, going to the beach, and traveling, but Talia also made sure that our time was filled with more than just fun.

As part of her Bat Mitzvah Project, Talia decided to collect children's books in English and Hebrew and give them to sick children at Schneider Children's Medical Center of Israel.

One afternoon, Talia went to each room by herself and delivered the books and the balloons to each family. Talia was very touched by the action, speaking with each family, giving them the books and the balloons and wishing them a full recovery, a "Refua Shlema." Seeing her do this brought tears to my eyes and to hers. At this moment I realized how I love my children more than anything else in the world and just how fortunate I am to have a daughter who wants to give and help others.

On the way back from the hospital, Talia was asking such tough and thoughtful questions, questions that we all struggle with. "Why are these kids sick? Why do things like this happen? This isn't fair."

And she's right.

Every family Talia visited at the hospital was going through such an unimaginably difficult time. They are dealing with change that they didn't want, change that was imposed on them. Tragedy is the most difficult kind of change and I still don't have answers for Talia.

There are many tales of tragedy in the Torah, and we can often look to them to see how to deal with such difficult situations. In the book of Beresheit (Genesis) we hear the story of Hagar. Hagar is Sarah's servant. When Sarah gets jealous, she asks her husband, Abraham, to throw Hagar and her son Ishmael out of the camp. Though Abraham is Ishmael's father, he agrees to Sarah's demands.

Hagar and Ishmael are dealing with a tragic life change. They have been kicked out of their home. They are out in the wilderness of the desert, with water running low. So what can we learn from their situation? What does Hagar do?

Hagar lets her emotions and her tears flow. She cries to God for help. Maybe that's why God sees her and sends an angel to speak with her and tell her not to fear. She's able to hear the angel who gives her hope and shows her the water: because she isn't closed-off, she's letting herself feel. Change comes with all kinds of emotions.

Like Hagar, the only thing we can do in these situations is to let ourselves despair, to let ourselves feel....and to be open to the voice of the angels in our life who we are lucky to have -- our community, our friends, our loved ones.

And as sad and eye opening as this experience was, visiting the hospital with Talia was still the highlight of our trip. Why? Because I got to see firsthand just how much my daughter cares about others and how much the experience has allowed her to grow and change. She was an angel helping others, and by helping others make changes in themselves, we can make changes in ourselves too. *The truth is that I've changed and Talia has changed as a result of this visit. We became more compassionate, more understanding human beings than we were before.*

Like you've seen, change can be positive or negative. Change can be something we take on voluntarily, like a new job, buying a new house, or getting a divorce. It can also be something that just happens, like a sudden death or illness. Either way, we need to remember to hold on to our values of love, support, and family and make sure that we are there for others. Regardless of if change is pursued or forced upon us, we get to choose whether to fight change or to embrace it and flow with it. When change comes and we don't want it, we can choose to let it make us broken, or we can choose to start fresh and better. When change comes, we can choose anger and fear, or we can choose to renew faith and trust. When change comes and we feel a sense of loss, we can choose to resist it, or we can choose to let it flow through until a newfound sense of freedom lifts us up.

Involuntary change can open us to recognizing new blessings, even if they come wearing disguises. Change can open us to recognizing new parts of ourselves, even if we think we already know who we are.

It's Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of change. So I ask you this: What would it feel like to truly open our hearts to change?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK, said in his book "Letters to the Next Generation" that "*The single most important lesson of the High Holidays is that it's never too late to change, start again, and live differently from the way we've done in the past. God forgives every mistake we've made so long as we are honest in regretting it and doing our best to put it right.*"

With this in mind, let me conclude my sermon with a short story.

This year, let's try to make personal changes for the better while still learning to accept the changes we can't control. Let's listen to others and make sure they feel heard. Let's be genuine. And most of all, let's be as kind, compassionate, and understanding as we can.

Shanah tovah!