

Here we sit on Rosh Hashanah, grateful for last night's holiday dinner and the festive meals still yet to come. Laden tables, beloved family recipes, the aroma of holiday foods - all punctuate the beginning of the New Year.

Fast forward to Yom Kippur afternoon. After long morning services, some of us are lulled into an afternoon nap to avoid our hunger. Awakened from our slumber by a rumbling stomach, we wonder how much longer it will be until the fast is over. It is at this time on Yom Kippur, that we read the story of Jonah. But why wait to take a good look at the Jonah story when it has so much to teach us now on Rosh Hashanah?

Jonah, the quintessential naysayer, tries to run away from God when asked to do a mitzvah. God wants to send him to Nineveh to save a few souls, help some people do teshuvah. But he shuns God, heads for the coast and goes on a cruise, afraid to do what God asked him to do. Why was Jonah so afraid? He was afraid of failing, afraid that when he would go to Nineveh to tell people to turn back from their ways, that they would not listen to him. He wanted to avoid the pain of rejection. He wanted to play it safe. Simply put, he was afraid of change. Like so many, he opted for the sure route, gravitating towards the status quo, shutting down the possibility of transformation in himself and in others.

It is so easy to read this story as so many do... Jonah was a sinner who rebelled against God... - that's why he needed to do teshuvah. But, we know that we all have Jonah moments, but I am not necessarily referring to his sinning but rather his root resistance to change. At one point or another, like Jonah, we all dig our heels in and refuse to change or even think about change. I thought back to a time in my life, where I was a bit of a Jonah too – so sure that I wouldn't change.

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In my early twenties, I was so confident about my life path. Always wanting to be involved in performing arts, I was finishing up my undergraduate studies at UC Irvine. I was so sure about going to UCI because I wanted to be close to all four of my grandparents who lived in a nearby retirement community known as Leisure World. When one of my grandmothers passed away, my grandpa became a security guard at the entrance gate. Everyday a widow would come to the gate and bring casseroles to my grandfather. Before long, they had eloped to Las Vegas and I had a new step-grandmother, Rose Hyman.

As many of you know, I was not raised in a Jewish family, but it was with Nana Rose that I began my Jewish journey. With her extended family living just around the corner from UCI, I spent Passover seders, Shabbat dinners, and attended their family B'nai Mitzvah and my first High Holidays services with them. And with this life turn, my first significant window into a Jewish world was opened wide.

In 1987, a second window opened for me when I began to notice Nana Rose's grandson, Jeff. When we began to date, we literally could not stop talking about religion – this was a hot topic and I had so many questions for him: How did Judaism differ from the way I was raised? Why were Jews always insisting on remembering the past? Why was there so much emphasis on being a part of a tribe?

Ok. . . You might be thinking now – I wasn't even raised Jewish and now I'm a rabbi!! At that point, I had every intention of converting to Judaism and celebrating the holidays but when it came to considering a different aspect of Judaism, such as keeping kosher, I pretty much shut down. Like Jonah, I just wanted to play it safe. Why change the way I lived? I was so sure that I couldn't consider adapting the way I ate and so I dug in my heels. But my visceral reaction to the idea of keeping kosher pointed to something deeper. Change is scary, change takes effort and some of us will do what we can to avoid it. At a very deep level, we somehow expect ourselves to stay the same, just like Jonah did.

But I share my "Jonah" moment with you to highlight a question that seems relevant to this season: What is it that makes us so sure that we are never going to change? That where we are now in our spiritual lives is going to look the same in the future?

In studies conducted about people's self-perceptions, research psychologists call the resistance to believing we will change, the "end of history illusion." What do they mean by this? They mean we underestimate how much we'll change in the future. Now think about that. We underestimate how much we will change in the future. Are any of us the same people we were twenty years ago? Haven't we changed? On this Rosh Hashanah, when we are thinking about teshuvah and transformation, what if we are actually underestimating how much we will or can change in the future? What does this mean for our spiritual transformation now?

These psychologists found that people consistently underestimated how much they would change in the future. In this study, when a 30 year old was asked, "How much have you changed in the last ten years?" she'd admit, "You know, I have changed a lot." But when the same 30 year old was asked how much she thought she would change over the next ten years, she said, "I'm not going to change that much." But when she was interviewed ten years later, she did report transformation and change.

So, a 23 year old, enrolled in a Judaism 101 class would say, "I am never going to change," but when she was 33, she would reflect back and say, "Wow, I have changed a lot. I have undergone a major spiritual shift in my life path. I have found a new paradigm of living in community with others - it is incredibly meaningful to me. My life is now shaped by mitzvot, a system of deeds and action that define my relationship to God and to the world. Who would have thought, that I, sitting in class ten years ago, scoffing at the seemingly meaningless act of keeping kosher would now find in it a sacred path? I can't believe I thought I would stay the same."

Why is it that we underestimate our ability to change? According to this particular study, the psychologists think it's because believing we have reached the peak of our personal evolution makes us feel good. We have so much to lose by stepping out of our comfort zone. Why leave what we already know? We feel comfortable, like Jonah, who was sleeping soundly on the ship, even as he was fleeing from God. I was in my own comfort-zone of sorts. At that time in my life, I actually thought that by simply going to the class that I had reached the peak of my spiritual evolution. I considered myself open, progressive and accommodating to Judaism. "Give me a pat on the back, Jeff."

When the rabbis of the Talmud contemplate spiritual transformation and personal growth, they do this through a fanciful story about a fetus in the womb. Before birth, "a light" goes in the fetus' head. The fetus instantly has full spiritual vision, an ability to see and know all things and learns the entire Torah in one instant. But right before birth, an angel comes and slaps the fetus on the mouth, causing it to forget everything. This, by the way, is where we are taught the cleft on our upper lip comes from.

The fetus comes into the world and takes its first breathe, its psyche and soul are truly a clean slate. God is saying to the fetus, "You don't need all that experience. The joy in your life will be found in learning and growing and in your evolution as a human being."

While some of us may be familiar with this story, many of us are less familiar with the end of the story. Right after the angel slaps the fetus, causing it to loss all knowledge, God says to the fetus:

I adjure you – I cause you to swear - ואפילו כל - תהי צדיק ואל תהי רשע - that you will be righteous and not evil -
העולם כולו אומרים לך צדיק אתה - - והיה בעיניך כרשע - and even if others tell you that you are righteous -

see yourself as less than righteous. Hold yourself in a humble way in this world. You should always remind yourself that you are striving to be righteous, that you have not yet arrived because too much knowledge can deprive you of humility.

And then God says to the fetus: וְנִשְׁמָה שְׁנֵתָן בְּךָ טְהוֹרָה הִיא - The soul that I give you is pure. . . That's how God sends the fetus to birth, to come into the world. God's closing words couch the journey with encouragement and comfort. As you navigate this world, as you strive to be righteous as you seek to change, may you never forget that your soul is pure, that you have the potential for a new beginning.

Jonah eventually became more like the fetus and he listened to God. Thrown off the cruise ship, swallowed by a fish, he was able to break through his fear. As Jonah wrenched his soul from a deep-seated comfort zone, he was willing to risk feeling pain in order to gain something greater. This is what he realized: Just like the fetus, his soul was pure. This meant that he could put aside his resistance to change and take charge of his spiritual journey. What we really learn from the Jonah story and from the "end of history illusion" is that we're going to change, so we might as well be fully involved and fully invested in it. It is not a question of "if," but rather a question of "how."

The Torah tells us, וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת־עֵמִיתוֹ (Leviticus 25:17) - do not cheat your fellow. It turns out that the Hebrew root in Jonah's name is the same root as the verb "to cheat." The sages derive from this that we cheat ourselves, if we delude ourselves that we cannot or will not change.

But how do we do it? How do we realize the potential for new beginnings in our own lives? How do we, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th century Jewish spiritual thinker, "live our lives in radical

amazement? How do we get up in the morning and look at the world in a way in which everything is incredible?” Heschel teaches us that to be spiritual is to be amazed.

To be like the fetus coming into the world, we must do two things: First we must let go. We must let go of being right. We must let go of knowing. We are so sure we are right – right about what to think, right about what to do. Our opinions become our compass and our ideas a security blanket as we navigate our relationships. But spiritual renewal is born when we set aside our compass, fold up our security blanket. We can release the weight of our opinions when we risk not knowing and being sure of everything. When we understand that our prior knowledge and current positions are not the end game, we are freed. Let’s trade in the confidence of a Jonah moment for a little more radical amazement.

The second thing we must do is to listen. The fetus came into the world listening with open ears and an open heart. Let’s spend less time being interesting and more time being interested. Listen instead of speak, ponder instead of conclude, consider instead of staking out a position. In our Jonah moments, we rush to fill the vacuum with words. We think it will be a little less scary that way, as if words erase fear and relieve us from taking a risk for change.

Letting go and listening means that we ask: What are you doing now in your life that you never imagined you would do? What do you need to break out of in order for your self-conception to be more flexible and imaginative?

Who is hoping, who is rooting for your personal transformation? That you’ll think about the things that you want to change? Is it a sibling who is waiting for you? Is it your child? Is it a parent? Is it a colleague at the

office who has been wronged? Is it a friend who is hoping that in these ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that you'll make the approach, that you'll take the risk. Let's not cheat ourselves - we lose in the end if our lives are filled with too many Jonah moments.

And then there are the Jonah moments that we have experienced in community over this past year? There are some who feel that change is happening too fast and others who feel that change is not coming quickly enough. Have resistance and fear held us back from letting go and listening to each other? Have we sat in a meeting this year and remained fixed in our opinions and positions? Have we listened as openly as we could have? When presented with a new idea, did we run in fear like Jonah? Did we scoff at a different approach or confidently state, "That will never work?" Have we sat in services or in a class saying, "I will never do that?" Or "I can't believe he said that?" Or have we remained outside the community, saying in confidence, "I know all about that community and there is nothing there for me."

Being a part of a community means that we hold each other accountable in our Jonah moments. That we don't let our strong opinions solely shape what can be in the future. That we ask questions more than declare truths, that we challenge each other to grow, that we don't underestimate our ability to envision change. That we choose to take an active role in shaping change rather than sitting back and saying, "That will never work."

Who will figuratively "slap" us across the mouth when we need to be freed of what was? Who will remind us of the purity of our souls? That too much focus on what should be closes us off from what can be? We will do this for each other. If we don't, there will be so much lost potential. We risk becoming our own worst enemy, allowing our own roadblocks to limit us whether as individuals or as a community.

There once was a righteous man named Zusya. He died and came before God. As he reflected on his life, he thought God might ask him, "Why weren't you more like Moses? Why didn't have you have the wisdom of

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Solomon? But instead God said, "Why weren't you Zusya? Why didn't you let your barriers down, release your fear and find your true essence, Zusya? What were you waiting for? Why were always trying to be someone else?"

If Jonah had made the same choices as Zusya, his judgment day would have been very similar to Zusya's. But instead Jonah no longer let his resistance to change define him, but he defied this and moved on to do the mitzvah he was meant to do. He transformed his "Jonah" moments into action. When he was still inside the fish, he declared, "ואני בקול תודה – And I with a voice of gratitude, I will do it, God. What I promised to do, I will do."

As I wrote these words to share with you today, I was moved to write my own prayer for the New Year and I offer this prayer in closing:

רבונו של אולם , Master of the universe, I thank you for the gift of opening me up to change on a daily basis. I am grateful for a Jewish path that continually unlocks my essence and strengthens my connection to others. May I live a year in which I transform fear into spiritual growth, a year in which I release my resistance and abandon my Jonah moments for the better. Grant this for me, for my community and for Your sake." Shanah Tovah.