

Remodeling Ourselves Rosh Hashanah 5777 Rabbi Rosie Haim

As you are no doubt aware, The Temple has undergone extensive remodeling lately, and this holy day season is the big reveal! We've been blessed to reinvigorate our building at University Circle. And in Beachwood, well, it's been a long 18 months of that outdoor covered walkway which now leads us into our beautifully remodeled sanctuary with all of the other features that retain aspects from our Temple history and are strikingly contemporary. At long last, our buildings truly fulfill the imperative to be a Beit Tefilah--House of Prayer, a Beit Midrash--House of Study and a Beit Kneset--a House of Gathering, and have comfortable seats! We can feel proud that within our sanctuaries, halls and classrooms, we have exquisite remodeled spaces that testify to our heritage as a people and a congregation, and inspire us now and will continue to do so for generations to come.

Just as our Temple community undertook to remodel its physical spaces that preserve our heritage and propel us to new possibilities, so have we undergone a similar journey with the remodeling of our spiritual path. That is represented in the Machzor—the High Holy Day prayer book in our hands. When the ancient temple was destroyed, our wise sages transformed our relationship with God from animal sacrifices into sacrifices of the heart thus initiating our form of verbal prayer. While the rabbis of the first century offered unstructured, spontaneous words of petition and gratitude—known as kavana, these eventually became the fixed prayers of our tradition—referred to as keva. As my teacher of liturgy Rabbi Jacob Petowchoski so eloquently taught: “One generation’s kavana becomes the next generation’s keva.” meaning one generation’s innovation becomes the next generation’s expectation. It’s so true in many areas of our lives. The newly innovative *Mishkan HaNefesh*—literally “the Tabernacle of our Souls” encompasses our past, and honors innovation again.

Like a page of Talmud that holds many commentaries representative of several generations of thinkers, and preserves their arguments on points of law as if the proponents co-existed in time, the

pages of our machzor invite the ancient rabbis to dialogue with modern poets. While some argue God is Great, others lean more heavily on the human endeavor to make space for our spiritual journey. As with all change, this is sometimes comfortable, and sometimes requires a period of adjustment.

I'm reminded of the first time I took an Israeli friend of mine into a Reform Jewish worship service in Israel in a 1982. Our families were friends from the old country of Turkey where almost all Jews are Sephardic, and the Sephardic Jews did not experience the delineation of movements like Reform or Orthodox. Still our parents had traveled different ways, his to Israel, mine to America; and we were traveling different paths he was serving in the Israeli Navy, and I was studying to become a Reform rabbi. The Reform movement was in its infancy in Israel at that time, but it happened that just across the street from where his family lived in Ramat haSharon, a suburb of Tel Aviv, was a developing congregation that met in his high school on Friday nights. One Shabbat we walked in together, sat together, and prayed together from the Reform movement's prayer book developed for Israel, and there were several men and women leading the prayers and songs. Afterward I asked him what he thought. He said it was awkward to sit men and women together, and he felt like he was attending a literature class because the prayerbook contained poems he'd studied in school written by the poet laureates of Leah Goldberg and Yehuda Amichai; and that women leading prayers was not allowed in a synagogue. I'm happy to report that when it came time for my friend's son to become a bar-mitzvah, the Reform woman rabbi of that congregation accompanied his son on their beautiful bima, and stood watching him read from the ancient Torah and the modern prayerbook of the Reform movement; and the inspiring words of those poets are now found in our new machzor too.

Reform Judaism from its inception has sought to co-mingle the words of our rabbis and poets of every generation. Through our remodeling and expanding the liturgy of this season the voices of every generation are seamlessly integrated to inspire the spirit of our people to new heights.

With the confluence on this Rosh Hashanah of our remodeled physical spaces and expanded spiritual guide, we are pointed toward another kind of remodeling and expansion project. This one

involves our very selves. Inspired by our surroundings, we've come here to consider renovating our lives! Encouraged by the words of prayer and poetry, we're here to examine what aspects of our souls could use some restoration or a complete overhaul. We offer ourselves this majestic time, the Days of Awe, as our opportunity to imagine the possibilities for our transformation as the architects and authors of our lives.

In our Temple construction project, we asked the architects to keep the dome motif to reflect our past and tie our two buildings together. As they were building the domes in Beachwood, I'd drive in each morning to see this person standing at the apex of the dome against a beautiful Cleveland blue sky. I asked the superintendent of the project if I could go up there to see the world from that seventy foot aerial view. While he went to bat for me in their construction meeting, he reported that after some expletives about how insane an idea that would be, my request was denied! Still every time I drive in, I love the view. But I have come to realize, it is actually the view from down here looking up that is just as spectacular. We can consider what aspects of our lives need to be remodeled by taking a broad overview that may never happen, or we can begin from our down to earth perspective to take on the simple tasks.

So often we become paralyzed in our effort to change our ways by trying to take on too much. Standing beside the huge overwhelming dome, could feel like the effect of standing at Mt. Sinai when the whole of Torah was offered to us. Yet the Israelites standing at Sinai are our teachers in not letting the vastness of it all, prevent us from starting.

The Midrash, the stories of our people, instructs: When God offered the Torah to the Jewish people, rather than examine and evaluate everything contained in it, they simply proclaimed "*na-aseh, v'nishma.*" We will do, and (only after) will we come to understand." Their immediate response reflected an understanding that to succeed in this new endeavor, they needed to just get started!

We can wait to get the whole plan for remodeling ourselves organized, but the wisdom of the Jewish methodology is that one *na'aseh*-- doing one thing at a time, setting one personal goal,

focusing on making it right with one person, performing one good deed--helps us reach the *nishma*, the recognition that we have transitioned into the person we want to be.

It's like the domino effect of redecorating. We recently had to buy a new window shade, which required new fixtures to hang it, which caused us to have to paint the room and then suddenly the room was transformed into something much more beautiful and useful than we'd imagined. We can start with one change in our lives which leads to more changes, and suddenly, we have remodeled ourselves into a better family member, more attentive friend, and a greater contributor to society. Apparently, I had an unrealistic expectation to get a full overview of the world from on top of the dome, but I could certainly look from my place on the ground and reach to higher heights in my personal life.

Thinking more about our perspective from high above and down below reminds me of a bracelet that you may have seen also. It's called the Lokai. It's made up of a series of beads with one bead containing water from Mt. Everest, the highest point on earth; and another bead containing mud from the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth. It's meant to remind us that life is full of high points and low points, and that the key is to stay balanced. When we are on top of the world, to show gratitude; and when we hit our lows, we'd be wise to remember that though there are no fish in the Dead Sea, we can still float! The extremes serve to remind us "be humble! be hopeful!"

Jewish tradition has us assess our highs and lows based on a Midrash about creation. We're taught that each of us should carry two slips of paper in our pockets. When we are feeling low and devalued, we're to reach into the one pocket to take out a slip that says "For my sake was the world created." And we'll be reminded that we human beings are the high point of creation, and came into being in God's image. When we are feeling high and self-absorbed, we're to read the other slip of paper with the words: "I am but dust and ashes." This thought is meant to remind us that we are nothing in the end, and we're not even so great now. Reaching into the pocket we need in that moment, we bring balance into our lives with a keen understanding of our place in the grand scheme of things.

As we consider our place in “the grand scheme of things,” allow me to share with you one of my favorite stories from tradition: Once a queen wanted a ring inscribed with words of wisdom to help her govern wisely: words to guide her when she was sad and disappointed, and words to sustain her when she was joyful and merry. Her advisors thought long and hard until finally they found the perfect words to do both. They presented her with a simple ring on which these wise words were engraved: “*Gam zeh ya’avor, this too shall pass.*” The queen immediately understood: when things were going well and she felt joyous and content, she would consider “this too shall pass,” and would enjoy the moment even more deeply. And when she felt melancholy and saddened, she’d remember “this too shall pass” and know that things would eventually be less painful.

I once told this story at a bar-mitzvah and afterward an attorney who specialized in family law asked if he could have a copy of it to frame for his wall. He explained this way, while he left the room to copy some papers, his client would do well to get some perspective that “this too shall pass” in that moment of reconstructing a life.

It’s not always within our purview to decide what changes need to be made: things get thrust into our lives, conditions that we may or may not have seen coming. Our perspective of life can suddenly go from a high point to a low point; change from a feeling of ecstasy to a feeling of being overwhelmed, but knowing that we can remodel again, that “this too shall pass,” propels us to move forward anyway. As the architects of our lives when we access from whence we came, what we have and what we need to change, a beaded bracelet, our slips of paper, or perhaps a profound ring, remind us to remodel with an eye toward balancing our days with humility and hope.

In our Temple construction project there were an infinite number of precise measurements taken so the various materials would perfectly fit together. Our engineers relied heavily upon those old Algebra problems and Geometry theorems many of us left behind after high school to accurately calculate length, width and height measurements. It was quite different than the methodology we use to measure things in our construction projects at home. There we employ the “Jewish way”--as we

refer to it-- of placing one foot in front of another, or stretching one hands breath to the next. While our makeshift measurements are difficult to translate for engineering purposes, they have great meaning to us as we remodel our lives. The Jewish way calls upon us to transform feet measures into acts of walking the walk, and hand breadths into lending a hand whenever possible.

In his book *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*, Rabbi Harold Kushner expands on this system of measuring. He writes: "...life should be measured in three dimensions, not only length but breadth—how many people does it reach out to embrace? --and depth—what values do I stand for...?"

When it comes to length, of course Rabbi Kushner is referring to length of days. Like our Temple construction project, our lives are a kind of Race Against the Clock. Now our temple had a hard due date for this sanctuary. With each seat presenting a laborious challenge to recover and remount, I have to admit there were days I thought we'd have to begin the service with "please rise and remain standing!" Thank God we can say "and please be seated!" However, when it comes to remodeling our lives, we do not have that luxury of knowing when our clock runneth over.

In the summer Olympics there were a lot of people measuring their life accomplishments against a stop watch, but we race against the clock of time not knowing if we have to sprint because our time is short, or taking a leisurely walk with time to spare. So our efforts must be a measurement that asks not "how long is our life?" but "what have we done with our years?" As President Lincoln once said: "It's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."

While the length of our years will be carefully chiseled onto our headstone, it is the dash in between the numbers that is the true measure of our life.

Consider this poem entitled: "The Measure of a Man."

Not—"how did he die?"

But-how did he live?

Not—what did he gain?

But-- What did he give?

These are the units to measure the worth of a man, as a man, regardless of birth.

Not- What was her station?

But—Had she a heart?

And –How did she play her God-given part?

Was she ready with a word of good cheer?
To bring back a smile, to banish a tear?
Not –What was his shrine?
Nor –What was his creed?
But--Had he befriended those really in need?
Not –what did the sketch in the newspaper say?
But—How many were sorry when she passed away?

Length of our years is given meaning by the breadth of how many people we have reached out to embrace. We can measure the most fundamental way that we reach out to others by understanding the essential mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah. It is the requirement *L'shmoah shofar*—to hear the shofar. The shofar calls us to be a listening ear.

It's no coincidence that the central watchword prayer of our faith is the *Shema*—the imperative to listen! We might think that this kind of reference would be alienating to someone who is deaf. But the way a rabbi friend of mine who is deaf uses sign language for the Shema, communicates her understanding of what it truly means to hear or listen. Rather than point to her ear which she says would be senseless, she brings her hands to her temples and glides them forward employing the sign for concentrate. Our command “Listen Israel,” is transformed into “Concentrate People!” To listen is to concentrate and allow the emotions to penetrate into our mind and heart.

The cell phone company in the well-known commercial asks “Can you hear me now?” Now, in this season, the mitzvah to hear the shofar and the command of the Shema exemplify the importance of listening with our heart as a powerful force in human relationships. Doing so enables us: to cross wide expanses to remove the loneliness, to feel another person's pain, to share the joys, to feel the heartbeat of friend or even a stranger reverberate within us. In our personal remodeling plan, we measure the breadth of our reach by improving our personal sound system with a listening heart.

In Rabbi Kushner's understanding of how to measure our lives, in addition to length and breadth, he challenges us also to consider depth by asking ourselves: what values do I stand for.

As we considered the various options for every aspect of the building, we could sometimes become overwhelmed with the number of choices. You've done this in your own homes I'm sure. The color of fabric and paint samples all seem to run together especially when held up in different

light. Consider how much care we put into selecting just the right treatment for a wall—paper, paint, plain or pattern? How much the more so should we put intention into selecting the way we want to treat ourselves, and the people who matter to us, and the world around us. Each of our choices has consequences, and it is as true of the ones we make by default, or passively allow to happen. A series of decisions, even non-decisions, creates a kind of ripple effect that leads us to wonder if we really have molded our life into the one we want to own; the one we want to reveal to others; the one we want to be held accountable for before God.

As we attempt to seize control of our guiding principles and values, we can hear the echo of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who prompts us: “To be is to stand for.” With the words of our tradition before us in our prayer book, we take an inventory of our character traits. Articulating where we may have failed, we carefully consider what we stand for, and what we won’t stand for? It takes courage--a kind of moral courage to stay true to our beliefs and know when we have reached our limits.

Studies show that it’s important to know our limits and to establish boundaries in our lives. Author of *Where to Draw the Line*, Anne Katherine, informs us: “As we learn to strengthen our boundaries, we gain a clearer sense of ourselves and our relationships to others.” She concludes, “Boundaries empower us to determine how we’ll be treated by others.” And I would add: and how we will treat others and ourselves. The clearer we are about our boundaries, the more compassionate and understanding we become of other people’s boundaries. When someone’s behavior has crossed our line, this holy day season challenges us to ask: Can I forgive the offending party? Or is it crystal clear that it would be better to create more emotional space between us? The thing is, while we can design picture-perfect rooms, we live in messy relationships.

The tradition utilizes this process of setting boundaries to establish ritual fences which guard against our carelessly violating the core principles we want to hold dear. Likewise, when we establish our values fence. We can set it up to be open the way a chain fence has permeable spaces; or our boundary can be moveable like a child’s gate, put up or taken down as necessary; or it can be fixed in

cement and have permanence. Measuring our lives through the lens of our liturgy, we reflect on: what we value and are attempting to protect; what we labor to keep out, or we strive to allow in. We consider where to add stronger fencing, and determine where to remove ineffective barriers. Maybe we need to protect our family and family time a little more; maybe we need to have a more open floor plan/life plan that allows for more largess and for us to give more of our time, talent and treasure to improve the lives of others.

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg helps us to understand that some principles must be fixed as the standard by which we secure our lives. Apparently, she has decorated the walls of her chambers with the biblical injunction: “*Tzedek, Tzedek tirdoff, Justice, justice, you shall pursue.*” She writes: “The demand for justice runs through the entirety of the Jewish history and Jewish tradition.” In our efforts to remodel aspects of our life, we want to be sure that we consider also the acts of justice demanded of us!

Our *V’ahavta* prayer taken directly from the Torah and written into every service of our people commands us: “and you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.” As I say to the children in the religious school: don’t go writing anything on your walls, your parents won’t be happy! Rather, of course, we recognize this as the instruction for placing the stately mezuzah containing the guiding principles by which we want to live upon our doorposts and fences. As we casually walk into our homes, it reminds us of our family values; and as we purposefully walk out of our homes, it is there to affirm for us that we are part of a larger world. In this season, our prayerbook steers us to strengthen our moral courage so that we make decisions that protect our personal boundaries and respect our guiding principles.

In our Temple construction project there remains a long punch list of things that still need to be completed. Similarly in our personal remodeling project, we too, have a long list of areas still in need of attention. Yet we can appreciate that in these next ten days, we can chisel away at some of them, make modifications and outright changes in our effort to become a better version of ourselves.

In our remodeled sanctuaries, with our remodeled prayerbook, we dedicate this time of year to remodeling ourselves. This is the season when we use the special tools of the Jewish people to develop a new perspective on how we can achieve better balance in our life by taking into account its highs and lows. We use the special measurements to enrich not just the length of our days but the lives we touch with the values we hold dear. And in that ripple effect kind of way, changing one thing causes reverberations throughout, and then we realize that renovating ourselves we are having an impact on our family and our community, and even our society at large.

Apparently in our Temple remodeling project every time an area was completed, the city inspector came out for a walk through to make sure there were no major obstructions or safety hazards, and that the area had been renovated or built according to plan. Only then would the city issue a Certificate of Occupancy.

We received the Certificate of Occupancy for our Beachwood sanctuary just this past Friday!

We have these next ten days to remove the major obstructions in our lives and prepare ourselves for inspection by the Great Inspector on High. As we use these days for self-examination, may our remodeled selves merit the Certificate of Occupancy so that we may be inscribed for a good new year. L'shanna tova! Amen.