

Rabbi Debbie Stiel

Living the Change

Rabbi Alan Lew, z'l, wrote an insightful book for this season called *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. So, not wanting you to be unprepared, I would like to share with you tonight some of his concepts from the book and some of my reflections.

There are two overarching premises to the book. First, that these Days of Awe **are** the most important days of the entire year – not because Judaism says we should see them that way, but because of the very real transformative power they can hold, **if** we lean into them and really observe them.

Secondly, Lew sees the Jewish calendar from Tisha B'Av which occurs midsummer through the building of the Sukkah 2 months later as providing a spiritual plot line for us. All these holidays working together help us to develop our soulfulness.

We start in sadness with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple on Tisha B'Av, with the crashing down of its walls and its way of life, and we end with the finale - the joyful building of a new, fragile home – the sukkah.

Let's walk through the timeline and reflect on what each part of it has in store for us. Tisha B'Av (the 9th of the month of Av) came in late July, but we can still reflect on its lessons and follow its prescription for us now.

The destruction of the 2nd Temple around 70 CE happened because Rome was a much more formidable military power than the Israelites. Rome had already conquered a sizable percentage of the known world. So it is no surprise that they

conquered Israel too. But when the rabbis looked at that defeat, they focused on what it taught us spiritually not militarily. They saw infighting that took place among different factions of Jews as they prepared to face Rome, and they blamed that for the catastrophic destruction. They said that the fall of the 2nd Temple was due to *sinat hinam*- senseless hatred. This was probably not factually accurate...but it is not wholly wrong either. The Israelites were not blameless. The infighting surely hurt their chances against the Romans.

Often when we fail at something that really matters, we want to blame others. It couldn't be our fault! Here the rabbis took exactly the opposite approach. Their focus was on - what did we have control over, and how did we do with it? Whether you like this approach to history, it holds a good spiritual lesson for us. At the time of approaching a new year, perhaps the most helpful question we can ask is 'what should I change in my own behavior and perspective?' I cannot do very much to change the people around me. I cannot change the past, but I CAN learn from it.

Rabbi Alan Lew uses the fall of the Temple as a metaphor for what needs to happen in our lives. Over the past year or more we have developed fortifications, heavy walls. All around us we stack up excuses, missed opportunities. In this season of turning to God, we want to crash down those walls. We want to break through. We seek to stand without any barriers or false identity before God as we start anew. Echoing the rabbinic response to Tisha B'Av, we might ask "how am I complicit in the destructions in my life?"

From Tisha B'Av, and for the next 7 weeks that lead up to Rosh Hashanah, we read the 7 Haftarot of consolation. For these 7 weeks, the rabbis compiled selections from the prophets that remind us that God is forgiving. The rabbis are

trying to give us courage and strength to share our true and repentant selves with God.

After Av comes the month of Elul. Of course, in Elul, introspection and reflection are our constant homework. It continues the ark that began with the month of Av. Here at Temple we listen to the shofar each Shabbat in Elul. It says ‘you are walking through the world half asleep’ – wake up! Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his seminal work titled *On Teshuvah* reminds us that we create distance between us and God when we sin. During Elul, we work to decrease that gap by figuring out where we need to make amends.

Vaclav Havel who was a playwright and dissident and became president of the Czech Republic after it freed itself from Communist rule once stood before the US Congress and admitted that “consciousness precedes being.” You see, Marxism had made the opposite assertion. Do what is right (equal size homes, equal pay, etc) and the heart will follow. But Havel said, “the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility.” Change comes first from within; from realizing who we are and who we can be. This consciousness raising is what we do in Elul and now.

We seek to move beyond our excuses: ‘she made me do it,’ ‘they just make me so angry,’ ‘what does it hurt if I am not completely honest,’ ‘someone else will help out,’ ‘well it may have been mean but it was funny’ ...to see our true selves.

Now we come to Rosh Hashanah -we work to consciously begin again. Tomorrow we will read from the first Torah portion of the Bible – the story of creation. This sets our timeline. We are at a new beginning! We work to have beginner’s mind. ... that wonderful sense of awe and hyperawareness that comes

with doing something for the first time. This is our first Rosh Hashanah - well, at least of this year! How will we observe it for *all* it offers us? Can we approach the apples and honey like it is our first taste of that awesome combination?! Notice the crispness and the sweet! Take in the sense of our community being all around us - not with the rote-ness of having been here 58 times before, but with the novelty and freshness of a new year. Will we allow ourselves to be moved by the melodies and stirred by our prayers?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said “wonder is a state of maladjustment to words and notions.” We don’t want to approach this season as ‘same old, same old.’ Let it put us off kilter a bit. These days ARE different. We are not at work or school tomorrow – we are here. It rocks us from our ordinary lives so we can see ourselves – our actions, our dramas anew.

Let us turn to this season with gusto! May we approach this new year with the singlemindedness of Oliver Queen on the Arrow or Barry Allen on the Flash as they go after a villain. I just had to throw those in there to let you know what I watched on Netflix this summer! 😊

Rosh Hashanah returns us to our core identities. For a moment we are not mom, brother, doctor, middle-aged lady, teenager,... we strip ourselves of all the social constructs and stand plain, unobscured before God. In so much of life, we spend time building ourselves up. We can hide behind our titles. Now -do we have the courage to open to being just our actions, our thoughts, our soul – just each of us alone and God?

And what will we see in this opening? As we crack our defenses, as we open our heart, what do we notice with our fresh eyes? With God we watch the DVD

clips of the last year of our lives. What are we most proud of? How will we keep those advances that we made with us in the year to come? How can we build on them? ...And we try to view with fresh eyes those moments we would prefer to ignore. With self-care and compassion, we revisit times we could have risen to a better level but did not. This is the awakening we want to seize hold of too, to make the most of this period.

Lew notes that “every sin already carries grace within it.” I love that! (repeat) “Self-forgiveness” he notes, “is the essential act of the HHDs.’ “I screwed up,” is difficult to say. Sometimes SOOOO difficult. But can we find that right mindset now that neither dismisses our faults too lightly (oh everyone makes mistakes) nor condemns us to shame (I am such a bad person). Instead we are called upon to see that growth will require both honesty and self-forgiveness.

As we look back, the times we slighted someone or were too cynical, hypercritical, dishonest, too self-consumed, unappreciative, – these are our opportunities for change now. Were we there for our community? Did we love our families as much as we should? There is so much to think about! We strive to see clearly and to improve.

Teshuva is usually translated repentance, but we know it also means return. Often we think of these days of teshuva in terms of trying to repent and thus return to a cleaner slate. It is as if we are erasing the shmutz (the dirt) from the chalk board of our lives. But another important conception to have in mind is that of returning to the earth. Thus teshuva in addition to being seen as being on a line of moving forward and back in righteousness can also be seen as more of a circle. In fact each person from this perspective is always moving back towards where we came from – traveling on the circumference of the circle. The question is how aware are we of that progression. We go from dust to dust.

On Yom Kippur, we rehearse for our return to the dust. In 10 days, we will cease to eat for one day. One way to think of this as a reminder that a time will come when we will never eat again. And we envision ourselves having died and needing to account for the life we lived. Whether or not we will think we stand before a Judge, we know that we will come to a time when all the adding and subtracting to the merits of our life will be done! This is our wake-up call par excellence! On Yom Kippur, we will have journeyed to the most intimate and intense day of the whole penitential season – at least it will be, if we let it be.

You may have heard this story of Alfred Nobel. Dr Alfred Nobel invented dynamite. When his older brother died, the papers got it wrong and thought that Alfred had died. So, Alfred had the unusual opportunity to read his obituary before he died! It said, “Dr Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday.” Suddenly he had an epiphany that this was not the way he wanted to be remembered! And that is when he decided to put his fortune into prizes that would reward people who helped the world.

Yom Kippur is a vacated day. We empty ourselves of our usual responsibilities. It is our day of heartbreak. We hear the melody of Kol Nidre and we vow to try to speak words of truth. The pleading melodies on this day echo our sincerest desire to atone. We feel the pain of life! And we search for healing and goodness. We strive to come close to God on this holiest day. And we work for closeness to others as we seek to forgive those who have offended us and ask for forgiveness from those we have hurt. There is no more moving day, potentially, than this.

Hungry, tired, out of energy by the end of Neila on Yom Kippur – we will have marched a very long journey to truth, resilience, healing, starting over. I

actually love this moment! There is nothing like that feeling when having spent every bit of energy on a long day of prayer, we greet each other and share in the break the fast! Having repented, we release the past and turn eagerly to the future!

What do we do with this start of a new year? We build ourselves a NEW house – the sukkah! It can be seen as the true house. As the sukkah is shaky, so is life fragile. Lew writes, “in the sukkah, a house that is open to the world, a house that freely acknowledges that it cannot be the basis of our security, we let go of the need (for security). The illusion of protection falls away, and suddenly we are flush with our life, feeling our life, following our life, doing its dance, one step after another.” Here – in the sukkah surrounded by gourds and vegetables and in the synagogue as we dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah - we are reminded to live life to the fullest. The pain of life is real, but so are its blessings. ...So we follow the heaviness of Yom Kippur with the inner, deep joy of Sukkot. May we relish life and seek to do good while we are here!

This intense period from Tisha B’Av through Sukkot is really a fractal of a pattern found throughout our life. The soul is always on this journey – tearing down walls and building them up. Always waking up to spiritual truths and then forgetting somewhat and falling back asleep. We are learning and growing and also struggling and being diminished. We can’t always live on top of the mountain, seeing everything for what it is. But we take time once a year to climb that mountain of awareness and reorient our lives to truth. On these High Holy Days may we wake up as fully as we can, that we might truly be alert and tuned in as we begin the new year. - Amen

ANTHEM- Avinu Malkeinu...

then Aleinu p. 82 Rise