

Transition and Change: the Bridges/Hagar Model

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About a month ago, I called a member of Or Atid from the phone in my office. Let's say his name was Larry. (Don't worry, I asked his permission to use his name.) "Hello, Rabbi Finestone!" Larry said excitedly as he answered the phone. "Actually, this is Rabbi Polisson," I said. "Oh!" he laughed, "I'll have to change that saved number on my phone." "Yes," I said. "I'm calling from the office at Or Atid."

I'm not telling you this story so that you change the contact information saved in your cell phones, though that could be an important symbolic act. I'm sharing this brief vignette because I believe it can actually teach us much about transition and change.

Change takes a long time to settle in. Long after we think we're all caught up, old ways of being can sneak up on us – including things that we didn't even realize had changed, or things that we didn't realize we need to change in order to reflect a new reality. For example, the way that you had saved the Or Atid phone number in your phone.

This summer, I read a book called *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* by William Bridges. As far as I know, Bridges was not Jewish. Nonetheless, without realizing it, he wrote a book about *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and this communal moment at Or Atid. *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is about change. In fact, the Hebrew word *Shanah*, which means year, has the same three-letter root as the word *Shinui*, which means change. If you turned the Hebrew noun *Shanah* into a verb, you

would get *Le-Shanot*, meaning “to change.” And so when we say *Shanah Tovah*, we are, in essence saying: have a good change.

William Bridges’s approach to transition and change can help us have a *Shanah Tovah*, a good change. The first thing we need to understand about his approach is his distinction between “transition” and “change.” Bridges teaches that “change is situational, while transition is psychological.” Examples of changes includes moving to a new city, or starting a new job. (Yes, I just did both of those things about two-and-a-half months ago.) Other examples of changes include having a new boss or employee at work, or, more seriously, losing a loved one. But for Bridges, these changes are **not** transitions, because transitions are the psychological – and, I would argue, the **spiritual** – ways that we successfully *navigate* change.

Bridges teaches us that **navigating** change requires us to achieve an “inner re-orientation and self-redefinition” in order to incorporate changes effectively into our lives. According to Bridges, “changes” happen – we might cause them, or they might happen “to us” whether we like them or not. “Transitions” are what we make of “changes” – how we approach them.

Bridges points out that many societies and cultures had “rituals” or “rites of passage” to help individuals transition and successfully change. These rituals were at regular, predictable points in people’s lives, so that people were prepared to transition. There were also, of course, seasonal cultural rituals, marking shifts in time.

Bridges argues that secular American celebrations of the new calendar year do not contain the vital ingredients for a transitional ritual or rite of passage, because the end of the year does not mark some form of death or loss, to be followed by rebirth in the new year. The Jewish calendar, however, invites us to do just that. Seven weeks before *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, we observe

*Tish'ah Be-Av*, the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av, a day of fasting and communal mourning marking the destructions of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. After *Tish'ah Be-Av* we confront the loss and destruction by restoring our relationship with God over a seven-week period leading up to *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, which is a rebirth. According to the *Mahzor*, our prayerbook, *Ha-Yom Harat Olam* – today, the world is born.

Bridges expands on the idea of transition in terms of death and rebirth, breaking transition down into three main phases: an Ending, a Neutral Zone, and a New Beginning. Transition always starts with an ending, he says. This seems paradoxical but is true. The first phase of transition begins when people “identify what they are losing and learn how to manage these losses.” This is true even for ostensibly joyful transitions, like having a child, or getting promoted. During the ending, people must “determine what is over and being left behind, and what they will keep.” At Or Atid, of course, you have all gone through an ending. Rabbi Finestone retired after 20 years of serving as your spiritual leader, and then moved away to serve another community in Colorado. Hopefully, you all had a chance to mark that ending in some way. I too, experienced the end of my previous life in New York, where I served two communities as a part-time rabbi while concluding my studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan.

The second transitional step is the Neutral Zone. As the name implies, during this time, people go through what Bridges calls “an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn’t fully operational.” This is when he says “the critical psychological realignments and repatternings take place.” During this time, people start to navigate the new reality, but it’s in flux and doesn’t feel comfortable yet. The neutral zone is the “seedbed” of the new beginnings

that are sought. In terms of our transition at Or Atid, for most of you, this past summer was probably a neutral zone: many of you had not yet met me, or perhaps had met me only once during my interview. On some level, we are all in a neutral zone right now, potentially feeling disconnected from the past and emotionally unconnected to the present, as we go through a time of reorientation.

Finally, according to Bridges, we come to the beginning only at the end. New beginnings often “involve new understandings, values, attitudes.” Beginnings are usually marked by “a release of energy in a new direction – an expression of a fresh identity.” A well-managed transition “allows people to establish themselves in new roles with an understanding of their purpose, the part they play, and how to contribute and participate most effectively.” When change occurs, if there is a successful transition, people “are reoriented and renewed.”

Though this makes new beginnings sound exciting and enjoyable, Bridges doesn't pretend that change and transition are easy. Because life is messy, we rarely experience three distinct phases of transition. In other words, you might continue pick up the phone expecting to hear Rabbi Finestone, even after today. During an ending, in letting go of something, you might feel like you're losing connections to the activities and people that matter to you. This is painful. But in the turning cycle of change, the next season inevitably comes. When change happens, attempts to reinstate old ways of being “are as futile as trying to keep leaves on the trees once they've started to fall.” And much as we might hate to admit it, autumn is almost here.

These ideas about change and transition might remind us of an often-ignored character from this week's Torah reading: Hagar, the mother of Abraham's son Ishmael, and the slave of Sarah. As Jews, we trace our spiritual lineage back to Sarah. But Hagar is our spiritual aunt.

Hagar's experience in this morning's Torah reading affirms the truth of Bridges' model. The story of Hagar and Ishmael reminds us that new beginnings don't always come after happy endings and easy neutral zones. Hagar and her son Ishmael experience an ending when they are exiled by Abraham because of Sarah's fear that Ishmael will inherit some of Abraham's estate and will thus reduce Isaac's inheritance. Hagar and Ishmael are essentially left to die in the desert.

Being alone in a desert also comes up in Bridges' book. In the book, Bridges created a composite of ancient transition rituals, describing a rite of passage in which an individual is left alone in the desert for days. This is, in fact, what Hagar – and a young Ishmael – experience. Giving up all hope after she runs out of water, Hagar leaves her son under a bush and bursts into tears. But then, suddenly, as she stands in this unbearable neutral zone, an angel of God calls out to her. Out of disorientation, despair, and near-death comes revelation and hope. God promises that Ishmael will also become a great nation. God then opens Hagar's eyes. In other words, Hagar is able to see in a new way, and she discovers a well of water. At the beginning of this story, Hagar experienced a terrible ending, as she was cast out of her home by Abraham, the father of her son, and Sarah, her mistress. And then, she experienced a neutral zone in the wilderness – an even worse situation that nearly ended in death by dehydration. But in the end, she and Ishmael reached a new beginning – by facing the reality of their situation, crying out for help, and being answered.

Thankfully, we are in a much better place with our new beginning at Or Atid. We are not alone in the desert without water. But we **are** experiencing **change**, and we must **intentionally transition** so that these changes will not only stick but will allow us to grow and flourish. Our

staff are all new – Kimberly Yaari, our Synagogue Administrator, Orna Sonnenschein, our Education Director, and me. But we have the support and wisdom of an incredibly dedicated group of lay leaders and a highly engaged community at large. And so I will strive to face reality and to ask for help when I need it – and I hope that you will do the same. At times, when we miss the way it used to be, it might very well feel like we are lost, alone in the desert. The truth is that endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings are happening all the time, overlapping with each other. Changes in our personal lives interact with broader changes in our community and in the world at large. These complex interactions can make us experience life as a flood of unfamiliar and often unwelcome changes. And that’s why we need *Rosh Ha-Shanah*. Today is our ritual for transition, for adjusting to change. Even as it stands as a unique holiday and a neutral zone of sorts, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* grounds us in time and space, in the cycle of the year and of life, with familiar words, melodies, foods, and faces, helping us transition as a community and as individuals from an end to a new beginning – from loss and disorientation to rebirth and renewal.

Rebirth is a helpful way to think of this moment, because, as Bridges notes, after a change, we might reconnect with old passions and hopes – or we might learn new skills and take on new roles that we had never imagined. What might this mean for our community? On an individual level, it might mean getting involved in a new committee or activity. I hope that we can create a culture in which you, the members of the community, feel empowered to take on new roles and learn new skills, from volunteering in the kitchen to chanting Torah and beyond. In the coming year, I plan to offer courses on prayer, Hebrew reading and comprehension, Torah

trope, Jewish music, and more. I have already been working to cultivate a deepened sense of spirituality and community on Shabbat, both during services and after services at *kiddush*.

I believe that my time during the week should be spent getting to know you – the members of the community. On Sundays and Wednesdays, I'll spend time with the younger learners of our community during Hebrew school for *tefillah* – prayer and singing. I also plan to lead educational offerings for all ages, including a course on prayer for adults of any and all backgrounds, beginning in November. And most important, I will be serving the pastoral and spiritual needs of our community daily. But I need your help – I need you to communicate with me, to tell me when your needs are not being met, when your new role – or your old role – in the community is no longer working for you. In my vision for the future Or Atid, I can see us as a center of both Jewish religious life and Jewish cultural life. I aspire to be a teacher of Jewish meditation, spirituality, and mysticism. I'm also a musician who enjoys all fine arts, and a thinker who appreciates a wide range of theologies and philosophies. And so I envision a community in which we regularly experience Jewish music, literature, food, and thought from communities all over the world – from Israel to Brazil, from Japan to the Ukraine, from San Francisco to a small town in Massachusetts called Wayland. I envision a community where we ourselves create a wide range of Jewish art as we deepen our Jewish identities through learning and practice. And I envision a community that lives out core Jewish values in the world – values such as *Tzedek* – justice, *Hesed* – loving-kindness, and *Kevod Ha-Beriyot* – human dignity, founded on the belief that humans are created *Be-Tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. This is not just my community – it is **our** community. My vision will surely change as I learn about your visions for the future.

On *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, we commit to navigating change wisely and productively. The Talmud says that “the world was created on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, and in that same month, in the future, the Jewish people will be redeemed.” (Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 11a) We look to the future for hope and redemption. But the future is not only unknown – it would be incomprehensible to us if we **could** see it. A rabbinic story reminds us of this fact. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 29b) describes Moses asking God to show him the future of Torah interpretation. So God causes Moses to travel through time so that Moses might observe the study hall of Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest sages of the Talmud. Moses sat in the back of Rabbi Akiva’s class, and was unable to understand the discussion. Moses felt disoriented and weak. Then, when Akiva came to a certain point in the discussion, his students asked him: “What’s your source for this ruling?” Akiva replied, “This is a law given to Moses from Sinai.” Then Moses’ mind was calmed.

Like Moses, we, too, must understand that the future **will** be rooted in the past – even as it might look radically different than anything we could imagine. The name of our synagogue reminds us that the future – the *atid* – is full of *or*, full of light.

But the future begins in the present, today. The words *Ha-Yom Harat Olam* are often translated as “today the world is born,” but more accurately could be rendered as “today, the world is conceived.” We could even translate it as: “today is pregnant with eternity.” What, then, do we envision as we conceive a New Year? Beginning today, what kind of world will we create? What will we do together as a community? What do you hope the coming year will bring? How can we turn those hopes into realities?

Creating the world we envision will involve messy change. William Bridges teaches that we must expect and accept mistakes during transitions. Rabbi Finestone taught us a similar lesson in her High Holy Day message. She wrote that “we cannot always affect or change the larger things, the *gedolim*,” but “we can have an impact on the smaller aspects of our lives, the *ketanim*. How we listen to our wives and husbands and partners; how we spend time with our children; how we treat our colleagues at work, especially during difficult times; how we greet a neighbor; how we greet a stranger. These are just a few of the little things, the *ketanim*, that fill our days. We are not helpless here, or powerless. We can make the effort, each hour of each day, to get the little things right, and we can succeed.”

During this time of change, if we cultivate hope, flexibility, and openness, we will have the ability to transition. This year, if we transition well, we will not only survive change – we will grow because of it, becoming new, fuller versions of ourselves. We can succeed in turning our hopes and dreams into realities.

*Ha-Yom Harat Olam* – today is pregnant with infinite possibilities. *Shanah tovah* – have a good change.