

Rabbi Jay TelRav

Yom Kippur Sermon 5779

The Rate of Change

A few weeks ago, I was at a Stamford Board of Rabbis meeting with two of my colleagues. When we were done and saying, “goodbye” one of the guests asked the three of us how our sermons were coming along. One of the rabbis said he was pretty much all done – just a little editing needed. The other said he hadn’t really written anything but he was confident that something would come along and I was somewhere in between. It used to be, in decades gone by, that rabbis would spend their summers writing and editing and getting ready for this moment. Even the trends taking place in the news maintained their relevance – with the exception of a year like 2001 when the attacks of 9/11 took place just a week before the holiday and every rabbi in the country threw away their sermons and rewrote last minute. Today, a sermon based on current events is obsolete by the next week.

Last week, I spoke about growth which takes place in an individual. You might think that your own lasting changes happen at a tectonically slow rate but, from a tectonic point of view, they’re lightning fast. Last night, I spoke about the growth I know we can affect if we lean in as a team to this congregation. Sometimes, impatient as I am, I wish we could see the differences more quickly, but organizations move more slowly than individuals. And, as we pull our zoom further away from the picture and look at our society, the changes are worth considering as well. If we use the metaphor of a wristwatch for comparison, the second hand moves awfully fast, the way individuals grow. The minute hand moves, relatively slower, corresponding to organizational progress and the hour hand, impatient as we might be, is the broader country at the national scale. At least that’s how human society has always functioned. But, these days, it feels almost reversed: like the changes that are taking place all around us would be better represented by the second hand!

In my first two sermons this season, I was almost using the words “change” and “growth” interchangeably. But today, I’m going to looking at how the speed of society and the speed of change is actually hindering societal growth.

Rude lady on train – twitter became a way to communicate what’s happening real-time, and when they arrived at the station, the media had beaten them there. She was accosted and questioned by reporters about how she felt about 40,000 people seeing her face and attaching the label of “rude”. Corey Booker can leak confidential emails at the very same moment that he says he’s going to leak confidential emails. Alex Jones can live stream his antics during an interview outside of a congressional hearing into why Twitter has permanently blocked him. There is no time to think between actions and their broadcast.

I don’t know about you but I’m thoroughly overwhelmed. The news sources I used to rely on have grown to be almost as annoying in their spin as the ones that I used to criticize. By the way, I still criticize the other sites. And here is the outcome I see taking shape: While not knowing where to focus, and the breaking bombshells in the headlines coming a couple of times a day, I grow in my disorientation until I begin to miss stories. And, I’m starting to see that there are times that the pundits are working themselves up into a tizzy for the 3rd time that day and so I stop paying attention. Then, two days later when we’re still discussing it, I realize, “whoa, that’s actually a pretty important story.” I actually thought, at one point, that someone should develop a website for people who missed the background of current news events. If you’re not sure how we got to this point, you can quickly read back through a timeline of events and breaking news to catch up. The fact that I sometimes need a website like this is not good.

I was trying to create metaphors to use to help us and the North Star comes to mind. Unwavering, it lends a sense of groundedness (ironic because it certainly isn’t anywhere near the ground!). We can establish a sense of balance and discern our location when bobbing out in the middle of the ocean with no other point of reference. Take away the star for a couple of stormy days and the sailors of old began to grow pretty cranky. The North Stars of my American identity today include Free Press, Free Speech, A tripartite government with effective

checks and balances and a core set of values including embracing diversity, supporting the vulnerable and equal opportunity for all. And, it feels as though I've been sailing through a storm recently and it's been too long since I've seen that good 'ole North Star. The Free Press is under attack. Free Speech is being brought to question. The checks and balances of our system of government are being tested and I'm not sure they're up to the task. There are an awful lot of voices proclaiming different values than those written on the base of the Statue of Liberty.

There is no question that this is unprecedented. However, I'm confident that, in previous eras, the Jews felt that the changes they were living through were also unprecedented. Three similarly devastating episodes for our people: The Destruction of the 2nd Temple in the year 70 CE by the Romans, the expulsion from Spain in 1492 by the Ferdinand and Isabella and the Holocaust of the 20th century at the hands of the Nazis and their willing executioners. In each of these awful chapters of Jewish history, we saw desperate efforts to identify new leadership. The first century saw the emergence of rabbinic leadership. The expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula created the right conditions for the rise messianic fervor leading to the false messiah, Shabbtai Tzvi. And the 20th century left the Jewish world staggering in search of leadership in the form of the Western idols of opportunity, assimilation and as a result for many, distance from their Jewish community.

If I'm noting similar patterns in this moment in history (and I will state unequivocally that we are not in the midst of anything like these monumentally bad chapters of history, yet) then, I find myself, like many other voters, yearning for leaders to come and save us. I think this helps, in part, to explain why we are seeing the unseating of establishment politicians. Perhaps new voices, particularly those of women, can effect the changes that their male counterparts have failed to achieve. But, with the gift of distance from the events themselves, we can look more deeply and identify some other outcomes from those historical comparisons.

When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, they were simply finishing a process that the Israelites had begun themselves in the preceding decades. There were vicious battles between Jewish groups vying for power and the society had grown fractured beyond repair. The

Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Roman sympathizers and the new group which would eventually come to be known as Christians were all rallying their followers. There was little cohesion and therefore little strength to the Israelite kingdom and so the Romans had little difficulty in smashing it. But, as a result of the devastation, what emerged was not just the dominant leadership of the rabbis, it was a clear transition to religious self-rule. The cessation of centralized sacrifice in Jerusalem led to personal sacrifice in the form of prayer and an emphasis placed on high behavioral standards. The inability to visit the Great Sanctuary in the Promised Land was transformed into the Little Sanctuary, the *mikdash m'at*, of one's own home. Instead of looking to leaders we couldn't trust in the center of the society, we were trained to look to ourselves as the essential building blocks of Jewish community.

I am over-simplifying here, but when Queen Isabella tossed the Jews out of Spain, she ended 500 years of what has been called the Golden Age. Incredible cooperation and idea-sharing between the scientists, philosophers and artists of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian world. The emergence of Shabbtai Tzvi was a symptom of the Jewish community spread around the world, still feeling ungrounded, lost and spinning more than 100 years later. When their messianic hopes were dashed with the downfall of this charismatic charlatan, their communal depression hit new lows, preparing them for a revolutionary new message. Chassidism emerged to teach Jews that they did not need to follow anybody. No matter where they found themselves – no matter how scattered afar they were – no matter how destitute or illiterate or downtrodden they felt – God was with them and heard their hearts' every prayer. The early teachers empowered the average Tevya to look heaven-ward and know that his salvation was right in his own hands. The pogroms against them with the encouragement of the Czars, at the hands of the Cossacks, the poles and the Christians could have broken their spirit – should have broken their spirit – but Chassidism reassured them; do not give up, in fact, redouble your efforts to live high when others go low.

The events of the 20th century are complex, to be sure. But, in truth, no more complex than the first examples and no more complex than today's headlines. Jewish theologians of the early decades of the last century wrestled with the question of Good and Evil. Rav Kook

rejected the medieval teachings that evil was simply the absence of Good. He taught, instead that evil is, itself a force in the world and that humans are tasked with the job of answering it with overwhelming demonstrations of Good.¹ Mordechai Kaplan continued this work placing the responsibility for effecting salvation squarely in the hands of humanity – turning our attention from an active God toward the potential of a committed human.² Then, in the decades following the horrors of the 2nd world war, we began to hear philosophers like Emil Fackenheim, Elie Wiesel and Abraham Joshua Heschel charge us with the responsibility to be the change God desires in the world. To summon the human strength that allowed individuals to carry on. To rebuild. To refuse Hitler a posthumous victory. We know we’re still vulnerable to the forces of evil – and probably always will be – but we also know that the complete destruction of the Jewish people will never come from the hands of one outside our borders. In each of these episodes of history, we felt vulnerable at the hands of outside forces but, as a result of each, we learned how powerful we are to effect change. In every age, we looked for a hero or sage to come to our aide but in hindsight, we see that it was us who rose as one to redeem ourselves.³

My childhood Rabbi Roman, back in Michigan, used to do a *hineini* sermon every year about someone who stepped forward to be the resource needed in the world. He would profile a righteous gentile during the Shoah or a little known but influential politician from the 1920s or a doctor in Africa...you get the idea. Individuals doing the things that we might call heroic. Individuals who answered a need with actions – akin to saying “Hineini – Here I am, ready to do what is needed.” Individuals, not so different from ourselves but who leave us wondering if we would have the courage to step into the breach and take our place among them. Individuals whose stories are in danger of being lost to memory.

Why do I bring up ancient history, you might ask? Because I believe that Judaism has a not-so-well-kept secret to share with the world again. I think that, far from an argument of

¹ Citation needed

² Citation needed

³ Based on the lyrics of *Mi Yimalel*.

“chosen-ness,” I would simply argue that there is a quality in our message that we know works. We’ve seen it work over and over again. Our Torah has served as an אור לגויים – *Or Lagoyim* – A Beacon for the Nations. All of Western Civilization is based upon the principles delivered to the world in our holiest texts. That message? Don’t wait for God, get to work.

This past December, a group of 14 lay leaders, youth groupers and staff from Temple Sinai traveled together to Boston for the Union for Reform Judaism’s Biennial Convention. 5000 Reform Jews gathered to learn from each other, study together and pray in some of the most powerful environments I’ve ever been a part of. It is personally transformative for those who attend and I hope you’ll consider joining me again in 2019. But, the real goal is for communal transformation – to provide Temple Leadership with the tools to help their local congregations grow. And one of the major themes this Biennial was grassroots organization. I attended many sessions and listened closely to the Best Principles shared by other congregations whose members also felt that it is time to take our societal salvation into our own hands and to effect the change God desires – just as our ancestors have done so many times before.

You received an email from me many weeks back inviting you to a brainstorming meeting for those who are unsatisfied with the world they see around themselves: A world of fear-mongering and abrogation of the values that are core to the teachings of the Torah. As a result of a single email, I received 65 responses from you saying, “*Hineini* – Here I am, ready to take my place.” We met and discussed the conditions around us that leave us upset. We created a huge list of complaints and then, we discussed what we would do if we actually wanted those factors to remain unchanged. In other words, how would we *strengthen* everything that is frustrating us? This creative approach led us to clarity on the steps we might consider in our effort to reverse or eradicate the upsetting factors. We narrowed, combined and refined our list of needs in the community and finally arrived at 4 task forces who will examine specific problems and opportunities.

There will certainly be a great deal of clarification and adjustment as the groups get underway with their foci but the working names of them today are as follows:

Building Broader Communities – working to close the racial, ethnic, economic and religious gaps between segments of our Stamford community.

The second group is called:

Education – Youth – Minorities – recognizing that animosity, fear and distrust begin to form young, this group will address the ways in which we can create cooperation, trust and cohesion in the community's youngest members.

The third group is focused on:

Local Politics – Everyone knows that the decisions that impact us locally are made locally by the elected officials closest to home. This group will seek to identify and support local candidates who advocate for the same policies that are encouraged in the Torah – the creation of a balanced society in which all members are valued and honored.

And finally a group will address:

Minority Voter Issues – it is clear that our system of voting presents many opportunities for improvement but the ones hit hardest by its inequalities are the ones who are also hit hardest by those elected. This group will work with the community of minorities and new immigrants to improve the election systems that will protect rights equally across communities.

There is a lot of enthusiasm for this work and the group of individuals who have already said, “*Hineini!*” is only waiting for you to jump on board. Of course, there are endless good efforts underway out there beyond what is happening at Temple Sinai and we’ll be partnering with like-minded others. But, if you have a little extra time in your life (or can create a little extra by eliminating something that’s overdue for elimination!) then I hope you’ll sign up to

help us. The ushers at all the exits have sign-up sheets and it would be exciting to see the list of willing volunteers grow exponentially today.

I know this sort of activity is not nearly as fun as attending the sporting events of your children or seeing the latest movie or laying on the couch reading a book but your ability to continue to do so is at risk. As President Obama said last week, “These are dangerous times” and the future remains uncertain. The prophets of the Bible were called by God at just such times – and they, too, would have preferred to just keep doing what they were doing. In fact, God needed to hound them over and over before they would agree to get on board. God had to argue with Moses at length from within a burning bush to get his attention. God had to get Jonah alone in the belly of a huge fish in order to have a heart-to-heart. And God subjected Elijah to a devastating tornado, an earthquake and finally a forest fire⁴, before that guy was able to pay attention! I don’t know about you but I feel absolutely hounded by the media now and, not to compare CNN, NYT, MSNBC, FOX to God’s tornados and earthquakes, perhaps – this is God’s playful way of getting your attention and telling you it’s time to do something!

I would now share a few lines from Senator John McCain’s farewell letter. An American hero of the highest caliber who gave his entire life to our great nation, he knew he would have our undivided attention for a brief moment at this time of his death and so he told us: Do not despair of our present difficulties but believe always in the promise and greatness of America, because nothing is inevitable here.” He said, “Americans never quit. We never surrender. We never hide from history. We make history.”⁵

I say: Do not let fear paralyze you. Do not let the monumental tasks intimidate you. Do not let others dissuade you and, whatever you do, do not lose התקווה - *hatikvah* - do not lose hope. Stand up with your Jewish community and answer the call with “Hineini – I’m ready to help!”

⁴ I Kings 19:11-13.

⁵ Sen. John [McCain's farewell statement](https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/27/politics/john-mccain-farewell-statement/index.html). 8/27/2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/27/politics/john-mccain-farewell-statement/index.html>