

Rosh Hashanah Day One

Heart | Mind | Environment
The Process of Change

It was 22 years ago. I was a pre-med chemistry major at NYU, three semesters shy of fulfilling my parents' dream – applying to medical school and becoming “my son the doctor.” It was at this time that I met Jodi on SEPTA (Philadelphia's commuter rail and a story for another time). Soon after meeting, we began dating. By Manhattan standards, this was a long-distance relationship. She was living uptown at Columbia while I was living downtown. Seeing each other involved transferring subway lines in Times Square (now that is dedication!) Jodi was a student at List College, an incredible joint program with Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Her Psychology major at Columbia didn't interest me much, but her Talmud and Rabbinics major at JTS was intriguing. Being the nerdy couple that we were, we had numerous “dates” in the NYU library. Side-by-side, we would sit on the library's 10th floor, looking out at Washington Square Park and the Empire State Building. On most nights, I would be laboring over Physics while Jodi was busy deciphering a passage of Talmud. My eyes inevitably drifted...to the page of Talmud. I was curious and wanted to learn more. And that's exactly what I did! Before my sophomore year concluded, I walked into my advisor's office and shared my intention to add a second major – Jewish History and Civilization.

By the spring of my junior year, I had a problem. I was deep in Physical Chemistry and Experimental Methods while beginning my preparation for the MCATs. With each passing day, I noticed my heart was not in it. I felt as if I was simply going through the motions. I would lay awake at night thinking about what to do, searching my soul for direction and guidance. I was already an active Jewish lay leader, founding KOACH – Conservative Judaism's collegiate arm at NYU. I was also intellectually curious and living an observant life. I began dreaming that I would

bomb the MCATs and then rejoice so I could pursue my passions. After several months of introspection, my answer became clear. I would combine my desire for Jewish learning and my involvement in the Jewish community and take a path that ultimately has brought me here today. Getting over that hump was not easy. It was a process, and it required some sage advice and clear direction.

I would like to share another story with you. It is now the end of March 2014. Jodi and I just had a relocation consultant come to our Upper East Side apartment to price out our impending move to Alexandria. As the consultant moved from room to room, rattling off numbers and box sizes, the reality that I would be leaving the city I had called home for 15 years began to sink in. My love for New York began as a young child visiting my grandparents in Herald Square, across the street from Macy's. I still remember sitting on their fourth-floor window sill watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, often coming within inches of a massive floating Snoopy or Big Bird. I later went to college in New York, rabbinical school in New York, and my first pulpit was in New York. From Greenwich Village to the Upper West Side to the Upper East Side. I had my favorite neighborhood, but I simply loved living in Manhattan. And now, in my early 30s, I was struck with a severe case of peri-chora-phobia – fear of the suburbs. What will I do when I crave a banana while walking down the street – there are no fruit stands! Without a doorman, who will hold on to my dry cleaning for me? Can I be a hip young rabbi if I drive a minivan? Will I find bagels worthy of the smoked salmon that I will need to import from Zabars? Can a New York Yankee survive south of the Mason-Dixon line? Intellectually, I knew this was the right decision for me professionally and the right decision for our family. I just needed to find a way to get my heart on the same page. Getting over that hump was not easy. It was a process, and it required some emotional help from several important people.

One final story. After being married for 19 years, I have learned what behaviors maintain joy and equilibrium and the behaviors that incite frustration and lack of balance. If you know my wife, you know she loves being organized. Clutter is practically a dagger in her heart. Our pantry is stocked with food staples in neatly labeled containers. The spice cabinet is lined up by spice category. Open a kitchen drawer, and you will find wooden boxes labeled sandwich, quart and gallon so our Ziplock bags remain tidy. Binders are color-coded. Winter clothing bins are labeled by person. And t-shirts are folded and placed vertically in drawers so that a quick glance will reveal every shirt option. While I wouldn't call myself messy, and by no means am I a slob, this level of organization doesn't come naturally to me. For the first eight years that we lived in our house on Kenwood Ave, one particular habit of mine literally drove Jodi crazy. Every day, I would come home, take off my shoes, and leave them in the foyer. I just liked the convenience of my shoes being near the door because that's where I'd need them next. Day after day, for years, she would tell me (and then our children) to put our shoes in the laundry room. The foyer needs to be clear of clutter. It wasn't for a lack of trying or caring. Sometimes, I would remember. Usually, I would forget. Old habits die hard. And when I did remember to put my shoes away, it was then my slippers that were sitting in the foyer. On and on this went until one day when everything changed. Today, almost religiously, my shoes are in the laundry room, and the foyer is clear of my footwear. Getting over that hump was not easy. It was a process, but the solution was easier than we anticipated.

Year after year, rabbis, including this one, speak to their congregations on the High Holidays about *teshuvah*. While *teshuvah* is often translated as repentance, it really means to turn around or change. Jewish tradition is remarkably optimistic that people have the capacity to change their lives. In fact, Judaism's faith in our ability to change is so important that a whole season is devoted to the process of change. We started 30 days ago with an entire month of introspection.

Today, Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the creation of the world and begin the ten days of change that climax with Yom Kippur. Most of us are familiar with the rabbinic notion of *teshuvah* – behavioral change. The Rambam states that your *teshuvah* was successful if, when faced with the same temptations, you act differently. This notion of *teshuvah* can be summarized as: “Just say no.”

The rabbinic idea of *teshuvah* sounds a lot like an ancient version of the Bob Newhart sketch about a rather old-fashioned and callous therapist. The scene begins when the patient enters and shares, “I have this fear of being buried alive in a box. I just start thinking about it, and I begin to panic.” After ascertaining that no one has actually tried to do this, the therapist responds, “I’m going to say two words to you right now. I want you to listen to them very, very carefully. Then I want you to take them out of the office with you and incorporate them into your life.” The patient quickly grabs a notebook to write down the sage advice. “You ready?” the doctor says, “Okay. Here they are. Stop it! S-T-O-P, new word, I-T. Stop it!” The comedy sketch is quite funny, but it also highlights how trite our advice for change can be. After all, the path toward change is a hard path to follow.

In contrast, the Hasidic tradition suggests a different path – a path seeking transformation. This transformation comes about not by saying “no” or “stop it” but by acknowledging the truth about ourselves. Acknowledging that truth means admitting that we really want to change this aspect of who we are. This is why the Baal Shem Tov would say: רק שיעצב על העבירה ויחזור לשמוח – Instead of being upset and ashamed of the past, return to rejoicing with the Divine (Tzavaat HaRivash 46:2). In the Hasidic tradition, *teshuvah* is less about regret and more about how you inspire and motivate change.

I know what many of you are thinking. “Rabbi...it’s just not that easy. People resist change.” I get it. I really do. I will be the first to admit that change doesn’t come naturally. We are creatures of habit, and sometimes, those habits are not admirable. On the other hand, babies are born every day to parents who, inexplicably, welcome the change. Think about the sheer magnitude of that change! Would anyone agree to work for a boss who would wake you up twice a night, screaming, for trivial administrative duties? (And what if, every time you wore a new piece of clothing, the boss spit up on it?) Yet people don’t resist this massive change – they volunteer for it (*Switch*, 4).

In our lives, we embrace lots of big changes – not only babies, but marriages, new homes, new technologies, and new job responsibilities. Meanwhile, other behaviors are infuriatingly intractable. Smokers keep smoking, couch potatoes stay on the couch, and your rabbi couldn’t get his shoes out of the foyer. Some changes are hard. Some changes are easy. According to Professors Chip and Dan Heath, all successful changes share a common process: a change of heart, a change of mind, and a change of environment (*Switch*, 4).

Conventional wisdom in psychology suggests that our hearts and minds are often working independently of each other. Our heart is our emotional side. It’s the part of you that is instinctive, that feels pain and pleasure. The mind is our rational side. It’s the part of you that deliberates, analyzes, and looks into the future. The weakness of our emotional side is clear: it’s skittish and has a hunger for instant gratification. When change fails, it’s usually our emotions that get in the way. While it is true that our rational side is our ability to plan and think beyond the moment, change rarely happens without the energy and drive of our emotions. Absent our emotions, we become paralyzed with over-analysis and an incapability to make decisions. A reluctant heart and

a wheel-spinning mind can both ensure that nothing changes. But when the heart and mind are both motivated, change can come easily (*Switch*, 6-8).

When considering my future career path, my heart was pulling me towards the rabbinate while my rational self was convinced I was crazy. I had already put in hours upon hours as a pre-med, including summer classes and internships, and I was good at it. It wasn't until I returned to my academic advisor and sought his help and advice that change began to take hold. He could see very clearly what my heart desired and distilled the concrete steps I needed to take to get there. Stop studying for the MCATs. Enroll in a Talmud class at JTS. Write an honors thesis for your Jewish History major. Speak to a rabbi you trust to learn more about next steps. And that is exactly what I did. I dropped my Chemistry major, graduated with honors in Jewish History, and applied to the Rabbinical School at JTS. And then, when I graduated, my parents could say, "You see that tall guy up there...his sister's a doctor!" Wrapping my head around this change was initially very challenging. My hesitance grew from a lack of clarity. Change happened when I was given crystal-clear direction. Change is always easier when you think in terms of specific behaviors and you know where you're going.

As a lifelong New Yorker, moving to Alexandria was also a difficult change. Intellectually, I knew this was the best move for my family and me. But how was my heart going to get on the same page? There was no advisor this time who could simply tell my emotions what to feel. Instead, change was facilitated by several people in this room. It began with members of the rabbi search committee going out of their way to welcome *our* family to the *Agudas* family, and that was just during the interview weekend. On each successive visit, before we even moved, members of this community would reach out and meet us for dinner, help us figure out doctors for our children, and share which stores reliably sold kosher food. Within our first few months at Agudas, we

received numerous invitations for Shabbat dinners, members heading to Shalom's would call and ask if we needed anything, and all of you were genuinely interested in who I was as a person. It became clear to Jodi and me that the members of the Agudas community cared about us not as a rabbi and his family but as friends, as *achim* and *achot* – as brothers and sisters. This was a feeling I had never felt before as a rabbi. My change of heart didn't occur with persuasive arguments about the merits of DC vs. NY. My change of heart occurred because the Agudas community touched my soul. My heart was seeking a home, and you figuratively and literally built me one. Knowing something isn't enough to cause change. Change is always easier when you engage people's emotional side, when you make people feel something.

There is a story about a man who complained that his new rebbe was doing things differently than the rebbe's deceased father. The new rebbe replied, "I am following exactly the traditions of my father." When the follower looked at him quizzically, he replied: "My father didn't imitate his father, and I don't imitate my father." We live in a world of change. God is a God of change. The midrash says that before God created the world, God created *teshuvah* – the ability to change. The sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a reminder that change is possible, and that we control our attitude as we journey into the new year with its promise of possibility.

So, what does change look like in our community? Change is our new community Shabbat dinners every month, starting on Sukkot. This will be an opportunity for community building and fostering new relationships. With a *clear direction* of what we wanted to accomplish, making this change was easy. Make sure to take home your bookmark with all the dates for this year. Change is also the sacred work of our SEACHANGE cohort. SEACHANGE is a team of Agudas members collaborating with Temple Rodef Shalom and Ner Shalom to learn about racial equity issues locally and nationally and working together to make a difference, both inside and outside our

congregation's walls. Change begins when we reach across the lines that divide us and listen to each other's hearts and stories. By the end of this year, our SEACHANGE team will identify and commit to one or two internal projects to make our community more inclusive. We will also select a local organization to partner with long-term – to make a broader impact on equity issues throughout the region and our Commonwealth. (For more information on SEACHANGE, see the article on page 12 of your High Holiday bulletin.) Change is also creating two weekday religious school options, virtual and in-person, to meet the needs of more students. Change is our preschool reimagining the outdoor spaces behind the synagogue to engage and stimulate the minds of our youngest children. Change is creating new and exciting opportunities to engage seniors, empty nesters, young professionals, and everyone in between. Thoughtful and deliberate changes to the heart, mind, and physical spaces are vital for the continued success of our community.

What is true for our community is true for each and every one of us. The season of *teshuvah* is a season to recognize the steps you need to implement change in your lives. When Moses asked for God's name, God replied: "I will be what I *will* be." And so can you. The world is a world of possibility and change. Change is never a singular moment. Change is a process. The people who change have clear direction, ample motivation, and a supportive environment. In other words, when change works, it's because the mind, heart, and environment are all aligned. When change happens, it tends to follow a pattern. The specifics are always different, but the pattern is always the same. Direct your mind, motivate your heart, and shape your environment. (*Switch*, 255)

I almost forgot. How did I finally get my shoes out of the foyer? When the environment changes, the behavior changes. So change the environment. Turns out all we needed was a large unit with shoe cubbies in our laundry room. Now, when I come home, I take off my shoes, and they have a dedicated spot. I don't even think about it anymore. It's become second nature.

For things to change, somebody somewhere has to start acting differently. Maybe it's me; maybe it's you; maybe it's all of us (*Switch*, 259). The New Year has now begun. The pattern is now yours. What will you change?