

The Whisper of Change

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This is the year that I discovered cooking. Mind you—cooking has always been there. According to Michael Pollen's book *Cooked*—it emerged about two million years ago. So, it's not that I was unaware of cooking—I just chose to ignore it. When asked if I liked cooking I would say proudly—"Oh no! I don't cook." Not cooking became a marker of pride for me. A centerpiece of my identity. I was absolutely certain it would be one of my defining characteristics for the remainder of my life. When I told people I don't cook there was always a range of colorful and impassioned responses. Many responded with horror:

"But, what do you do for food?"

"What will you do when you have kids?"

I would make jokes about being a New Yorker with no kitchen for too long to change and relying on a fantasy husband who would surely cook for me everyday. I sometimes joked with my sister that I became the rabbi in the family so that she would have to cook for our holiday meals. I had zero doubts about this part of my identity, zero inklings, zero guilt. Then a few years ago, a couple friends of mine published some cookbooks. *The Forest Feast*, *The Gefilte Manifesto*, and *Modern Jewish Cooking*. I bought the cookbooks, my first, to support my friends, not realizing at the time that in fact they were gently nudging me.

Soon I found myself gravitating regularly to the cookbook section. Just to read, of course! My collection began to grow and grow. To my bemusement I found myself over dinner (in restaurants of course!) with friends talking animatedly about new cookbook titles. And then last December, poof, I suddenly thought to myself in a moment, "You know what, this is the year I'm going to learn to cook. I took *Modern Jewish Cooking* off the shelf, dusted it off, and made *borscht* and *tzimmes* for New Year's Eve, signed myself up for a semester of cooking classes and now, suddenly, just like that, I'm a person who cooks. It's been entirely unexpected. I effortlessly shed an old identity I assumed was a fixed aspect of my personality. In the choice point of a few moments an entirely new world opened up to me.

"Every blade of grass has an angel watching over it that whispers: Grow! Grow!" –the Talmud tells us.

Isn't it funny how there are times in life when it seems like we're hitting our heads against the wall to grow and change and there are times when the change comes in a moment of revelation. During the High Holidays we often spend much of our time focused on the difficult and sometimes laborious work of self-inquiry--on examining the shadow parts of ourselves, and doing the work of change. And of course, I believe deeply in this work of *cheshbon hanefesh* and *teshuva*. But I can't help but notice that this approach to change assumes a great degree of control that we have over our own will and our ability to actualize change through hard work and determination. A common topic for conversation or sermons at the High Holidays is often: Is change really possible? And if so, how? The assumption being that change is often frustrating and slow-going and hard-won. Indeed, many times it is—we all know this intimately don't we?

And the work of change and its possibility at every phase of our lives was originally going to be my sermon topic for today.

But after reflection and prayer over the last few days I'm instead inspired in this moment to recall together all the moments in our lives when change came as a lightning bolt, out of the blue—

Either through our own still-small voices that whisper or the suggestion of a friend, the shock of a circumstance beyond our control, a chance encounter, or just the flow of nature.

This is part of the glory of being human.

How amazing it is that, with some exceptions, the majority of us learn to eat, smell, see, feel, talk, and grow in inches and feet with minimal agency on our part.

Reb Zalman Schachter makes the controversial but compelling statement that the only real growth comes from shock. The shock of birth, the shock of illness, the shock of loss, the shock of sudden success.

I agree, but amend these examples to suggest that there are many minor shocks in life--

those of serendipity, meeting, and happenstance--

that herald and usher forth monumental changes for us as well.

**"Every blade of grass has an angel watching over it that whispers:
grow!"**

Rosh Hashanah is a time of birth and rebirth. *Hayom Harat Olam* our liturgy proclaims. The birthday of the world. A time pregnant with possibility, heralding renewal and creation. Interestingly, Rosh Hashanah does not commemorate God's beginning the act of creation with the words "let there be light" but rather the sixth day of creation, the day that we humans appear. And in this commemoration of our own birth we hear about the possibilities for rebirth again and again throughout this season. What are the times in your life when an entirely new world opened up to you? When you experienced change because of a chance encounter, because of a whisper, because of a shock? I wonder what breakthroughs we can have this year for change in our lives if in addition to reflecting on the aspects of ourselves we know we want to change, we also look back on our lives and recall the moments of serendipity when change touched us. What can open up for us this year in 5779 if we draw inspiration from these moments in our lives and open ourselves up to possibility?

These moments are everywhere in our Torah and Haftarah readings over the High Holy Days. A fact that is noteworthy. Read together, these examples from our Torah readings serve as an important counterpoint to prayers in our liturgy such as the *Al Cheit* which encourage the hard and courageous work of growth through *teshuvah*. These Torah texts remind us that it is not only through chest-beating that we change. There are also whispers—inspiring us to grow—everywhere if we only open our ears to hear and our eyes to see.

In Genesis chapter 21 (which some congregations read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah) we read the story of Sarah and Hagar. Hagar has just been banished from her household and is alone with her son Ishmael in the desert. Frantic and traumatized. At that very moment a *malach elohim*—a messenger of God—calls out to Hagar. *Al Tireh'i* "Do not be afraid" "*Koomi!* Stand Up!" And Hagar harkens to the

call. The action shifts suddenly. She opens her eyes and sees water. The source of all life and new possibility.

In Genesis 22 which we read here in our congregation on the first day of Rosh Hashanah a *malach adonai* calls to Abraham: *Al tishlach yad'cha el-hana'ar:* “Do not lay your hand on the boy—do not lay your hand on your son Isaac.” And at that moment, just as Abraham was about to kill his own son, he harkens to the angel’s call, lifts up his eyes—and recognizes that another way is possible.

And today, when we heard the story of *Bereishit* (creation) that Martin Brotman just read so beautifully, while not as explicit, we find echoes of the creation of these angels. The midrash tells us that it was on the second day of creation that God created the angels. *Adonai Tz'vaot*, the lord of heavenly hosts, creates Her own attendants, messengers, and conscience. In fact, according to one midrash, it is only because a group of angels argued effectively with God for the creation of human beings that we are even here!

**“Every blade of grass has an angel watching over it that whispers:
grow!”**

I know many of us are not accustomed to talking about angels in a Jewish context. We generally associate them with Christianity. But this happened only following the Torah and the Talmud during a time when rabbis were concerned that belief in angels could turn into a form of idolatry. If we look at our sacred texts we see angels as a deeply rooted Jewish concept. They are everywhere in the Torah, Talmud, and mystical literature as messengers between God and human beings.

In an analysis of *parashat Bereishit* Aviva Zornberg discusses the concept of action before knowledge and how we can take our cues from angels. She writes: “We might, in fact, call the mode of action before knowledge a kind of spiritual virtuosity. Angels do what is complex and difficult with organic ease. In order to achieve the same effect of simultaneity, in which commands are transmitted from the brain to the nervous system to the muscles so fluidly that performance seems to precede input, human beings normally have to work very hard. But there is a triumphant

moment when the normal laborious procedures of will and execution are short-circuited. In that virtuoso moment, a new world is created.”¹

This all sounds very theoretical. But I see it every day. Currently I’m working with over fifteen conversion students. It is one of the aspects of being a rabbi that brings me the most joy. At least half of them come in for a first conversation with me not knowing why or how they ended up in my office. Each of their journeys are unique and beautiful. But they share something in common. A whisper. They share often share with me a version of this story: “I was moved to come here, there’s something drawing me to explore Judaism but I can’t quite explain it. I’m just here.” These brave students take on a monumental and life-altering calling often with little more to go on than a series of whispers they have heard throughout their lives: the whisper—“there’s something there for you, move toward it and you will grow.”

In this year of learning to cook I whipped through three seasons of Chef’s Table on Netflix in about two weeks. Each episode documents the life of a well-known chef. In Season Three the show follows Ivan Orkin, the owner and head chef of Ivan Ramen in New York City, and maybe the only Jewish ramen expert in the world. Ivan grew up in Syosset, Long Island. Raised in a family of high-achieving Ivy Leaguers Orkin talks about being constantly reminded that he wasn’t one of them. He was the black sheep of the family. He did poorly in school, struggled in social situations, and couldn’t find his place. Ivan recounts the story that led him to ramen: “One day, my friend Dean called me up on the phone and said—hey I just got a new job as a dish washer in the Japanese restaurant. Wanna come? I thought, why not? I got to the restaurant, I remember opening the door... shamisen music playing on the loudspeaker...and the smells intoxicating. It didn’t take me long to realize I finally belonged somewhere.”² A few more whispers reminiscent of Orkin’s time in the restaurant led him on a lifelong journey through the world of ramen, to the very top.

¹ Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 2011).

² Ivan Orkin, “Life, Love, and Ramen” (Tedx Talk, Palo Alto. June 1, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXG4JzDwojE>.

My own story of encounter led to the birth of an entire world. People often ask me: how did you become a rabbi or cantor. I can give little explanation—the idea was not my own and I’m not sure it ever would have come from me without a messenger. A long time ago, on a sunny day in June, I became a bat mitzvah. Following the service a woman approached me. I had never seen her before nor have I seen her since. She was not a friend or family member or member of our congregation that I know of. She said to me, simply: “you need to become a cantor.” It was the equivalent of a bolt of lightning, suddenly finding water in the desert or seeing a ram. No matter how far afield I went from Judaism, I could not get her voice whispering to me out of my head. I have been forever changed because of this whisper, and I know it is not the last whisper I will receive in this lifetime.

What whispers have changed your life? What whisper might you hear at this moment if you take some time to be still?

Every blade of grass has an angel watching over it that whispers: Grow, Grow, Grow!

The ending words of the *Hashiveinu* prayer which we sing as a motif throughout this season—*chadeish yameinu k’kedem*—request that God renew us as in days of old. Rabbi Robert Scheinberg notes that the choice to recite this passage, the final verse of the book of Lamentations, is significant because it asks God to renew our days *k’kedem* (as before) rather than *k’eden* (as they were in the garden of eden). Why not *k’eden* he asks? Why wouldn’t we want to be brought back to that primordial Garden of Eden when all was perfect? Because another translation of the word *kedem* is East. When Adam and Eve were sent out of the utopian garden they were sent *kedem l’gan eden*, East of Eden as translated by Steinbeck and others. We desire a return to this place because we are not interested in returning to perfection. Rather, our interest lies in returning to that far more inspiring place, the place after the fall where we are called on not to begin, but to begin again.³

So here we are, together, ready to begin again.

³ As quoted in Elliott Cosgrove, “To Begin Again” (sermon, New York City, October 14, 2017) Park Avenue Synagogue, <https://pasyn.org/resources/sermons/begin-again>.

What worlds will we create this year? What worlds might open up for us?

As we enter 5779 I pray that we will not only grow through *teshuva*h but also through the delight and surprise of the unexpected.

May humor, joy, astonishment, and laughter touch your life in this new year.

May you experience the wonderment of serendipity and miraculous encounter.

And may you be blessed with whispers that resonate and the courage to follow your heart when they do.

Shanah Tovah

Sermon Anthem with Cantor David and Choir: “Every Blade of Grass”