

## **Change or Repetition?**

When we assembled a year ago, we were not yet sure who the next President would be. Some things do change, and sometimes for the better. Yet in many ways the country still seems deeply divided, between those who want to move forward, and those who are so afraid of change that they will believe even the most outrageous rumors. It may be that, despite the best efforts of the new administration, we will remain stuck, a society paralyzed by fear rather than what America was from its beginning: a grand experiment energized by hope.

We have some signs of change. Same-sex marriage took some steps back, but mostly moved forward. It has a long way to go, but who would have thought even five years ago that we would be this far along? ...

A new President, a few changes, and some very tough going ahead. But enough about politics (for now). What about us? Are we stuck? Habit is essential – “the great flywheel of civilization,” says William James. But there are habits that drag us down, waste our time, destroy our souls. Can we change? Will this be the year?

*"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."* This is not a rabbinic statement. "The more things change, the more they remain the same" was penned in 1849 by Alphonse Karr (whoever he was -- this is the only line of his in Bartlett's). Or, as my father often used to say, "Twas ever thus." I was never quite sure, when he said that, whether it was with a sigh of resignation, or with the wisdom that comes with the longer view of age. For that matter,

I'm not sure how Koheleth (Ecclesiastes, the most nearly heretical book of the Scriptural canon) meant it either, when he insisted

Only that shall happen  
Which has happened,  
Only that occur  
Which has occurred;  
*V'ayn kol chadash tachat ha-shemesh*  
There is nothing new  
Beneath the sun!(Eccles. 1:4-9)

We read Koheleth during Sukkot, toward the end of the fall holidays. Why do we return to his bleak-sounding message after all of our determined resolutions to change for the better this year? Is there really nothing new in the New Year?

Deuteronomy has insisted, over and over through the readings of recent weeks, that there are consequences to our actions, real, measurable, and sometimes devastating. And it has also insisted that *teshuvah* is possible: return, renewal, reconciliation are in our hands. We can change. Sometimes God waits patiently, and sometimes pushes hard; expectations are very high.

Part of what Moses tries to do in the valedictory song of Ha'azinu (which will be read on Shabbat Shuvah next week) is to offer an explanation for what will go wrong in the future:

The Lord saw and was vexed  
And spurned His sons and His daughters.  
He said:  
I will hide My countenance from them,  
And see how they fare in the end.  
For they are an upside-down generation,  
Children with no faithfulness in them. [Deut. 32.19-20]

Moses suggests that God's hiddenness - *hester panim* - which comes about because of God's vexation with our disobedience, is why things seem to go wrong. Feeling God's absence can be a stark and frightening occurrence.

But if divine hiding can bring disaster, God's close attention and presence can also be unsettling:

R. Kruspedai said in the name of R. Johanan:  
Three books are opened on New Year, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are forthwith inscribed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are forthwith inscribed in the book of death; the doom of the intermediate is suspended from New Year until the Day of Atonement...

[Rosh Hashanah 16b]

The Rabbis set side by side the reality of God's judgment and condemnation - that there is such a thing our sages had no doubt - and the possibility, the necessity of change:

R. Isaac further said: Four things cancel the doom of a person, namely, charity (*tzedakah*), supplication (*tza'akah*, 'crying out'), change of name (*shinui hashem*), and change of conduct (*shinui ma'aseh*)...and some say change of place (*shinui makom*). [same page]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> •Tzedakah delivers from death (Prov. 10.2) • They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distress (Psalms 107.6) • As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah...and I will bless her and give you a son of her (Gen. 17.15) • God saw their works, and God repented of the evil which he said he would do to them and did it not (Jonah 3.10) • The Lord said to Abram, Go forth from your country...and I will make of you a great nation (Gen. 12.1,2)]

More familiar to us, and perhaps closer to our experience, is the way the Machzor puts it:

*Ut'shuvah, ut'filah, utz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zerah.*

Repentance, prayer, and tzedakah do NOT make everything OK. They do NOT make all our problems go away. They do NOT guarantee that bad things will not happen to good people, like us. But these are the practices, the fundamental orientation to life, that *ma'avirin* – put to one side, or help us get through – the *ro'a hag'zerah* – not the “evil decree” per se, but the evilness of the decree, the otherwise unbearable weight of our mistakes and shortcomings.

There is no magic bullet that makes everything fine, for ourselves or for others. But there are ways of living our lives that create a context of connection and support within which our efforts make sense and bear fruit. This is what is summarized by *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*. These are up to us.

There are changes we can make, major shifts that depend upon our decision to turn. Even the smallest degree of turning can have a major impact spanning out over the coming years. Yet there is much that pushes against change: habit, lethargy, resignation, the *yetzer hara*. Anyone who has ever decided to diet, exercise, stop smoking, stop gossiping, study more, pray with more devotion... knows how much effort even the smallest change in direction can take. Creatures of habit are we, riding what one contemporary thinker has called “the inertia groove.”

Yet every year at this time the possibility of a different direction presents itself. We are fortunate as Jews that the expectation, hope, desire, feasibility of change is embedded in our calendar. Over and

over, we arrive at the great – Nu? So? Nu? Will the new year bring just the same old, same old, or will things change? Will *we* change? Will we move toward something new? Will we allow something new, or perhaps some very ancient wisdom, to move us in a new direction – *nu*?

Consider the very word, *shanah*: It contains opposite meanings (like the word *cleave* in English – cling to; split apart).

A year represents a cycle, a circling of the earth around the sun, and its return to where it began. Thus one meaning of “*shanah*” is cycle, return, repetition.

But the same root, *sh-n-h*, also brings us the word *shinui* – change.

A *shanah* can be a repetition, as in "do it a second time [*sheni*]." Will the new year be merely a repetition of the old – old habits, old behaviors, old ideas and opinions?

Or will the new year represent the opportunity for change? We are now back where we started, but everything is different, so we really aren't back there at all. The earth is back where it was a year ago, relative to the sun; but the sun itself has moved!

So "Rosh Hashanah" could mean (etymologically, if not grammatically) "Beginning of repetition" or "Beginning of change."

Or, it could take on even a third meaning: "the beginning of instruction." Just as repetition is one way of learning, so the root *shanah* can also convey the act of teaching and learning: *v'shinantam l'vanekha*, “you shall teach them diligently to your children.” The more you study, and repeat your lessons, the smarter you become...up to a point, anyway.

The Mishnah (there's that root-word again) is the basic teaching of Rabbinic Judaism. The sages of the Mishnah are called Tannaim (which comes from the same root, sh-n-h, but in Aramaic). The Tannaim were bold and creative interpreters of the Torah, though officially they only considered themselves to be expounding and making explicit what had already been given orally to Moses at Mount Sinai. In that sense, they too-humbly called themselves repeaters.

But repetition alone is not true learning. Those who only know through repetition do not really understand. And repetition of sin is even worse. A passage in the Talmud<sup>2</sup> warns in the name of R. Huna that: "When a man commits a transgression and repeats it, it becomes to him something which is permissible." Ah, the slippery slope of rationalization!

The ideal of *v'shinantam l'vanekha* "you shall teach them diligently to your children" - is not a repetition devoted to pounding it into their heads. It is, or should be, like the Passover seder, the quintessential moment of Jewish cultural transmission, when space is opened precisely for the next generation to ask questions.

And those questions are not to be destroyed by single answers that are "fatal to the question."<sup>3</sup> Rather, they are opened further, by multiple answers, which in turn invite more discussion.

"Not system but commentary is the legitimate form through which truth is approached," says Gershom Scholem. Commentary, conversation, give and take; *shakla v'tarya* – questions and answers, back and forth.

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<sup>2</sup> Tractate Sotah (22a)

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 1969, pp. 15-16, quoted in Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, p. 281.

Judaism is a growing, changing tradition, expansive at its best, embracing, seeking, unfolding. It shapes us, and it is what we make of it. But it is not simply whatever we say it is. There is a core of teachings, of values, and at that core are questions which must be asked over and over, by each generation.

What is to be preserved, repeated, and transmitted? What ought to comprise the canon, an agreed-upon core of knowledge and tradition that everyone who participates in a culture should share? And what needs to be transformed? What new questions can be asked that might open us to a different way of seeing? And what new voices might be heard? These are questions for an individual, for a community, for a nation.

So for each of us as individuals: Will this be a year of blind repetition, or of real change? Will it be a year of change just to be different, or of constancy and renewed faithfulness? Can we, individually and together, do genuine *teshuvah* -- find ways to change for the better that connect us in a new way to the core values of our tradition? This year, and in years to come, as we cycle through time and space to return once again to where we have not been before, may we be renewed and refreshed, challenged and invigorated, and may we ask, and hear, new questions and open ourselves to old-new answers.

We have arrived once again at a point of embarkation. How shall we set forth this year? Much is beyond our control; much, but not all. The space has been opened. We are in it – now.