

“Changes”

Things are going to be changing around here.

There's been some changes.

We need to make some changes.

Some of you are sweating.

Intellectual and emotional maturity and health is in part demonstrated by one's ability to respond appropriately to change. If you cannot bend you will break when enough stress is put upon the rigid structure you have built for yourself.

Pick the most rigid, institutionalized system you know. Now let me ask you what do you think would have happened if the people responsible for that system were faced with what our community faced two thousand years ago; the destruction of the primary institution of our people. The temple, the priests, the levites—gone. If not for the bravery, wisdom and initiative of men like Yochanan Ben Zakkai and his students, and the ongoing creativity and flexibility of Rabbinical Judaism the story of Israel would be no different than that of the Picts, or the Visigoths. I suggest to you that the survival of this people is attributable primarily to two things: our ability to change, to respond; and to our

maintaining homeostasis—to literally reform ourselves. Without counter-tension, stretching becomes disintegration—this is true, and one might argue that this tells us that change must be limited or the very ‘it’ness of the thing changing is lost. A balloon changes slowly until it makes one big final change. That’s true—it ceases to be when it can no longer change. The ability to change is what keeps us growing and what keeps us from being destroyed. It is what allows us to expand—and what allows us to pull back from the breaking point. Consider the lowly balloon and it’s wisdom. Risk nothing and it is limp, truly without form or purpose. Allow it to resist the pressure you invoke upon it and it sputters and fails. Push it just a bit too far and it loses its integrity and disintegrates, or loses it’s ability to withstand a mere pinprick.

In order for a balloon to live up to it’s purpose it must be challenged, it must be able to change and it must also be managed. So too, the human soul, so too, a congregation.

Anyone who has ever spent time with four year olds fill in the blank. If I have to watch-slash-listen to-slash-read-BLANK one more time I am going to lose my mind. You’ve experienced the immature mind holding on to order, predictability and sameness.

Repetition is soothing. Knowing what’s going to happen makes toddlers, financial planners and air traffic controllers happy. Indeed, Ritual has the power to comfort. That’s the point of it. Having an order to things presents a world in order. Seder, Siddur, Jewish life is all about Laws and Order.

Comfort food is predictable. Kraft Mac and Cheese or a McDonalds, or a Friday Night Kabbalat Shabbat service here is consistent. But consistency, and predicability, are not the same as stasis.

Prices change. Menus change. Packaging changes. And if they didn't, these institutions, these constants, these things we might take as permanent fixtures in our cultural landscape would perish. Laws change. The Rule of Law endures. Change and homeostasis—without both, things fall apart, or fail to thrive, and die. Jewish law and practices have only survived because they have changed. Jewish communities that succeed and survive do so because they are able to change while retaining their particular integrity. We face challenges on both fronts to be sure, but one is a far greater danger.

I would like to tell you the story of two businesses. And neither of them sets a good example for us, so keep that in mind.

On the one hand there is the approach to change that is radical, wild, dismissive of identity or recognizable boundaries. Abercrombie and Fitch sold shotguns, fishing rods and tents. I bought a backpack and boots at Abercrombie and Fitch for my first trip to Israel in 1984. In 1988 the brand was sold to a fashion company, and the rest is creepy marketing history. For years their primary marketing message was nudity. They were selling clothes with people who didn't wear clothes. It worked.

Thirty years on, I'm thirty years past their demographic. If I walk in, they assume I'm lost on my way to the Apple Store or I'm having a midlife crisis. Either way, the fact remains that the repositioning of Abercrombie and Fitch has been wildly successful. They have nothing at all to do with the original mission, and a century after it's founding, few even remember what it once stood for and provided, but they have lots of customers. The people that originally would have been their customers have no place in the current model, though admittedly their grandchildren might. That's small comfort but it's something.

The other hand holds on white knuckling to the control yoke. It is one of absolute rigidity followed by tactics without a strategy. We can't change, or won't or fear to change, so we fizzle out, a victim of our own arrogance and self-assurance or lack thereof. Many times this approach takes the form of conflict over inconsequential details, the proverbial rearranging of the deckchairs on the Titanic.

Consider the cautionary tale of Blockbuster Video. Remember Blockbuster? In 2004, Blockbuster employed 60,000 people and had 9000 stores. It has 11 today. Blockbuster didn't change at all until it had to reduce itself to being a series of giant checkout lines filled with impulse buys and miscellany. It was hard to watch but fascinating. The grandchildren of people who were conceived during or after watching a blockbuster-rented video will have no concept of what it was like. All of it, the late-fees, be-kind-rewind-the race to get one of the only copies of Jurassic Park before someone else does—

stories as strange and foreign as those of the civil war or the middle ages. And yet too many synagogues refuse to make the changes that matter, instead throwing miscellaneous window dressings around. Sure, streaming and video on demand is the future, but let's keep renting DVDs and supplement with lots of retail merchandise.

Now, I wish to make something very clear. I don't care about teenage fashion, or how entertainment media is distributed and I really don't care about business models except where it can help me preserve and promote liberal contemporary rabbinical zionist American Judaism. And Jewish education and community building is far more important than videotapes and skinny jeans. The fact remains, however, that if we can not change how we do things and how we approach Jewish education and community building we will have a very hard time surviving.

Lucky for us, we're Jews. We are members of the single greatest changeling culture in history. Time and again, civilizations rise and fell around us and we remained both part of and distinct, expanding and contracting with the forces that surrounded us, reacting and responding to pressures from within and without, and somehow remaining in form. The Reform movement is but one example, one of my favorites, of how we adapt our Jewish living to the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves. The problem we Reform Jews face is one of maintaining homeostasis: how far can we expand without disintegrating.

To live is to change. To survive demands change. The word Shanah means Year. The word Shinui means to change. The roots are identical. There is no new year without change. The very measure of time is through observing change.

So why are we so afraid of change? Why are there people who make fantastic livings teaching and writing and coaching “change management”? Because change is painful. The very first change any of us undergo is splitting from one cell into two. Growth is literally the process of being stretched and even ripped apart while simultaneously building structures that pull us back together. At best, it is uncomfortable.

Growing pains. Cutting Teeth. The morning after the first workout. Pregnancy and labor. Health can be almost as painful as sickness or injury. Self restraint, self-discipline, self-control, these are almost as painful as the self-loathing we endure when we have had no self-restraint or self-control and must accept the consequences.

There is no stasis. You are either getting stronger or getting weaker. You are either growing intellectually or you are stagnating. You are pushing yourself to be better, more compassionate, patient, loving and open-minded or you are decaying. You are, to be sure, growing in Torah and a life centered on the mission of the Jewish people, or you are using the precious gifts God has entrusted to you serving idols and false gods that can't save you.

The beginning of God's creation is an act of separation, of pulling apart; darkness from light, night from day, the first day is born in the pain of birthing. Things are pulled apart, things pull back together, a constant state of not being what just was.

Rosh HaShana is the Rosh HaShinui—the start of the changing—for good or ill, for health or illness. For life or death. Time is change. When you are no longer able to change, you are out of time. To reach a Rosh HaShana is to have changed, and now we decide whether or not that change was for better or worse. Usually it's both.

It doesn't matter whether you want to change or not. You have no choice in the matter. The choice you can make is this: You will be active in the change, passively be carried along by time and circumstance, or stand defiant against change and slowly decay in place. There is no stasis. Things do not stay the same until you are dead.

And so when you hear people say this Temple has changed? That's neither good nor bad. But usually it's bad. Because we, for some reason, associate change with something negative. It's a childish view of the world.

When I hear that this Temple is changing? That's good. That means we're alive. And may it continue to do so for generations yet to come. Pain and all.

The entire purpose of these high holidays is to encourage us to make amends, to get back to the path of life and goodness and to foster change. You aren't supposed to stay the same year after year after year. That's the worst thing that could happen. Think about all the people in the world that are spiritually or intellectually dead. Unchanging. Rigid. Walking through life and relationships as psychological zombies. I'm sure you know people like that. The foolish consistency—the unchanging nature—of small minds. People that made their mind up because they know what they know and no amount of God defend us from such a fate. No, let the Shofar blasts rouse us from our slumber. Let fear of becoming a cautionary tale move us to seize our days. Let us willingly pull ourselves apart and reform ourselves again and again, letting the prejudices and fears and bitterness slip between the lacework tendrils of our spiritual framework, fall away and be forgotten like so much dust. Let the bonds that hold us and give us form and shape retain the light of Torah, the breath of God, the resiliency of the young palm that bends but does not break.