

## Books Close and New Books Open

Rosh Hashanah 5776(2015)

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L' Shana Tova Tikatevu v techatamu. May you be written and sealed in the book of life.

A lovely greeting... but a frightening metaphor. It comes from Talmud:

“Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah – one for the evil, one for the righteous and one for the ones in between. The righteous are inscribed and sealed instantly for life; the evil for death, and the rest of us are held in between until YK. If we are found worthy we are inscribed in the book of life; if not, the Book of Death. (RH 16B) “

Oy.

We don't take it literally, but it gets our attention. It suggests that what we do really matters; that our actions have consequences. And it reminds us that a new year is a time when one book closes and a new one opens.

This year, an important book is closing for me and another one opening. As many of you know, these are the last High Holy Days where I am Senior Rabbi. Next year I open my new book as Rabbi Emerita. In this new role I will support our clergy in life cycle events, teach adult education, be part our development efforts and continue to lead the “NextStage: Boomers & Beyond Initiative.” Part of that effort is what we are calling “The Synagogue Village”; it was just awarded a three-year Cutting Edge Grant by the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles. The goal is to create a thick intergenerational community that will enrich our lives now and help us negotiate needs that become more acute as we grow older. Exciting!

Books are closing, and new ones are opening. This year it not just a metaphor. Today we opened a new prayer book, a new machzor. How many of you remember the Union Prayer Book Machzor, created 121 years ago (1894), revised in 1923 and revised again in 1945? It was small, not very much Hebrew. There's a lot of responsive English readings. God is always referred to in masculine images, and references to women don't exist. That's the machzor I grew up with. It reflected the Reform Movement of its time --- with one unified vision of what it meant to be a Reform Jew.

Then in 1978, two years after my ordination, *Gates of Repentance*, was published. It was a very different prayer book. There were more choices– and more of the traditional prayers. There was very little transliteration – we had to hand out a transliteration supplement (and then we'd forget to announce the pages!) There were prayers commemorating the Holocaust and prayers for Israel; so much had changed in the Jewish world since 1945. And though the introduction claims that it responds to the “new consciousness of women”, that new consciousness is hard to find. God is referred to as God of the generations instead of God of our fathers, but our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are not mentioned. God is still “He”, or “Father” or “King”; there is no inkling that worshippers might have very different understandings of God.

So much has changed since then.

The year after *Gates of Repentance* was published, 1979, the convention of the rabbis of the Reform Movement was scheduled to take place in Arizona, a state that did not support the Equal Rights Amendment, the proposed amendment to the United States Constitution designed to guarantee equal rights for women. Remember that in 1979, three years after my ordination, there were still only a handful of women rabbis, maybe 7 or 8. Our dilemma? It felt important that women rabbis be at the convention, but we wanted to honor the boycott of states that didn't support the ERA. Not knowing what to do, I called Betty Freidan, the feminist thinker and activist who had written the culture changing book, *The Feminine Mystique*, and had founded the National Organization of Women. Her advice was surprising and empowering: "Go to the convention and invite me to speak!" We did.

It is hard to overstate the importance of that moment. Betty Friedan, the iconic and hugely influential leader, for the first time linked her feminism to being Jewish. That connection helped Jewish women all over the United States understand that their experience was Jewish experience, even if our tradition had ignored it, and helped nourish the Jewish feminism that had such a powerful impact on every dimension of Jewish life, from theology to spirituality to scholarship and to Jewish leadership. And it also helped seed the ground for changes in the way we pray and how we imagine Divinity.

You see those changes in the machzor we opened today in the way it speaks about God. It embraces multiple images of divinity that transcend gender, giving us different metaphors for God. The traditional *Unetane tokef* "Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die" is still there; you heard it this morning, but it is surrounded by other more contemporary and, for some of us, more helpful images of God... God, as M'kor Ha chayim, Source of Life; as Mystery; and as an ocean in which we are waves, individual and distinct just for a short time, but eventually reabsorbed into the divine ocean. You see so many other really revolutionary changes and choices. It reflects what we say in our Temple Emanuel vision statement: "There is more than one way to be a Jew."

It is actually stunning to me to see how far we have come since the last time we opened a new machzor just two years after I became a rabbi. We haven't reached the Promised Land yet; we only need to just think about the battles over education for girls and women all over the world to be reminded of how much work is still left to do. But our new machzor does symbolize how far we have come as a Jewish community .... and for me, how far I have come as a rabbi in these 40 years since my ordination.

In the early years of my rabbinate, whenever I was invited to speak, it was on the role of women in Judaism. One memorable moment was on a radio show where the well know Jewish host demanded of me: "What is more important-your Judaism or your feminism?" I paused, and then asked him: "And what is more important to you, your heart or your liver?" Silence. I was never invited back on the show!

In 1980, an organization of the still very small number of Reform women did a survey of congregants, boards, and senior rabbis about their attitudes toward hiring women as rabbis. Their major fears included.... and I quote:

“Women cannot do the job because the rigors of the rabbinate are too great and women too weak for the demanding routine.” Responses actually included: “the Torah is too heavy; women are too soft-spoken; women do not know how to, nor care to, wield power or authority; women will cry at meetings when pressured or criticized.” Another fear, and remember I am quoting: “female rabbis are too political, too new; they may alienate the more traditional segments of the congregation;” Then there was a fear of the unfamiliar: the “untoward aesthetic of seeing a woman carrying a torah or wearing a *tallit* and *kippah*.” And finally a fear: again I am quoting: “of women succeeding. Women who succeed will reflect poorly on their colleagues. If women can read from the Torah, preach, and teach, the rabbis’ duties become accessible to everyone. The mystique is lost. This possibly leads to the breakdown of the hierarchy of the rabbi-congregant relationship.”

I don’t know how many of those fears were still operating when I was interviewed to become the senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel 20 years ago. I do know that it was brave for this congregation to consider me. I had been a Hillel rabbi at USC for 14 years and then the executive director of what was then a very liberal community relations organization. You knew of my progressive inclinations and that I wouldn’t be afraid to speak out on issues important to me.

And you also knew I didn’t have a day of congregational experience!

But, under the leadership of the chair of the committee, Bruce Corwin, to whom I will always be grateful, you gave me a chance. Rabbi Heller was supportive; he even sent a letter to the entire congregation designed to allay people’s fears about hiring a woman! How grateful I am that Temple Emanuel gave me the opportunity to open that book.

It wasn’t always easy. There were lots of personal challenges along the way, within my family, with congregants, in the larger community. But look how much has changed in these 20 years. Our congregation has become more diverse, enriched not only by the voices of women but also gay and lesbian families, intermarried families, single parent families, Jews by choice, Jews of color, transgender Jews. Who could have imagined 40 years ago when I was ordained that gay marriage would be the law of the land? Who could have imagined that a Reform machzor would offer a new option for how a Jew might be named in Hebrew: not as son or daughter of their father and mother but as “from the house of their father and mother” so that transgendered or queer Jews are fully acknowledged.

This very sanctuary in which we pray has changed, reflecting the breakdown of hierarchy between clergy and congregation that in 1980 was articulated as a fear and now is seen as a blessing. Twenty years ago your clergy stood behind big wooden lecterns connected by a wooden barrier that literally separated the clergy from the congregation. Twenty years ago the floor of the sanctuary was much lower in the back than in the front so it was never possible to arrange the chairs in a way that congregants and clergy could face each other. Now we do that often. And now it is possible for people in wheel chairs or who have difficulty walking to access the bema.

Ours is now a congregation where your rabbis' goal is to empower you to take responsibility for your Jewish lives, to use us as teachers, facilitators and counselors, not as vicarious surrogates for your Jewishness. And ours is a congregation where members of the clergy are colleagues and friends. One of the most precious gifts of this congregation is my partnership with Rabbi Aaron. It is not common in our movement for a clergy team to work together as long as we have, where an assistant stays past five years, or where an assistant becomes an associate and then a co rabbi and then the sole senior rabbi. Our partnership has worked so well because we balance each other, with us both so different in our skills, our passions and our ways of living Judaism, and because of Rabbi Aaron's talents, openness, generosity of spirit and endearing sense of playfulness and humor. And I am delighted that Rabbi Bassin is our colleague. She has already made a big difference with her innovative strategy about social justice as community engagement and the amazing work she is doing to bring younger people into the congregation thru YoPRO.

Some things change. But some things don't. In my first sermon 20 years ago I said: "to be Jewish is to recognize that all human beings are created in the image of God ---and to work to create a world that reflects that. Being part of a congregation makes it possible for us to strengthen each other in that work and in our own spiritual growth." It is still true now, 20 years later.

That mission doesn't change. Our challenge to engage in the complicated work of repairing the world doesn't change. We might not agree on what is most important or how to do that work of repair, but we are strengthened when we find ways to work together even as we disagree and when we are able to share our differences without demonizing those who would do it differently. That work of repairing the world is messy and hard. It is never easy to know what is right, or how and when to give up our own privilege or security to give other people a chance for a better life. But still, our mission demands being part of the bigger world, with the challenging issues that grab the headlines. Many of those issues of the past 20 years are still with us; Israel and the Palestinians, health care, civil liberties, race, gun violence; others feel more recent: the drought, end of life questions.

But perhaps the most critical challenge at this this very moment is the migrant crisis facing Europe, all the more poignant because on our recent congregational trip along the Danube we were in places that just a few days later were flooded with refugees. We saw the train station in Budapest where the migrants and refugees were living; we now know how far their walk was from Budapest to the border of Austria. In every city and with every person we met, we confronted the searing memory of the Holocaust when the world turned its back on other desperate refugees – our own families. It is urgent that the Jewish community respond to this crisis by supporting HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society that brought so many of our families to American in the last century, in its work on the ground with these refugees and its effort to urge our government to increase the number of admitted Syrian refugees in the coming year.

Some contemporary issues change, some don't; but what doesn't change is our need for other people with whom to do the work, and the strength that comes from a synagogue community

to confront the challenges. Synagogues change, but what doesn't change is our need for a connection to tradition, memory and ways to pass what matters most to us on to the next generations. Prayer books change, but what doesn't change is our need to come together to pray. Our lives change, but what doesn't change is the need to celebrate our transitions with ritual, ceremony and a connection to the Divine. We change, but what doesn't change is our need to continue to grow and to do the work of these High Holy Days, of chesbon ha nefesh, taking an account of our souls, really wrestling with how to repair relationships with people we have loved, how to forgive, how to open our hearts to each other and how live with compassion and gratitude. We change, but what doesn't change is our need to confront the fundamental questions of what it means to be a human being: how to find meaning and purpose in lives that we know are fleeting and fragile.

Each of us changes as books of our lives close and new ones open. What is closing for you this year? What new book do you want to open? For you, what is changing... and what will never change?

What will never change for me is the gratitude I feel to all of you for the privilege of being your rabbi, for being part of your lives as you grew up, at your weddings, the births of your babies, the b'nai mitzvah of your kids, the losses of people you love. What will never change is how much you have taught me through the learning we have done together. What will never change is the blessing I feel because of your willingness to be my partner as together we discovered the power of a synagogue to really matter in people's lives.

Books close and new books open. Much changes, and some things never change.

As books of our lives close and new books open, we say: "Chazak chazak v'nitchazek. May we go from strength to strength and may we strengthen each other."

L'Shana Tova Tikatevu v techatamu.