

“Embracing the Change”

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779

At least twice a day, I drive down Proctor Avenue to and from the shul. And most days, I check out the state of the houses on the street. Many of you have probably noticed the giant houses that are going up on the Henderson end of the street. But hidden on Proctor are some quaint old houses. I wonder which one will be the next to be bought, torn down, and rebuilt into some giant McMansion. Much as I love Toronto, this city is one that often tears down the old and builds completely new—in whatever style is current. For some of us that is sad, and for some it is a sign of progress.

I grew up in an 1830s farmhouse with hardwood floors that had pegs instead of nails; a foundation made of stones with a dirt-floor basement; and two staircases—a fancy one in the front of the house, and a plain one in back, probably for servants. There were old spigots coming right out of the ground that served up fresh well water. Our neighbourhood was home to a number of even older colonial houses from the 18th and even the 17th centuries.

But in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—no one bats an eye at a three-hundred year old building. And in Israel, you can't walk a metre without bumping into something medieval, Roman, Greek, biblical, or even older. If you need proof, sign up for our next Har Zion Israel Trip, leaving November 23, 2019!

This summer, I learned about a very special and ancient building in Japan. There is a Shinto shrine in Mie Prefecture, not far from Kyoto, called Ise Jingu. It is said to date back two thousand years. It was built to honour the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu-Omikami. It is a beautiful building with cypress pillars and a thatched roof, and is considered the spiritual home of the Shinto religion, much as Jerusalem is our spiritual home.

Five years ago, in 2013, the people of Ise gathered around their revered shrine and tore it down. The roof was thrown to the ground, the wooden pillars taken away to be recycled, and the inner sanctum dismantled. This sounds like a tragic story, and it certainly would be, if the shrine had not been torn down and rebuilt every twenty years since the year 690 CE. In a remarkable ritual,

villagers of all ages carry out this renewal, from children to seniors. If they didn't, the cypress pillars would rot in the wet ground, and the roof would decay and start to leak.

Preparations for the 20-year rebuilding of Ise Jingu take about eight years – four years to prepare the timber alone. Local residents participate by taking part in a parade – transporting the wood along with white stones—two per person—which they place in sacred spots around the shrine. This tradition keeps Japanese artisan skills alive. But more importantly, the powerful rituals refresh the spiritual life of the community and strengthen their connection to their religious heritage. That is how the Ise Jingu shrine remains eternal after so many centuries¹. This is the Shinto version of *L'dor vador*, from generation to generation.

Judaism itself is a bit like the Ise Jingu shrine. Throughout our history, we have had to dismantle and rebuild sacred institutions and practises that no longer stood the test of time. The priesthood, which was a hereditary, male-gendered institution, was rebuilt as the rabbinate, a merit-based leadership model. The rabbinate has evolved to include men and women, members of the LGBT community, and Jews of many colours and backgrounds.

The Temple in Jerusalem, which had been the primary focus of Jewish practise for over a thousand years, was dismantled against our will. Instead of rebuilding it, we envisioned the synagogue. What a brilliant invention! The synagogue is an institution that is smaller and multi-purposed: a place of study, a place of worship, and a place of gathering. A synagogue can be built anywhere—from Aleppo to Buenos Aires, from Mumbai to Marrakesh, from Bathurst St. crossing the globe *all the way* to Bayview Ave!

Animal sacrifice as worship was taken away, replaced by the three pillars of Jewish life: *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *G'milut Hasadim*. Instead of feeding God, we offer God study, prayer, and deeds of lovingkindness. Judaism is taken apart and rebuilt over and over again, so that it can continue to live and thrive and re-form, and yet it still remains our ancient heritage. It is not diminished by this process. Quite the opposite—Judaism is handed new and fresh to the next generation to begin work on its next evolution.

¹ Thanks to Rabbi David Thomas for introducing me to this story:
http://www.ccarpress.org/admin/manage_assetlibrary/file.asp?id=04358

The High Holy Days themselves give each of us the opportunity to experience a personal rebuilding each year. Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, explained thusly:

“The task of a person is like that of a person who is building an elaborate house on a foundation of rubble. If someone doesn’t want to invest money and effort to dig deep and construct solid foundations, the building will not have a strong base and therefore cracks will keep appearing in the walls. Each time repairs are needed, one will have to spend a lot of money all over again in order to strengthen the building, and yet this will be futile, because more fissures will appear, and the house will always be in danger of collapse.

“There is only one path before him, and that is to have the courage to destroy the whole structure of the house and to dig deep and construct strong foundations. On top of those foundations, one can build a strong and lasting structure.

“The same applies in the realm of *t’shuvah*. Each year a person makes repairs and improvements to their spiritual home. Nevertheless, since the whole thing isn’t built on good foundations, new cracks and fissures appear year after year, and one’s spiritual structure always threatens to collapse. Only when a person understands that all of these minor repairs will not solve their problems until they dig deep foundations and pull out the roots that yield gall and wormwood [meaning: the root of all evil]—then they can build a structure that endures.”

As it is with the Ise Jingu shrine, and with our souls, and with Judaism itself, so it is with our prayer books—they must be dismantled and rebuilt in order to remain relevant and useful. Some of you may remember the days of *Union Prayer Book II*, first published in 1894. The edition used here at Har Zion in the early days would have been the 1945 revision. That *machzor* predated widespread knowledge of the Shoah, predated the founding of the State of Israel, held up through the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s Rights movement, all of the social upheavals of the sixties—and it served our congregations well. But by the early seventies, our rabbis knew it was time for a rebuild.

And so in 1978, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the rabbinic arm of the Reform Movement, published *Gates of Repentance*. This is the *machzor* we have used for almost forty

years here at THZ. Its liturgy was relevant and meaningful to us for four decades, with a revision in 1997 to change the God language from gender “insensitive” to gender-sensitive. In his introduction to *Gates of Repentance*, Rabbi Chaim Stern (*alav hashalom*), wrote regarding the principles governing the creation of Reform Jewish liturgy: “[These principles are:] our sense of continuity with Jewish tradition, our desire to combine the old with the new, our appreciation of the diversity of thought and feeling within the Jewish people in general and the Reform movement in particular, and our need to confront the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We have... responded to the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel, the modern crisis of faith and the longing for a tradition in which we can feel at home, the new consciousness of women and the need for straightforward and elegant expression.”

And for these past forty years, many of us have lived with and cherished *Gates of Repentance*, at least I hope you did. But the world continued to change (as it always seems to do!). Jewish families are different, Jewish sensibilities are different, Jewish belief is different—all have become even more varied and amazingly diverse. Our style of worship has evolved, our music has evolved, our Shabbat and Festival liturgy has evolved with the publication of *Mishkan T’filah*. And now our *machzor* has evolved. *Mishkan HaNefesh* has been the *machzor* of Temple Har Zion for just over an hour now, and I could not be more excited.

In his introduction to *Mishkan HaNefesh*, Rabbi Edwin Goldberg writes on behalf of the editors (you can follow along on p. xii if you like): “Most important to our work are the people for whom this book is intended: the members of a dynamic, ever-changing, and diverse Reform Movement who gather in community to experience awe and forgiveness and hope, as well as all others who seek to find a spiritual home in this prayer book.

“We believe that the Reform nature of this *machzor* will be most evident in its respectful yet fresh approach to tradition; in its unwavering commitment to the equality of men and women; in its attention to concerns that are both immediate and timeless—the fears and hopes of the people who will pray from its pages; in its faithfulness to the ethical and justice-seeking dimension of Judaism; in its embrace of the universal and the particular; and perhaps, most of all, in its effort to deal with the tension between the historical theology of the High Holy Days (God’s sovereignty and judgment) and more contemporary beliefs, such as the theology of human empowerment.”

That is a tall task—to create meaningful liturgy for a movement as multi-faceted as ours. But having studied this book with Hazzanit Abrams and our Worship Committee for a few years now, we believe the editors have done a fine job. I encourage you to keep your minds open; to explore this book; to let yourself wander its pages; and to let it guide you through the journey of *t'shuvah* and *cheshbon hanefesh* this Holy Day season.

I'm going to offer you a personal *vidui*, a confession: The six months leading to these High Holy Days terrified me (I think your Hazzanit would agree!). Change is difficult and challenging, and when you've led congregations from one *machzor* for thirty years in a row (ever since my first student pulpit in Great Falls, Montana in 1989), a new *machzor* is daunting. But as a Reform Jew, I know (and you know) that change is necessary for growth—it is how we survive an ever-changing world. Our prayers need to reflect who we are and how we've grown. *Mishkan HaNefesh* does just that. Embrace it—soon enough its pages will feel like home.

If you go into a store in Jerusalem that sells antiquities, as we will do on our next Israel trip in November 2019, you're likely to find lots of oil lamps, pottery shards, ancient Greek, Roman and Maccabean coins, and jewelry made of Roman glass. You might also find a little jar made of that same Roman glass, about this size. It's clearly too small for water or wine, maybe right for perfume. The Romans called it a lachrymose—a tear jar. The idea was, that each time they had reason to cry, whether out of joy or sadness, they would collect up the tears in the tear jar. That jar, when it was full, contained a record of the most profound emotional moments a family had experienced.

While you won't find tear jars among Jewish artifacts from the past two thousand years, you are holding the Jewish equivalent in your very hands—our prayer book, this *machzor*. It is much more than just a book of prayers. It is a history of our yearning to understand and know God. It is the record of a people's lifelong emotional outpourings to God, a chronicle of the tears of joy and sadness we have shed throughout the years.

In it you will find songs of praise, cries for help, hymns of thanksgiving, and ardent expressions of the kind of lives we know we should lead. It is made up of material from many sources and

ages: Torah, Prophets, and Writings; Mishnah and Talmud; Midrash; the great medieval Jewish poets; Hasidic teachers; early Reformers; the poets of modern Israel, and the varied voices of twenty-first century Jews. And like any family record, it needs to be updated now and then, to keep up with the times. Unlike Torah and Tanakh, which yield new interpretations every time we read them, prayer books are not timeless. As our relationship and understanding of God evolves, so must the way we express that relationship as a people.

Mishkan HaNefesh is the latest chapter in a long history of pouring our hearts into a prayer book. But the book isn't finished. It is our task now to offer our own minds, hearts and souls to it, to fill in the white spaces of its pages and make it our own, so that each of us will, indeed, experience awe, forgiveness, and hope.

I would imagine that every twenty years, some of the villagers of Ise shed many tears over the shrine they've come to know and love—some of them for the entirety of their lives. It was a place of healing, a place of renewal, a place of great spirituality. And I imagine there is also great joy as the new shrine rises to take the place of the old. That is what you hold in your hands tonight—a beautiful new *machzor* representing the future, but built from everything that has come before—a microcosm of who we are and what we are meant to become as we rebuild ourselves once again in 5779.