

Weekly Teaching

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The following are my sermon notes for my Rosh Hashanah Day 1 sermon.

Shabbat Shalom & Chag Sameach,
Rabbi Mitch
rabbimitch@templesholom.com

L'Shanah Tovah everyone. May God grant us all a happy, healthy, and peaceful New Year.

This prayerful wish really gets to the essence of what we all most desire.

Usually more than anything else, we want happiness, health and peace.

But, we also worry. We worry about the alternatives—those things we don't desire; the alternatives that may be lurking in the shadows of our future.

Our High Holiday liturgy captures both our hopes and our worries.

In the prayers we just read, *Unetaneh Tokef*, our liturgical words stay in our minds and resonant with urgency and weight.

- *Who shall live and who shall die?*
- *Who shall rest and who shall wander?*
- *Who shall be serene and who afflicted?*

I find myself thinking about these questions a lot; but, I also have been contemplating of late a few of the less remembered lines of *Unetaneh Tokef*; they are the verses that describe last year's journey.

- *We are like a fragile vessel; like the grass that withers; the flower that fades; the shadow that passes; the cloud that vanishes; the wind that blows; the dust that floats; the dream that flies away.*

We gathered here this morning, in this sacred space during this sacred time, to contemplate three life possibilities.

We may perceive that our lives are serene.

We may perceive that our lives are chaotic.

But, most likely, we may perceive that our lives are both serene and chaotic; such being the common state of us mere mortals.

The shifts between our experiences of personal serenity and chaos are like the waves of the ocean: sometimes mild, sometimes choppy, sometimes overwhelming and sometimes even life threatening.

These waves are the markers of the journey we take throughout our lives.

Some parts of the journey are from our own choices, such as: a school we attend; a career we possess; a sacred relationship we've entered.

Some journeys are thrust upon us such as a health crisis or an accident.

Our Judaism teaches us that it's how we grow in response to the positive and negative aspects of our journey that best determines the quality of our lives.

We human beings can be thoughtful and reflective.

Our attitude towards what is happening on our journey will largely characterize our experience of life.

If we are in miserable circumstances, we are motivated to change those circumstances.

If we are content, we try to avoid restlessness.

We all seek new adventures.

We all seek opportunities to grow throughout our lives, even as we experience aging.

But today, I want to discuss the unchosen—the unwanted adventures on our journey.

This could be: an accident or an illness that hinders our abilities or our mobility; an addiction that takes over our lives; or a change in circumstance due to the loss of a marriage, a job, a loved one.

Or, it can be a simpler unwanted action your spouse or family chose, such as moving or pursuing a new hobby.

While another person in your life may have chosen the change, you find yourself needing to make room for this choice.

An unwanted change in your journey can be a real struggle, filled with inconveniences.

Or, the unwanted change can be an opportunity to grow in positive ways:

- A weight loss or fitness regime
- Preparing for a new career
- Taking a class
- Training for a marathon
- Learning to save and invest earnings
- Creating a garden
- Volunteering
- Traveling
- Fostering a child
- Even getting a dog!

All of these choices that are not made by you—but rather by your partner in life—are big changes when you're in a sacred relationship.

You may find yourself in this situation—on a journey not of your choosing!

I have found myself in unchosen, very difficult journeys such as:

- Roseanne's long battle with cancer
- Our son's very challenging health crisis
- My mother's stroke, then cancer, followed by her passing

But, as difficult as these challenges were, I think I was prepared.

Even though I was an unwilling participant, I had a better mindset.

We can't control health crises, but we can focus our energies on what the possibilities are in the situation.

We can figure out how to be as effective as possible.

These detours on our journey were difficult, unwanted detours, but illness happens—not by the choice of my loved ones.

Maybe that's why I didn't struggle as much as I thought I might.

But, this year, another unwanted detour arrived.

The change was expected.

I had prepared for it.

Roseanne and I were becoming empty-nesters in our home. Faith, our youngest child, was going off to the University of Alabama.

I knew this day would come, and I knew it would be bittersweet.

But, what was completely unknown to me was that Roseanne and I were planning to ride very different waves through this ocean of change.

I miss not having my children at home, but I knew this day had to come.

And it should come.

And, I was truthfully looking forward to this new stage:

- To be able to travel more freely
- To have time to explore new possibilities while entering this new stage of parenthood.

In my mind, I was readying myself to surf a rather gentle wave.

However, Roseanne was readying for a much different life experience.

Faith had already been away for over four months during her second semester of high school:

- Two weeks in Poland
- Then two months in Israel
- Returning for two days before she headed to Florida for an internship in Interior Design
- After that, she was due to come home for another two days before going off to be a Counselor at Camp Ramah; and then; she would not even be home 24 hours before we would have to get her to her University for the dorm check-in.

So, during this first stage of empty-nesting, Roseanne decided she wanted us to get a dog.

Now for those of you who are dog owners, you have a practical understanding of what it means to have a dog.

I, however, have never had a pet, although periodically my children had lobbied for one over the years they lived at home.

I never found the need to articulate my reasons for not wanting a dog:

- I had no life experience with a dog.
- I had a childhood history of weekly shots to help with my allergy to both dogs and cats.
- Our two sons have the same allergies.
- And for many years Faith had a real fear of both dogs and cats.

So, I believed, with absolute certainty, no dogs or cats would be in my future.

The only pet possibility I ever contemplated was a small aquarium with some fish.

So, my expectations were turned upside down when Roseanne said she wanted us to get a dog.

At first, gently and lovingly, I raised quiet objections.

For two weeks, Roseanne and I talked it over.

And, I was convinced that because of my practical objections, the dog issue had been put to rest.

Imagine my surprise when Roseanne shared some research she had done.

And, she wanted us to get a Lagotto Romagnolo, a dog that is a rare breed of a water retriever from the Romagna sub-region of Italy.

This breed is especially known for its special talent of hunting truffles.

And, before I recovered from shock, she answered all my objections:

This breed is:

- “Especially Intelligent”
- “Friendly”
- “Hypoallergenic”

I was dumbfounded!

In my non-rabbinic way—neither gentle nor quiet—I announced that I would not be comfortable in my own home if she got a dog.

I threatened to stay at work longer just to avoid this new intrusive element in our home.

This made no impression on Roseanne at all.

Then she went on: “this dog doesn’t shed and, by the way, I’ve found the perfect dog already.”

- He’s not a puppy
- He’s house trained
- He belongs to an Orthodox family in Great Neck, who unfortunately can’t keep the dog any longer
- And, his name is Mendel (which, by the way, was one of my Jewish middle names that my Bubbye, my grandmother of blessed memory, actually used to call me by)



Roseanne announced with excitement: “It seems like its B’shirt.”

But, she was only going to visit the dog and see what he was like.

Well, we all know exactly what was about to happen.

My journey changed when my unwanted dog came home five hours later wagging his tail.

Now, I know all of this might seem benign, even amusing, but having this dog was a huge change.

Mendel brought a lot of sunshine, but also some clouds.

All journeys have their challenges.

Our growth as individuals is the real journey.

It’s not:

- Our educational degree
- Our career
- Our health
- It’s not what we acquire or love
- It’s not even the dog who likes to take his morning walk an hour before we would normally wake up

The real journey of our lives is the attitude we embrace when we travel on both the wanted and unwanted parts of our journey.

And, often these parts of our journey bring us experiences of love, learning and loss.

Chosen or not chosen; our journey often brings these three tandem experiences: Love, Learning and Loss.

The new hobby, the new friend, the new pet, the new job, the new diagnosis; these all may bring both growth, and sorrow.

While we pass through life’s rose bushes, there are always thorns present:

- Pets have short life-spans
- Children grow up and move away
- Careers end or change
- Illnesses interrupt our lives and we battle through them, and hope to win and move on
- Marriages change

Changes in our journey are not as predictable and regular as the seasons, but they happen as frequently.

And, the human experience is about living through these journeys, recognizing that they all entail: love, learning and loss.

So every Rosh Hashanah we look back on our year and characterize it.

We put a bad year behind us, or relish a good year in our memories.

While we reflect on last year and our loves, our learnings and our losses, we can be mindful of the lyrics of “The Climb”.

It’s written by Jessi Alexander and Jon Mabe, and it’s performed by Miley Cyrus.

These words have resonated with me, since I heard them in 2009.

*The struggles I’m facing /
The chances I’m taking/
Sometimes might knock me down
but /
No I’m not breaking...
I may not know it /
But these are the moments
That I’m going to remember most...
It’s all about...the Climb.*

So often, we don’t realize the significance of our experiences as we live them.

We don’t process the year’s changes in our journey until later reflection.

We don’t know what we will remember, and what we will forget.

With our new dog, Mendel, I anticipated discomfort, and not wanting to be home with an animal in my house.

Yet, my initial aloofness almost magnetized Mendel to me.

I watched Mendel, and Mendel watched me, and he kept communicating with me without language:

- The wagging tail
- The perked up ears
- The soulful eyes

It all started a process of me accepting, and then enjoying this new presence in our lives.

I started giving the dog my attention with the idea that I was “being a good husband to my wife” but, really what I was doing was embracing my unwanted journey.

We lost the freedom I was relishing for Roseanne and me to travel freely.

Having a dog is not like having a child, but it is a change that adds new responsibilities.

But, we all need to acknowledge that losing freedom gracefully is an art we humans must practice.

And, as Elizabeth Bishop writes about in her poem “One Art”:

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master. So many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster.”

We all lose things.

We know when we have a family, get a pet, start a class, read a book, etc. that a life chapter comes to an end; eventually we will experience loss.

On the Jewish Heritage Trip our Temple took some time ago, we visited Prague.

One thing I especially noted was that the author, Franz Kafka, had a statue in Prague.

It turns out he was one of Prague’s most famous citizens.

My knowledge of Kafka comes from reading his short story “Metamorphosis”.

Most of us know this story—the man who turns into an insect, who definitely takes an unwanted journey.

I noticed that the statue of Kafka stands in Prague between a church and synagogue.

Looking at the statue I recalled the term “Kafkaesque”; which means, “marked by a senseless, disorienting, often menacing complexity.”

Looking at the statue, staring at both church and synagogue, reflecting on our challenging trip to Poland, Hungary; and the Czech Republic, I was somewhat disoriented.

But, beside the statue was a woman who was also a tourist.

She was a huge fan of Kafka, and she told me a story about Kafka.

At the age of 40, Kafka was in his last year of life, suffering with Tuberculosis.

He took daily walks in a park during this time, and Kafka noticed a little girl weeping because she had lost her doll.

As they looked for the lost doll Kafka comforted her.

He explained that the doll went on a journey.

The girl was doubtful, so Kafka said he knew it was true because the doll had written him a letter.

When the girl asked to see it he said he would bring it to the park tomorrow, and read it to her.

Kafka wanted the girl to feel comfortable with loss.

So that evening, he wrote a letter from the doll describing her travels, and how the doll was growing up, and going to school.

The doll writes that she loves the little girl even as she goes about living in her new world.

He writes, and reads a few more letters sharing the doll's adventures.

Kafka decides the doll will fall in love, and get married.

At the end of the last letter, the doll says a final goodbye.

Then Kafka gave the little girl a new doll, which looked different.

The new doll had a note saying her travels had changed her.

The little girl overcame her grief at losing her doll.

Many years later, as a grown woman; she found a note hidden in the crevice of the doll that says: "Everything that you love, you will eventually lose, but in the end, love will return in a different form."

After hearing this story, when I think of Kafka, I don't associate him to an insect horror association.

Instead, I think about his comforting wisdom that after loss and sorrow, love returns to us in new ways.

So even on a journey we did not chose, there's love, learning and loss. And, we can also have hope.

This New Year as we travel our life's journey, both wanted and unwanted aspects, chosen or unchosen aspects, let us greet each day and each loved one (just as my new dog now greets me when I come home) with the exuberance of unconditional love.

Let's pray to God that we might use both the welcomed and unwelcomed aspects of our life's journey so we can thrive and grow even further into the people God created us to be.

Everything that we love, we will eventually lose, but in the end, love will return to us in a different form.

L'Shanah Tovah—May God inscribe us all in the book of life for a truly happy, healthy and peaceful new year.