

**Day 2, RH, Sept. 11, 2018 2 Tishrei 5779**

Temple B'nai Shalom, Braintree, 5779

### **Count Your Change**

#### **Good morning and Shana Tova**

When we wish each other *shana tova* we are doing more than simply extending greetings for a good year. In addition to meaning “year”, the Hebrew root *shin, nun, hey*, shana, means *to change*. With that expanded understanding in mind, I wish you, a meaningful Shana Tova- a year of change, of striving to be a more whole and a more complete you; and a year of learning and relearning the many lessons of wisdom in our amazing Jewish tradition.

In the late 1990's, a thin little book called Who moved my cheese? was published. Easily read in an hour, it remained on the NY Times best seller list for more than 40 weeks. It is a parable which Dr. Spencer Johnson wrote to help himself cope with a difficult change in *his* life. Cheese symbolizes the good things in life: good health, happiness, close relationships, meaningful and fulfilling work and healthy passions. Two characters, named Hem and Haw, are in a maze that symbolizes life. In the beginning all is going well for them. They are in a part of the maze where there is plenty of cheese. They are well nourished, content and have no worries. Then one day, they wake up. There is no cheese! They are stunned! Immobilized, even. They simply could not accept that the cheese was gone. They searched, repeatedly, in the only place where it had always been, but to no avail. They jumped up and down, stamped their feet and made a growly noise. They protested: “It is not fair. It's not fair.” And they yelled, “Who moved my cheese?”

Hem refused to accept this new reality. He was angry, frustrated and confused because things *had changed*. He couldn't think of what to do. And... he began to feel hungry. He stayed where the cheese always was and pouted. Again and again, to no avail, he cried out: "this is not fair; this is *not* fair."

His buddy Haw, resolved to adapt, relatively quickly. He was able to take a step back and get some perspective. He stopped pouting and left the place where the cheese had been. He figured out new ways to search for the cheese down every path of the maze. He searched everywhere. Eventually, he found it.

The moral of the story resonates with all of us: change happens; it is a universal theme. As was the case with Hem and Haw, change can be imposed on us, suddenly and unexpectedly. It always requires a response of some kind- including, perhaps, doing nothing!

The holocaust survivor and psychotherapist, Viktor Frankl, survived Auschwitz. He wrote a book which may be familiar to you, called *Man's Quest for Meaning*. In the book he writes, "Everything can be taken from a man or woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. We often have no choice about what happens to us. But we can [always] decide how we wish to react." It is guaranteed that change will happen. How we will deal with it, is an ongoing question we must answer for ourselves.

Several summers ago I had the opportunity to return to the temple where I had been the family educator for 7 years. Once again, I would work as a part of the temple's professional team. One afternoon when I arrived early for a meeting, I sat reading in the foyer outside of the sanctuary. Friends from my previous life at the temple, more than 16 years before, walked through the foyer on their way out the building.

One of them recognized me and with warmth and excitement said “Hi! How nice to see you here. It’s been such a long time. You haven’t changed a bit.”

I knew she meant it as a compliment; that I hadn’t gained weight or that I seemed to have the same energy and enthusiasm. But the thought bothered me: *I* knew how much *I had* changed in those 16 years. We all do. After all, in the words of Charles Darwin: it’s not the strongest of the species that survives but the one that is most easily able to change and adapt. Change is inevitable and consistent. When it is imposed by factors outside of us, it *requires* that we adapt. We might be hesitant. We fear it will be too hard; require too much effort. We might avoid it because the need to change makes us feel somehow, inadequate. Many of us, at some point, put those obstacles in front of ourselves. It is natural, but eventually it will cause us to lose our capacity to grow.

When the need to change and adapt confronts us, however, it is not always an external challenge. Rosh Hashana is a time on our Jewish calendar when we can embrace both the challenge and the privilege to consider whether and in what ways we might *want* to change. This is the time of year to ask ourselves some big, hard questions: What kind of people do we want to be? How do we want to live in relationship with God, with each other and with ourselves? When we consider those questions, we are accepting the invitation of these days of awe, to *choose* to change, from within. And there are other smaller but equally as crucial questions: Did we share meaningful companionship with our family and friends during the last year *or* was there a living together but a growing apart? Did we leave the affectionate word unspoken? The kind deed—did we perform it or postpone it?

I recently read the story of a man who found himself stopped in his car, at an intersection on a raw, cold and windy winter day. He noticed a young woman standing alongside the street rubbing her bare hands together and dancing in place

to keep warm. She held a sign. It read “I have a baby and no food.” The man recalled having been told many times, that giving money under these circumstances will foster a dependent lifestyle, or that the cash would be used to buy drugs or alcohol. What if she really didn’t have a baby? On the other hand, obviously, baby or not, she was really in need; but still he hesitated. “What should I do?” he asked himself. “How could I help?” As he wrestled with these questions, the person in the car in front of him, rolled down the window. A hand shot out the window holding a pair of warm gloves. Apparently, the driver had taken off her own gloves and offered them to the shivering woman. The young woman outside, mouthed the words “Thank you” and she smiled. It occurred to the man, that while he had debated with himself, someone else had helped. He had hesitated, but the person in front of him acted. He was trying to decide what was the *best* decision, the right moral thing to do, while the woman in the car in front of him simply did what she *could* do. In those moments of self-awareness, and in the days that followed, the man decided *he needed to change both his attitude and his behavior*. He pledged to himself that, when he confronted moments of need, of any kind, he would try to *do* something. External change is both constant and universal. Making internal change is our choice.

From my feminist perspective, I want to tell you a very short and poignant story from the Mishna; the collection of material written around the year 200 CE, which embodies oral Jewish tradition and forms the first part of the Talmud. The story is about Bruria, the brilliant and learned wife of Rabbi Meir who lived during the time of the writing of the Mishna. Bruria once found her husband, Rabbi Meir, praying that a particularly annoying neighbor-would die. Appalled by this, she taught her husband that he should pray that this annoying neighbor would do *teshuva*; would repent and change, rather than praying that he would die. She

quoted to him from the psalms (Psalm 104:35): “Let **sin** be consumed from the earth, *rather than the sinner.*”

The opportunity that is inherent in Judaism, to do teshuva, to repent and return to God and to our better selves, is an extraordinary blessing. Although as a concept, teshuva has historical origins, the mystics view it as “eternal, essential to the world’s existence. The Talmud includes it as part of the mysterious list of seven things that came to be even before the world was created.”<sup>1</sup> Why? Because, as my teacher Rabbi Arthur Green writes: “[for the Rabbis of Talmudic times], human life itself, is inconceivable without the possibility of return to God or restoring one’s lost inner balance.”<sup>2</sup> Teshuva is Judaism’s invitation to bring ourselves closer to a place of wholeness; to a place of renewal. External change is unpredictable. It is constant. Internal change, teshuva, is always available as a *choice* we can make.

In a sermon Rabbi Joseph Braver z”l, wondered as I did after seeing people who hadn’t seen me in over 16 years, whether ‘you haven’t changed a bit’ is a compliment. “If God were to look at us today”, he wrote “God would probably say to many of us: ‘You are in bad shape. You haven’t changed a bit.’” Rabbi Braver recalls a classic item, in a past which many of us will remember. It was a sign that used to sit near the cash register at the checkout line in many stores. [Remember cash registers?!] ‘Count your change before you leave’ the sign said. “That is good advice not only about money,” the rabbi suggests. “It is good spiritual advice as well.”

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<sup>1</sup> Judaism’s 10 best ideas, Rabbi Arthur Green, Tehsuva, p.51

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

May we be blessed with the desire and the ability to “count our change on a regular basis”. “Let’s make sure that when God sees us next, we will hear, ‘You look great! You’ve changed a lot.’”

I wish you all a healthy and sweet New Year, a year of change, of successful growth toward becoming the “you” you strive to become.

**שנה טובה ומתוקה**