

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5774
Rabbi Sam Gordon
Congregation Sukkat Shalom
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If you were here at last year's Erev Rosh Hashanah service, you undoubtedly remember the candle lighting ceremony at the beginning of the service. As is our custom, we have a tea candle lit on the table, and then the people called up for the blessing of the candles are expected to take a fireplace match, touch the flame of the tea candle, light the match, and then light the tall tapers and say the blessing. It is a foolproof system. Except! Last year, the match touched the wick of the tea candle, and the flame went out. I looked around for a book of matches or even something on which to strike the fireplace match, but there was nothing to be found. Toni, our maintenance engineer, had lit the small candle with a lighter and never imagined there needed to be a backup plan.

I looked around the sanctuary and asked if anyone had a match. Nothing! Out of nearly five hundred people here, not one person seemed to have a match. Finally, someone rummaged through her purse and found a book of matches from a restaurant, and slowly the matchbook was passed up to me. Gratefully, I opened the matchbook cover and discovered....toothpicks!

There is a phrase in French: "l'esprit de l'escalier"—loosely translated as "staircase wit." It refers to the brilliant retort one thinks of only after the moment has passed. It is what you realize you should have said, but it is too late as you head down the staircase, leaving the apartment where the conversation took place. For this past year I have obsessed about how I should have responded to the candle lighting incident. As I thought about it later that night, I wished I had had the presence of mind to turn to all of you and ask: "How many of you were once smokers?"

I was!

Lots of us were.

This summer I saw the movie, Hannah Arendt. Set in the early '60's, absolutely everyone in the movie was smoking, and all the time. We have seen the same behavior portrayed in the television show, Mad Men or in the movie, Good Night and Good Luck, about Edward R. Morrow. So many of these settings strike us as odd or anachronistic because of the prevalence of smoking in late nineteen fifties-early nineteen sixties American society. It was the most common behavior, socially accepted by nearly everyone. Remember going to summer camp and doing arts and craft projects? We made ashtrays! Little children would take clay, form it into bowls, add a thumbprint along the rim, and proudly present our parents with this precious gift of an ashtray made by a child. I don't even own an ashtray!

It's not only our attitudes toward smoking that have changed. We have gone from Mad Men to MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. I spend lots of time in restaurants, especially at lunch, but I can't remember the last time I saw anyone indulging in the classic two or three martini lunch. A glass of white wine perhaps, but mid-day drinking is certainly frowned upon. Attitudes toward drinking have

changed, all to the good. More and more, we expect someone to act as the designated driver, or more commonly, people drink less.

There are numerous other examples of our changed attitudes toward what was once common, acceptable behavior. We see it in how we treat recycling, littering, children's car seats, and seat belts. Our next major task is to change our cultural norms regarding texting while driving. It is absolutely necessary that we change our behaviors and attitudes toward this latest danger, though the technology might itself change so as to prevent texting while driving.

More significant cultural shifts and changes are occurring as well, and they are happening with a rapidity that has surprised many. There was an extensive amount of commentary this summer on the Supreme Court's striking down of DOMA in the case of Edie Windsor and the late Thea Spyer. The federal government is quickly changing regulations that discriminate against same gender partners and families. "Don't Ask; Don't Tell" is no longer military policy. Same gender marriage is recognized in more and more states, though Illinois lags, at least for now. This past Sunday I officiated at a beautiful ceremony for two wonderful women, but I had to use confusing language of, a joining of two partners recognized as a civil union by the State of Illinois. I hope that changes very soon. You will of course note that on Sunday Justice Ginsberg officiated at a wedding in Washington for Michael Kaiser and John Roberts, and just the other day, The New York Times called Justice Anthony Kennedy, "the most important judicial champion of gay rights in the nation's history."

If we look back just five or ten years ago, there has been an enormous attitudinal shift on the public acceptance of LGBT rights and same gender marriage. Many commentators have expressed some level of shock and surprise concerning this shift, but I am not shocked. The act of so many individuals "coming out" concerning their sexual identity was key to changing the attitude of much of the nation. After all, if you know someone—a child, a sibling, a friend, a neighbor, the person sitting next to you at church or synagogue—it is difficult to demonize that person. This is a person you know, care about, and love.

Last week we saw another example of cultural change within a short span of history. August 28th was the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. There on the Washington Mall was something of a re-creation of the crowd of fifty years ago, but also on the Mall stands the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, the only non-presidential statue in that remarkable setting. It was impossible to miss the symbolism of President Obama speaking from the very spot of the "I Have A Dream" speech, there beneath the gaze of Abraham Lincoln. Next to the President was the bell from the 16th Street Baptist Church of Birmingham, bombed by the Ku Klux Klan on September 15th of 1963. (A word from our sponsor: On Friday, October 11th, T K Thorne will be our guest speaker at Shabbat services. She is a Jewish woman author, and is a retired captain of the Birmingham police. She helped lead the investigation that eventually brought those Klansmen to justice.)

As I watched the coverage of the 50th Anniversary March, I thought of this summer's movie, The Butler. It may not have been the greatest movie, though the performances by Forest Whitaker and Oprah Winfrey were outstanding. For those of you who might not know about the movie, it follows the life of an African

American, born into a sharecropper family, barely removed from slavery, as he becomes a butler in the White House. The movie documents the changes he saw in Black and White America over his lifetime, while following the parallel story of his son through the Civil Rights Movement from the Freedom Riders and Selma to election to Congress. I found it a wonderful telling of history and the incredible changes our nation has experienced. One need only recognize an African American President, former Secretaries of State, Supreme Court Justices, Attorney General, and UN Ambassador.

Don't mistake what I am saying. America is obviously not a race blind society. Life's not perfect. Prejudice and baseless hatred exists. But the cultural change is still extraordinary. Our society has undergone remarkable change within our own limited lifetimes. It is impossible and wrong to ignore or dismiss those huge cultural shifts.

Let me now turn to the American Jewish world. There is rapid change in the American Jewish culture as well. My friend, Rabbi Sid Schwartz, has written a new book, Jewish Megatrends, Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future. Rabbi Schwartz talks about the change in American Judaism from Tribal Judaism to Covenantal Judaism. You know what he means by "Tribal." It is the Judaism defined by birth, history or generational obligation. It was a Jewish community that retained its memory of immigration from Europe, the trauma of the Holocaust, and the pride in Israel. It was a Judaism of "MOT's," Members of the Tribe. What Schwartz calls "Covenantal" Judaism is based more on faith, meaning, and spirituality. He says, today's Jewish identity is seen, "less as a matter of group solidarity than as a spiritual legacy." (p.11) Jewish boundaries are no longer set by tribal definitions, and those boundaries are porous. People often self define themselves as Jews, and they do so not exclusively by birth.

The Pew research studies and the work of Robert Putnam have both pointed to the American phenomenon of voluntary personal movement between faiths in our lives. We are a nation of seekers and searchers. I must tell you that this is not the American Jewish world that most rabbis, sociologists, and community leaders might have expected or been trained for.

I don't think it's necessary to once more rehearse how Sukkat Shalom represents that change. I hope you know it. Unlike those who in 1990 viewed intermarriage as the death of American Judaism—largely because they were thinking only as Tribal Jews—we understood that Judaism could be attractive as a spiritual home for those born Jewish, converted to Judaism, living in Jewish families, or coming to Judaism as independent seekers of an open faith and identity. We have viewed everyone, no matter their faith backgrounds, not as visitors to be merely tolerated and asked to observe Judaism as outsiders. Rather, this congregation has defined itself as an authentic spiritual home that touches people and speaks to them, no matter what their background. Our mission is to serve all who walk through these doors, whether they are living in a Jewish home and raising Jewish kids, or part of an extended family, or someone coming to worship at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah for the first and only time on a Saturday morning. We have chosen to embrace the change in American Jewish life.

There is still resistance to the cultural shift that I describe. Just this week, an article by Jack Wertheimer, of Jewish Theological Seminary, made all the same old arguments. Wertheimer continues to push back against this new Jewish world. The article is entitled, “Intermarriage, Can Anything be Done?” In it, he offers the same old arguments and criticisms of those who reach out beyond the old traditional borders.

But the push back can also become personal. This summer an ugly controversy was played out in the various print and online media of the American Jewish community. It concerned Rabbi/Cantor Angela Buchdahl, the Cantor of Central Synagogue in NYC. Central Synagogue on the Upper East Side is one of the most prestigious, respected synagogues in America, and Angela Buchdahl is an extraordinary presence there as cantor of that congregation. Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, the senior rabbi of Central, is about to retire. Cantor Buchdahl, who also holds Rabbinic Ordination, is applying for the job of senior rabbi.

The story of her interest in the senior rabbi position was the subject of an article in the New York Times. It was also a front page story in The Forward. What made this especially newsworthy is that Angela Buchdahl is the daughter of a Jewish American father and a Buddhist Korean mother. She once wrote an essay titled; “Kimchi on the Seder Plate.” She is fully Jewish by Reform standards, according to Patrilineal Descent. It also so happens that she went a more traditional conversion ceremony as an act of confirmation.

But following the publicity about her applying for the position of Senior rabbi at Central Synagogue, an Orthodox rabbi, published an article in the New York Jewish Press with the “snarky” title: “It’s Official—You Can Be a Non-Jewish Rabbi.” The attack was mostly on the Reform movement more than Angela, but the focus still accused her of being a non-Jewish rabbi. This article was subsequently followed by a piece penned by a Conservative woman rabbi writing about how painful it is for her personally when she has to reject patrilineal descent Jews. All of this was in response to the significant story of Angela Buchdahl potentially becoming one of the most important rabbis in NYC. After all, she didn’t look like what they thought of as a member of the tribe. She is Korean-American.

This only added to the controversy of the question of whether HUC should admit and ordain students who themselves are intermarried. The public criticism of Angela Buchdahl was a tribal argument against a covenantal decision. I would argue that this is another example of a battle between the past and the future.

The truth is, the face of the Jewish tribe is changing. Look around this sanctuary. More significantly, come to Family School on a Sunday morning. It is obvious that the Jewish world is undergoing change as quickly as the secular world around us. We can decry those changes. Some people may feel uncomfortable. It might require us to re-imagine how we think. There are many people entering the Jewish world voluntarily. They are living with “Green Cards” of Jewish residence, finding meaning, challenge, and inspiration in Jewish teaching and life.

But now I turn to the personal—From Megatrends to Microtrends. Let’s talk about us—the personal. This is the central theme of Rosh Hashanah. There is change. That is the meaning of the word, Teshuvah—repentance, atonement, turning. Its simplest meaning is “change.” The lesson of these Days of Awe is that

we are not stuck. The past does not define the future. Let's look at how a culture changes. It changes because of individual behavior. Societies do not give up smoking—individuals do. Nations do not become less racist, homophobic, and xenophobic. People change their attitudes.

At times the issues that confront us may appear hopeless, intractable. How will we ever solve the challenges of gun control, global warming, the Middle East, or terrorism? But cultural norms and expectations do change. And the personal issues we each confront can also be examined in that same light.

We can change. We make mistakes. We fail. We regret attitudes and actions of our past. We may have failed to treat others as equal containers of the Divine breath. We may have indulged our own pleasures at the cost of lasting hurt to those we love. We may have failed in our personal life or in our public and business world. But change is possible and even mandated. We turn from errors of the past to the promise of the future. We can never surrender to the despair that allows us to say, "Things will never change." "We have to just accept things as they are." "We are stuck." "We are powerless."

Rosh Hashanah is our Re-Set button. For those of us who once were smokers and gave it up, or stopped drinking or abused other substances, we should know this truth. Those who have controlled their weight, or have begun to work out, or retooled a career, or survived loss, have all learned that we can do anything. Any of us who have harbored fears of the "other," whether in the form of racism, homophobia, sexism, or intolerance, we have grown and matured.

This year's greatest Rosh Hashanah sermon was not delivered by any rabbi, no matter how eloquent. Nor were they the words of President Obama standing at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28th. The best lesson was delivered by Diana Nyad, at the age of sixty-four, completing her swim from Cuba, as she walked out of the sea onto dry land at Key West. She said:

"Never give up."

"You are never too old to chase your dreams."

"It is not a solitary sport. It's a team effort."

It is a New Year. Embrace this opportunity to change, whether as a nation, a culture, a people, or as an individual. Be inspired by the promise of the future. Create for yourself a New Year of sweetness, hope, well-being and peace. Then this New Year, 5774, will indeed be a year of true Blessing

Shana Tova uMetukah

May this be a New Year of sweetness and well being.