

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5768
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As We Decide and Choose
So are our Lives Formed

It was the first dramatic change ever to take place, and none like it has occurred since. Adam and Eve were living peacefully, rapturously and care free in the Garden of Eden. They lacked for nothing. They were secure and safe, and wandered without fear among the animals in the Garden.

Of course, this good life was destined to end. One day they passed by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and their eyes were drawn to the most beautiful, aromatic and luscious appearing fruit. The Creator had warned them not to eat from this Tree, but their desire was strong and they couldn't resist. And so they defied the Almighty God and ate to their bellies' content.

From that moment forward nothing would be the same. God promptly exiled them from the Garden, and they lived together, east of Eden, tilling the earth, bearing and raising their children. They suffered the greatest tragedy, a nightmare beyond imagining, when their first born Cain murdered his younger brother Abel. And they grieved deeply as only parents who lose a child can do, and they recovered as best they could, and struggled to live.

After their many years of struggle, of childbirth and hard work, of loving each other, living their day to day lives, meeting challenge after challenge, hardship after hardship, success after success, each as it came to them, and after their children were grown and gone from home, Adam and Eve decided to go out, enjoy being empty nesters, relish their leisure time together, and see the world. They journeyed from one corner of the earth to the other, and they were delighted by the sights, sounds, and richness of the created world.

In the course of time they happened upon the same entrance to the Garden of Eden through which they'd been exiled so long before. Now it was guarded by an angel holding a flaming sword. As they turned away God spoke to them. They hadn't heard their Creator's voice in such a very long time. It was so familiar yet strange as well, as memories of an earlier time flooded their thoughts.

God said: "Adam and Eve, you've lived in exile these many years. The punishment I gave you is now complete. I know that along the way you've experienced highs and lows. You've lived a long time, and I've judged you worthy enough to return into My Garden."

Suddenly, the angel with the sword disappeared and the way back into the Garden was open before them.

"Come in, Adam. Come in, Eve." The Holy One beckoned.

"Wait," Adam replied. "You know, it's been so many years. Remind me, what's it like in the Garden?"

"The Garden is Paradise!" God said. "In the Garden there's no work. You need never struggle nor toil again. In the Garden there's no pain, no hardship, no suffering,

and no death. Day after day, life goes on, forever, peacefully. Come Adam. Come Eve. Return to My Garden!”

The first humans listened carefully to God’s words and tried to imagine such a life - no work; no struggle; no pain; no death; nothing left to learn; nothing more to experience; an endless life of ease.

And then Adam turned and looked at Eve, at the woman with whom he’d lived and whom he’d loved for so long, and he thought of all they’d done to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to beget and raise children, and to build their home. He read in the lines of her beautiful aging face all the challenges they’d overcome together and the joys they cherished as one. He saw in her worldly wise eyes all the laughter and the tears they’d shared.

For the first time Adam made an independent considered decision. He shook his head and said to the Compassionate One, “No, thank You, God. Thanks for the offer, but that’s not for us now. We know too much. There’s no going back to what was. Besides, we’ve come to love our lives too much to let them go and return to the Garden...Come on Eve. Let’s continue on our journey.”

And Adam and Eve deliberately chose to turn away from Paradise, and they walked on hand in hand together - and God smiled.

(Note: The above is based on the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, in the midrashic literature, and my own twist on all these stories)

And so began the drama of human existence. On the one hand we all strive for paradise, and on the other we yearn for the excitement and variety of being human. Being human, we have free will to choose. And with choice inevitably comes change. With change adaptation, and then choice again. This cycle informs us and dynamically defines our lives over and over again.

I recall so vividly the change that defined my own life as a young boy. As a child I used to go through my family photograph albums and look at my parents as children, as young adults and happy newlyweds, at my brother and me as babies and young children, and at all our extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. There were pictures of our family vacations, of spring and summer days in our backyard, at Lake Arrowhead where we often vacationed, and at the beach. They were happy times, care-free and unburdened. With my father’s death our family was forever changed, and those old photos were difficult for me to look at because of what I’d lost and knew would never be again. As a consequence of that change, I learned early in my life that we can never go back to the way things were once major events and change take place.

Like Adam and Eve, each of us has change and choice thrust upon us, and like Adam and Even we too can make choices, redefine ourselves and grow. But if we too doggedly hold onto the past, life itself stops.

Goethe said that “We must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise we harden,” and in essence die before our time. The question we should be asking ourselves during these ten days leading to Yom Kippur is, do we accept change and embrace it, or do we struggle to keep our lives and ourselves as we once were?

In this season tradition challenges us to acknowledge where we are, what needs to change, and to choose what will come next. I’ve thought a great deal about change this past year because our son Daniel graduated from college and our son David is entering his senior year of high school. Their growth will leave Barbara and me as empty nesters

next June, a dramatic bittersweet change in our family life, but something we actually look forward to despite our joy in our kids.

I've also seen so many changes in your lives, necessary inevitable changes, new marriages, new babies, new jobs and beginnings, and sadder times as well, the inevitable changes that we all know. Our first natural response to any kind of change is to try and control what's happening to us, to control the context in which this change takes place. We don't always succeed, of course. The psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl reminds us especially when we begin to feel the most powerless that "When we are no longer able to change a situation – we are challenged to change ourselves."

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay called "Circles" in which he spoke of the relentless inevitability of change:

"There are no fixtures in nature.
The universe is fluid and volatile.
Permanence is but a word of degrees...
There is no sleep, no pause, no preservation,
But all things renew, germinate and spring...
Rest, conservatism, appropriate, inertia...
They are all forms of old age...
Not the way forward...
In nature every moment is new;
the past is always swallowed...
People wish to be settled;
Only as far as they are unsettled
is there any hope for them..."

In truth, change occurs every day, but the force of our lives is to try and keep things the same. We yearn for stability and permanence, when, in fact, we know that these are illusory.

There are times when we yearn for the new, for a break with the past, for the next challenge, and the next opportunity. In the *Kabalat Shabbat* service, Psalm 96:1 reminds us of the importance of discovering newness and celebrating it in every moment: *Sheeru ladonai sheer chadash* ("Sing unto God a new song.").

There are times, of course, when change isn't easy even if we know it's necessary, even if we welcome it and even if we choose it. It's then that we're offered the opportunity to step away from our situation and find out who we are independent of what once defined us, and then choose deliberately what we're going to do next.

One of the greatest examples in Jewish tradition of the transformation of one man's character is the story of the patriarch Jacob and his encounter with his mysterious Adversary at the River Jabbok.

As a child Jacob was mild and timid, favored by his mother. Yet, Jacob had unusual spiritual capacity that his mother recognized as essential for the future leadership of the Jewish people. His twin Esau, favored by his father, was a brute, and Rachel knew he had nothing of spiritual significance to offer. Jacob was the visionary. However, in order for Jacob to become worthy to inherit the mantle of tribal leadership, he had to

grow up. He was too immature, unseasoned and self-centered. He needed to experience life's rough knocks and learn humility through struggle.

After he stole his brother's blessing as the first born and fearing his brother's wrath, he fled into exile. For the first time in his life Jacob was alone and he had to fend for himself. Happily he met the woman of his dreams, Rachel, but became subject to his father-in-law Laban who consistently mistreated, manipulated, cheated, and took advantage of him. At last, twenty years later, having grown wiser and tougher, Jacob left Laban's camp with his own family and set out on his own. However, he had one final task, to confront the brother he'd so wronged so long before.

The climax of his story came at the River Jabbok on the night before he would meet Esau and Esau's 400 man army. Jacob was justifiably terrified. He feared for his life and he wondered would Esau take vengeance and kill him the way Cain had slain his brother Abel?

There, by the river, in the darkness of night beneath a blanket of stars Jacob was alone, and there in that place he encountered a man against whom he wrestled until the dawn. Jacob's struggle with this mysterious Adversary (was he human, divine or both? The text is unclear) is a metaphor for his struggle to transcend himself and become something more than he'd ever been before, to transform his selfishness into generosity, his arrogance into humility, his egocentricity into selflessness, and his self-aggrandizement into magnanimity towards his brother.

As the dawn was breaking the Adversary blessed Jacob and conferred upon him a new name, *Yisrael* meaning "for you have struggled with God and prevailed" and you are now everything you need to be. But first, you must meet your brother and make peace with him, if Esau wills it.

When Jacob met Esau, his older brother realized that Jacob had changed, that he was a different and better man than the deceptive boy twenty years earlier. Instead of going to war, their meeting ended in an impassioned embrace. They wept and made peace.

We might think of Jacob and Esau not as actual twins, but as one being, the yin and yang of brotherhood, the dark and light sides within each person, within each of us, and within the greater Israel choosing to struggle and integrate newness and change.

Professor Joseph Epstein of Northwest University has written insightfully of the nature of choice in our lives:

"We don't choose to be born. We don't choose our parents. We don't choose our historical epoch, the country of our birth or the immediate circumstances of our upbringing. We don't, most of us, choose to die, nor do we choose the time or conditions of our death. But within all this realm of choicelessness, we do choose how we shall live: courageously or in cowardice, honorably or dishonorably, with purpose or in drift. We decide what is important and what is trivial in life. We decide that what makes us significant is either what we do or what we refuse to do. But no matter how indifferent the universe may be to our choices and decisions, these choices and decisions are ours to make. We decide. We choose. And as we decide and choose, so are our lives formed. In the end, forming our own destiny is what ambition is about."

In this season we ask ourselves this existential question: “Where am I?” But it seems that the question is as much a question of “where should I be?” Or put differently, “pay attention, because something is about to happen,” and we need to be open and embrace whatever it is and accept necessary changes that come with it.

We also need to stop our own history book for a moment to read over the events of this past year, assess whether we’ve made enough progress in abandoning the constrictions of the self for something higher, greater, better, and more meaningful all the while polishing the mirror within that reflects back our own image to us. What defines our past is what has changed. What defines us today and in the future is what we choose to do next and how we’ll progress.

Someone once said; “What we choose changes us. Who we love transforms us. How we create reshapes us. And what we do remakes us.” (Dr. Eugene S. Callender)

A story is told of a man in a hot-air balloon who suddenly realized that he was lost. He lowered the balloon enough to shout to a man on the ground, “The wind has blown me off course! Can you tell me where I am?”

The balloon can be a good metaphor for our lives. At first, all we wish to do is rise as high as we can in terms of wealth, position and prestige. Yet, as we ascend, the wind currents push us sideways. Eventually, we discover that we’re on a very different course than the one we intended, a long way from the place from which we were launched, and no closer to the end point we’d hoped to find.

What we need to understand is that our power of choice is a steering mechanism that enables us to respond to every breeze and gust. We can choose either to drift with the current or go against it. Yet, like haphazard wind currents, unplanned events beyond our control affect the direction our lives take and we need to be ready for them. In the end, what we do and become is determined by what we choose and how we embrace the new circumstances in which we find ourselves, whatever they may be. The key is for us to be attentive, to keep our eyes open, to look around, and to be certain that we’re going where we really wish to go.

In this New Year, may all our chosen paths lead us individually and as a community to live fuller, more enriched and dynamic, more loving and compassionate, graceful and blessed lives! Amen.