

“Beginning Again”

Rosh Hashanah 5779

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As we sit together in this incredible moment, the very beginning of the year five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-nine, I invite you to think about how you’re feeling right now. What kind of day are you having? As you consider that question, I want to tell you about a guy named Phil. Phil was having a BAD day. He left his comfortable life in the big city to travel for a short work trip to a not so big city. He didn’t really want to go, he felt that this particular work experience was beneath him. And, Phil wasn’t really a nice guy. He was gruff, he was sometimes rude, and he could be extremely obnoxious. His coworkers did not seem to like him too much, but that’s besides the point. When Phil arrived for his work commitment, all he could do was hope and wish that the project would end quickly so he could return home. Low and behold, a snow storm keeps him stuck in the small town with nowhere to go.

Phil goes to sleep, full of annoyance, irritated that he had one night away from his extravagant life in the major metropolitan city. He wakes up, only to discover that somehow it is the same day that he just lived! He goes through the same motions as the day before, befuddled that he is somehow reliving the same experiences.

He once again goes to sleep, ready to move on. And yet, he wakes up and repeats everything for a third time.

If you haven't guessed by now, I'm sharing the story of the much-loved 1993 film entitled "Groundhog Day," starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. While this story is a funny, sweet, and in some ways life-changing movie, it speaks to a broader issue: What would we do if we had the opportunity to do everything over again? What changes would we make in our lives to better ourselves and the world in which we live?

On the first day of this new year, a day that allows us to begin again, we recognize that Rosh Hashanah provides us with a duality of emotions. We feel joy and excitement as we start over, and we feel trepidation and a small sense of anxiety as we mull over the past year, reflecting on our decisions both good and bad. Our Machzor contains many readings and meditations that help us gain a deeper understanding of the importance of the New Year, a day that renews and rejuvenates. The very first reading, found on page 2 addresses just that. Written by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, he asks the question, "What kind of day is Rosh Hashanah?"

The sounding of the shofar, the most distinctive act associated with Rosh HaShanah, has a dual nature in the *Tanach* (Hebrew Bible). On one hand, it is a call to battle and a cry of warning. The prophet Zephaniah speaks of ‘a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress...a day of shofar and *t’ruah*’ (1:15-16). On the other hand, the shofar conveys joy and triumph, as when it is sounded to anoint a new king (I Kings 1:34) or praise God in worship, as in Psalm 98:6: ‘With trumpets and the sound of the shofar make a joyful shout before our sovereign God!’

The dual meaning of the shofar is appropriate to a day that is both solemn and festive in mood. We feel sorrow and regret as we confront our failings, countered by relief and joy as we celebrate our ability to begin again.”ⁱ

As Rabbi Waskow explains, it is indeed a joy to begin again, just as it can be difficult and sometimes sorrowful. Not every new beginning feels like a celebration, not every change, whether significant or slight feels right, but finding ways to accept these beginnings and changes will allow us to move forward with confidence, and perhaps even a sense of excitement and joy.

I am in the midst of a new beginning. One year ago, I stood on a completely different bimah, in a different city, in a different state. I spoke to different people (except for my parents who were in Rochester for Rosh Hashanah and are here today as well). I shared a sermon that spoke of change and the importance of not only accepting change but finding ways to enjoy change. While my sermon was by no means intended to prepare my congregants for the news that I would be leaving Rochester at the end of the year, it created an opportunity for everyone to reflect on how change impacts their lives as individuals and as a community, and perhaps offer a framework in which they could learn to be excited for upcoming changes.

My sermon reflected on the importance of not only accepting change but moving *with* change. I shared excerpts from the well-known “One Minute Manager” book entitled, “Who Moved My Cheese?” This short story tells the tale of 4 characters living in a maze in search of cheese. It explains that, “Everyone knows that not all change is good or even necessary. But in a world that is constantly changing, it is to our advantage to learn how to adapt and enjoy something better” (pg. 18).ⁱⁱ

Whether or not Congregation Beth Israel was prepared for significant changes this year, today we have new faces on the Bimah and in our offices. This change may be difficult for some, and for others it may be exciting. However you are feeling in this moment about so much “newness,” your feelings are valid, they are justified, and they are accepted. And, for those who find these changes to be challenging, I invite you to take a moment, sit with your discomfort, take a deep breath in, then release the tension you feel. As we know, change is constant, inevitable, and it actually doesn’t have to be so frightening!

There have also been some subtle and perhaps not so subtle changes to our services as well. This year, we chose to begin a new tradition, reading from an earlier chapter in the Book of Genesis. The story unfolds as Sarah and Abraham learn that they will become parents in their old age. As their son Isaac grows, Sarah becomes angry with Hagar, her maidservant who previously birthed a son for Abraham at her own bidding. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael out of their home and into the wild. Hagar wanders the desert, becoming increasingly distraught that her son will die in front of her own eyes. God provides them with shade and a well filled with water, and also a new beginning to their life outside of Abraham’s tent.

When we read this portion, I can't help but imagine the pain and heartache Hagar went through as she journeyed through the wilderness. Left with practically nothing, she sought shelter for her son, concerned that he would perish in the wild. In her grief, she placed Ishmael under the shade of a bush and distanced herself so that he would not hear her prayer. She said, "*Al ereh b'mot haYeled*, Don't let me see the death of the child" (Genesis 21:16). The verse continues with, "*Vateshev miNeged vaTisah et kolhah vaTeivch*, And she sat at a distance and raised her voice, and cried" (Genesis 21:16).

Before understanding the incredible moment of change in front of her, before embracing the change, and before even going with the change, Hagar had to take a short period of time to grieve what she had lost, what could have been. After Hagar paused to mourn this loss, and then another pause to ask for help, she received guidance and assistance. She began to accept this major shift in her life, and then she began to live again.

When we hear the blast of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we are presented with a sound that evokes a sense of awe and celebration, just as Rabbi Waskow described in his text.

Both Phil and Hagar heard a symbolic blast of the shofar as they each experienced an incredible moment in their lives, a moment that required significant change. Phil first heard the shofar as a call to war, a feeling that arouses fear, anxiety, and pain. He was unable to endure the constant cycle of this one terrible day, a day that he desperately wanted to end. He even attempted to kill himself in a multitude of ways so that he no longer had to experience the pain and suffering of this particular day anymore. Hagar too heard the shofar's call to war as she sustained the pain of Sarah's hatred, the pain of being forced out of her home, the pain of feeling unable to protect her child in the desert. And yet, to move beyond the pain, both Phil and Hagar took to heart Tony Robbins' well-known quote, "Change happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change." As Phil and Hagar experienced the shofar of war, they both knew that a change had to be made, whether they wanted it or not.

Consider the necessary changes Phil made to move from the place of fear and pain. He tried providing care and help to a homeless man, he tried being nicer to his coworkers, he attempted to start a love affair with a woman, but nothing seemed to work. While the reason the time loop eventually stopped was unclear, we do know that Phil had to make a concerted effort to exist in life as selfless, respectful of others, and kind. He was given an opportunity to grow and to embrace others, a chance to change himself into a more altruistic individual.

As we begin a new Hebrew year, we have the opportunity to move with these changes and to look forward to the other possibilities that lie ahead. When we hear the shofar blast, it is a raucous sound that echoes in our bodies and souls and shakes our beings. The shofar, the sound of the ram's horn vibrating with the breath of humanity enters our brains and announces that we are beginning again, and maybe this time we'll be better, maybe this time we'll be great.

Thinking once again about Hagar and Phil, the most important aspect of their new beginning ensued after each had learned that changes must come from within. Just as we learned in “Who Moved My Cheese,” “The biggest inhibitor to change lies within yourself, and that nothing gets better until you change” (p. 72).ⁱⁱⁱ Once we are able to accept changes that are either thrust upon us or something we choose for ourselves, we can accept those changes as an opportunity to begin again. Phil was essentially forced to make changes to his being so that he could eventually move on in life. Hagar learned to go with the drastic change made *for* her by Abraham and Sarah, which left a lasting and positive impact on her life. For both Phil and Hagar, the shofar blast became a call for celebration. Their new beginnings lead to growth, to joy, and to a life filled with selflessness and miracles.

As we listen to the sound of the shofar this morning reverberating around the room and into our beings, may it wake us up and call us to embrace the beginning of the year, a new beginning for us all. May it resound in our souls and remind us that change helps us to grow, to expand, to experience the world in profound and meaningful ways.

We may not have the opportunity to relive every day like Phil, and hopefully we're not being forced into a new life like Hagar, but we have the opportunity right now to begin again, to choose how we want to be present in our community and the world as a whole.

On Rosh Hashanah, we repent for the wrongdoings of the last year and make promises to be better. Through our repentance, we can begin anew, fresh and ready to take on the year, ready to bring more joy and happiness into our lives and the lives of our loved ones. As we read in Mishkan HaLev, the companion Siddur to Mishkan HaNefesh for Elul and Selichot:

Our Sages taught that the Divine Presence dwells in the midst of joy and vitality; and they saw repentance as fundamental to our joy- a gift to humanity created even before the world itself. Judaism celebrates the possibility of self-renewal; and it sanctifies the acts of soul-searching, acknowledging error, and starting again. In that spirit of joyful self-improvement we open our hearts to the Days of Awe.^{iv}

The gates are open, as are our hearts and our souls. Let us begin again, let us embrace the changes for the new year, let us become the best version of ourselves possible. In doing so, let this new beginning lead to a year of happiness and joy, of contentment and fulfillment, of wholeness and peace.

Amen and Shana Tova.

ⁱ Rabbi Arthur Waskow, in *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays* (Beacon Press, 1991), p. 12.

ⁱⁱ Johnson, Spencer, "Who Moved My Cheese?" One Minute Manager series. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, Spencer, "Who Moved My Cheese?" One Minute Manager series. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.

^{iv} Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 93