

Head Changing Day

Shanah Tovah.

We greet each other with these words tonight, sharing wishes for a good and a sweet year.

At this moment it is hard to imagine what that even means.

We are in a pandemic looking towards an anxiety filled Fall, uncertainty abounding. How can we make meaning of our genuine good wishes for one another in this unprecedented time?

The word “shanah” usually translated as “year,” is also based in the Hebrew root meaning “change.”

Our holiday greeting reminds us that each year brings change— we can’t hide from that reality. Even if we try to avoid everything new, change would still find us.

Since Rosh means “head” and shanah means “change” today is literally “Head (rosh) Changing(shenah) Day.”

Our tradition reminds us to enter the new year with a new head! :)

We are taught to begin our new year (our new head) with an open mind. Only we can transform our thinking and our vision so that we enter the New Year with a new perspective.

And so we begin 5781 with every hope for goodness-- What a task lays before us!

We are abundantly aware that when and where ever change may find us, it is not easy. We get comfortable in our routines, and even in our quarantines. Habits are difficult to break. Sometimes, when the known is safe, it can be even harder to step outside our comfort zones. For years, a rare, white tiger lived in the Washington Zoo. She restlessly paced back and forth in her 12-by-12 foot cage. Finally, biologists built her a larger outdoor park enclosure, so she could run, climb, and explore. To their great disappointment, she didn't eagerly embrace her new habitat. Rather, she marked off a similar 12-by-12 foot square for herself, and paced there until her death, never enjoying the new opportunities in front of her.¹

How many of us have looked forward only to see limits rather than potential? When our quarantine makes us feel caged, how can we see beyond it? We too become hobbled by the familiar/ and fearful of the new. This new year is our moment to define our future by the possibilities rather than the challenges.

¹ (Inspired by by Rabba Sara Hurwitz, in Jewels of Elul IX, edited by Craig Taubman, 2015 + other facts from the internet)

This transformation begins with each of us. As Tolstoy writes, “*Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one/ thinks of changing themselves.*”

Consider how the shofar is narrow at the beginning and wide at the end. Our rabbis teach us that the widening mirrors our own transformations. Our change begins with us and expands to the world. Only when we embrace change for ourselves, can we open our hearts and our minds to understand that our smallest actions can make a difference. They can echo throughout the world. The shofar can’t make a sound without the *breath* of a human. Ask our own Doug Emanuel just how hard it is to make a sound. As difficult as it is, we all have the capacity to make our best selves heard.

Change is about risk -- exploring outside the comfort zone, pacing outside the 12x12 foot square, expanding the boundaries of possibility. Taking risks means we won’t always be perfect. We must remember that the people growing and changing beside us won’t be perfect either. New things can be messy. It is up to us to receive these innovations with grace, good will and an open heart.

Here we are tonight--We welcome the New Year over livestream and zoom in ways we could never have conceived. Think about this--no Jews have celebrated

the holidays in a time of pandemic AND such incredible technology. We begin 5781 embracing the newest of the new with all of the accompanying glitches and imperfections. The resilience of this moment is a model and an inspiration for how we can live.

Rabbi Israel Salanter was a brilliant talmudist and wise soul. Late in his life he wrote: "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town, so, as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize that the only thing I can change is myself."

What does change look like for each of us, as we embark on the newness of 5781?

My favorite midrash² addresses this reality. We all know the story we recall each year on Passover... the Israelites fleeing Egypt, the parting of the sea. Uncertainty and change, possibility and fear. Oh the questions they must have had! And yet, as the Israelites faced an “unprecedented” redemption from Egypt, God responded with empathy, compassion and transparency. “I’ve never orchestrated a redemption

² Midrash Tanhuma Buber Bo 8:3

like this either,” God admits to the Israelites. “Nevertheless, let’s work together and we will get through it!”

That’s just where we stand. We note that just as our times are unprecedented, our actions can be too. This moment provides us with the opportunity to be our best selves in ways we never dreamed before. Today is Head Changing Day. We can be more patient, kinder, more generous and open hearted. The choice is ours. Rosh Hashanah. A new year. A new head. A new perspective.

Shanah Tovah.