

Weekly Teaching

September 21, 2018

On behalf of our clergy and professional staff, thank you for sharing the High Holy Days with us.

We hope you found services meaningful, and we deeply appreciate feedback. Please take the time to fill out a brief survey about your recent High Holiday experience.

We hope that whether you attended one service or attended them all, that you will take a few minutes to complete it.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom,
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This week's teaching is an adaptation of Rabbi Chaya's Rosh Hashanah Sermon.

I am a middle child but I used to be the youngest child.

Seven years ago, I was visiting my parents for the weekend when they told me that they had news to share with me.

“You are going to be a sister again,” they told me.

To which I responded, “You’re getting another dog!?”

What else could it have been? I was in graduate school and my father was planning out his retirement.

“No,” my stepmother said. “I am pregnant!”

Just like that, my world changed for the better.

My baby sister, who just turned 6, has taught me so much about what it means to be a sister, a caregiver, a family member, a teacher and, of course, a rabbi.

My world changed for the better, but my world did change. Suddenly, I was the middle child!

For decades I had a very strong youngest child identity.

I let my older sister take the first steps in the world and then I at least attempted to learn from her successes and the places she missed the mark.

Now as an older sister myself, I have to be the one who makes the mistakes so that my little sister might learn.

There was a standing tradition that my father, stepmother and older sister were my family.

This change, having a new sister, not only strengthened the already existing relationships in our family, but brought us closer together, and opened our hearts to what a dynamic growing family could look like.

That is the fruitful relationship between tradition and change—something new that naturally grows from and strengthens something already existing.

The holidays are a time of tradition and change.

Every year, we say the same prayers, maybe even sit in the same seat in synagogue, eat the same holiday foods and see similar people at our dinner tables.

But this year is not last year.

Some new people have entered our lives: through birth, marriage, a new job, new school and other happenstance ways.

Others have left our lives: through death, ending relationships, moving and other factors of disconnection.

This year, we have our amazing new cantor, Cantor Sandy, new synagogue lay leadership and a new full-day program at the Selma Maisel Nursery School.

This summer, we also took on the new ritual of adding the names of our matriarchs to the Amidah.

Through all these changes, our core values remain the same but our identities may have shifted a little to accommodate our new normal.

I am still the same Rabbi Chaya that I was last year—but this year I gained a sister-in-law.

This year, my father sold my childhood home in New Jersey and moved to Vermont.

Tradition: I remain continually me.

Change: Sometimes what “being me” looks like is remaining true to my core identity while I evolve as new people and circumstances enter my life.

“Tradition and Change” is also the motto of the conservative movement.

In 1958, Rabbi Mordechai Waxman in the book *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism* defined tradition as following the laws related to Jewish ritual observance without considering the complication of modern life and change as completely veering off in a new direction without considering the impact on religion.

The key then is the “and” in tradition and change.

Tradition AND change, is, in the words of Rabbi Waxman “seeking to maintain the traditional patterns of Judaism, to be cautious in appraising the need for change, to be meticulous in making necessary changes and seek to create institution and a frame of mind from which a stronger Judaism might grow.”

Tradition and change is not a modern process, however, it is a Godly process that has its roots in the bible.

In the book of *Numbers*, we learn about 5 daughters who ask for the laws of inheritance to be reexamined in order to address their case.

God reveals to Moses the law of inheritance states that when a man dies his property goes to his son, and if he has no son, the property goes to the next closest male relative.

After the death of their father, Zelophehad, his 5 daughters approach Moses.

They petition for the right to inherit their father’s land so that their father’s name and legacy would not die with them.

Moses took this case upstairs to God! In the end, God decided that the plea of the daughters was just, and amended the inheritance laws in the Torah to be that in the case of a father not having a son, his daughters might inherit his property.

But the story doesn't end there.

It turns out that the tribes were not happy with this.

They argued that if a woman were to inherit her father's land, the legacy of the father and the father's land might become absorbed into a foreign tribe.

Moses took this case again to God.

God amends the law for a final time: When women are the sole inheritors of their father's property they may marry anyone that they wish, as long as that person is from the same tribe as their father so that the land can remain tribal land forever.

Rabbi Jill Zimmerman points out in her essay, "Real Change in the Torah," that all of the changes to the law were necessary and reflect the modern process of how we relate to Jewish law.

The first change only benefited the daughters but not the tribes, and the amendment demonstrates how changes sometimes require fine-tuning even after it becomes law.

God makes changes to the laws when they don't match with the lived reality of Judaism.

I think God must have read Rabbi Waxman's book!

In changing the inheritance laws, God maintained the tradition of inheritance and worked with the existing model.

God also cautiously appraised the need for change and made the necessary changes, from the mindset of growing a stronger Judaism.

This is tradition and change.

It is important to maintain perspective when thinking about the relationship between tradition and change when for some change may seem too fast or tradition too slow.

It seems like only yesterday that I was in Kindergarten. And then I was suddenly in high school. And then suddenly I was married!

It really did feel like one day I was at the store picking out a ninja turtle lunch box to take to my first day of school and the next day I was a rabbi welcoming toddlers to their first day of nursery school.

I have gone through a lot of growth and changes, but I only register the changes in my life stages as a slow, lived experience.

Watching my younger sister Hazel grow, however, gives me a new perspective.

I have watched her figure out how to eat food, put together words (and then sentences), learn how to crawl (and then run) and become a person with very strong opinions, and wants, and needs, and desires, and dreams!

It is overwhelming how much she changes in the weeks between when I get to see her.

From my perspective, she becomes a new person every few weeks.

From her perspective, this is her slow, lived experience.

The younger generations don't perceive changes in the same way that the older generations do, and that is due to perspective.

And witnessing change can sometimes be scary. It can be jarring. It can completely throw off a decades' long routine.

That is where tradition AND change come in with what Rabbi Waxman calls "vertical democracy."

He writes, "vertical democracy is recognition that it is not only the present generation which has a voice in ongoing institutions. The past and future must be allowed an equal vote."

As Conservative Jews, we take in the entire picture—thousands of years of Judaism, the weight of the knowledge of our ancestors of blessed memory and the values they held, the pressures of modernity and the needs of future generations that we can't possibly know.

All of us have a say and all of us have a stake.

This is the process of change. From generation to generation, Jews engage in the same balancing act, weighing past and future values as they act in the present.

When Rabbi Waxman edited the book *Tradition and Change* in 1958, the essays were all written by leading rabbis of the time and the generation before including Rabbis Sabato Morais, Solomon Schechter, Louis Finkelstein and Mordechai Kaplan.

Not surprisingly, there were no women included in the publication as they were not admitted into seminary for ordination until 1980.

Through decades of often difficult conversations, the rabbis of the mid-20th century addressed the question of female ordination.

In the end, they maintained the tradition of ordination.

They cautiously appraised the need for change and made necessary changes to the seminary and the movement at large all with the mindset of growing a stronger Judaism.

Of course, younger generations don't perceive changes in the same way that the older generations do, and that is due to perspective.

The toddlers here in the nursery school will simply grow up at Temple Sholom interacting from time to time with a rabbi who happens to be a woman.

It is all a matter of perspective.

Witnessing change, especially one as large as female ordination, can be scary for some, while for others it can also be slow and natural, the way things have always been.

“Tradition and Change” is also about our relationship with God.

In his book *God of Becoming and Relationship*, Rabbi Brad Artson talks about the role God plays in the process of change.

He writes: “God is not timeless and separate from creation. God is the one who offers us the best possible options for our own future and who lures us to attain the divine goals of engagement, love, compassion and justice. God uses persuasive, persistent power to allow us to intuit the optimal choice for each of us and empowers us to be able to make that choice.”

God is that process of change through which we as a community take ownership of our Judaism.

God is the permission for our community to choose the best possible options for our future that allows us to reach our goals of engagement, love, compassion and justice.

God is the choice to come to synagogue year after year and for some, week after week.

God is the choice to send your children to Hebrew school and to get a bar or bat mitzvah.

God is the choice to include the matriarchs in our Amidah, so that when we pray we reflect our linked textual tradition to all of our ancestors and our vision for the future where the full potential of both our women and men is realized.

This is Tradition and Change.

The holidays are a time of tradition, remaining continually yourself, and the process of change, remaining true to your core identity while also gaining perspective and evolving through the lens of relationship, keeping with the values of the past and working towards a better future.

Let us acknowledge that we at Temple Sholom are a part of the ancient tradition of change; a Godly tradition passed on to the ancient rabbis until now. This year, embrace changes that have come into your life and remember that you are a vital link in the tradition that goes both back to ancient times as well as into the future.

L’Shanah Tovah! A Happy, Healthy & Peaceful New Year!

Rabbi Chaya

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