

## Kol Nidrei 2016

Good evening. I want to make sure everyone has a seat because I don't want anyone falling down at my next statement. I'm not going to be asking for money this evening. OK, so now, everyone can take a deep breath of relief and just let your shoulders drop a few inches.

But I am going to ask for another type of investment in our future. I'm going to ask that in the coming year, we all work on experiencing without passing judgement. On experiencing both old and new things and working hard to not decide if you like it or not. Just experience it.

When the Israelites are at Mount Sinai and God gives them the commandments, they say, "We will do and we will hear and understand." We will do this new thing—live by Your laws--and we will come to know them, to hear them, to understand them. Not "We will try it and, as we try it, we will decide if we like it." No, we will commit to doing it and learning from within the experience.

The commitment to do and then understand is brilliant because it acknowledges that people don't often do things just once or twice and come to like them or more importantly, really understand them. Particularly if it's something challenging, profound, or new.

As adults and parents, we experience this when we tell children to eat their vegetables. We know that they aren't going to necessarily like a veggie the first time. Or like their new teacher, or a new sport. But we continue to serve them vegetables and to make them go to school and stick with the team. And as they mature, vegetables become an important and enjoyable part of their diet. They grow to learn from the teacher and to develop sports skills and camaraderie. We teach our

children to do and grow into an understanding of new and different things. But we don't often give this same gift to ourselves.

A couple of years ago, when I started a new job that's near the JCC in San Francisco, I decided I was going to bicycle to work. So, I got out my 34-year old bike and began riding over the Golden Gate Bridge and up Presidio Boulevard to my office. Never in the history of bicycling has there been that much internal kvetching and whining. And it was the same the next day, and the next day. To say that I dreaded the ride is an understatement. But I decided that I would ride for 100 days and then decide if I wanted to continue. A confession here: I did buy a new bike—it's amazing how much bike technology has changed in three decades. Slowly over time, there were days when I actually enjoyed parts of the ride.

I figured I was a pretty accomplished rider—I'd ridden almost 5,000 miles across the US in my 30s so what would be new to learn in this 5 mile ride? Between racing and touring, it didn't even occur to me that there were new things to learn and enjoy about biking.

But I did find new things. I learned to love leaning into turns with an abandon I hadn't previously had. I've learned to listen to my knees and get off and walk when the whining gets too loud. I haven't however quite yet learned to love the tourists riding across the Bridge holding selfie sticks, but I'm working on that.

But now, at the end of the day, even if there are hordes of tourists on the Bridge and there's a headwind no matter what direction I'm riding, I remember that I get to ride over the Golden Gate Bridge. People travel thousands of miles to walk

or ride across this bridge. What a gift that 100 day commitment was to myself.

To do and to understand is a not “try it, you’ll like it.” It’s do it and give yourself the gift of learning from **within** an experience. Not from the edge of the experience but really from within the experience, from where it is often difficult and uncomfortable and confusing. And let’s be honest, that’s really hard. The pull to stop experiencing and start judging is so strong.

The need to do and then understand is as true for us as Jews today as it was at Mount Sinai. Ever since Sinai, the practice of Judaism has been changing. We don’t practice Judaism the way our ancestors did—neither as they did in ancient times nor even as our parents and grandparents did. And how many of us with grown children can say that our children are living and practicing a Judaism just like we did at their age? Judaism is resilient—we won’t destroy it by adapting and evolving. But if we don’t welcome and struggle with change, we are dooming Judaism.

Do each of us see **ourselves** personally as participants in this inevitable and crucial change? Or do we feel that the responsibility to be open to and create change is for those who came before us and for those who are following us? Are we personally hesitant and resistant to being part of this evolution? If we aren’t willing to do and then understand, is that stopping us from being part of the necessary evolution of Jewish communal and spiritual life?

A member recently told me about his childhood synagogue in Chicago. It was large and thriving. It had an active youth group, Friday night and Shabbat morning services. Most of his memories from his youth center on this exciting synagogue.

Fast forward just 20 years. This synagogue is no longer in existence. Here’s a synagogue that was incredibly vibrant just a few decades ago, everything apparently was working well. But the environment changed and the synagogue didn’t evolve to meet these changes.

Evolution isn’t a drive towards perfection. It’s change driven by the need to survive in an ever changing environment. And since environments—physical, social, cultural—constantly change, evolution must always be occurring. Or the organization will die. Think of that vibrant synagogue in Chicago. If membership doesn’t take responsibility for evolution, a synagogue is destined to become irrelevant.

So, I want to encourage us all to do and come to understand. Not just with regard to our Judaism but in many parts of our lives. Be willing to be uncomfortable. Be willing to experience and actively resist passing judgement. Consider an experience from other people’s perspective. Guide yourself in this as you would guide a child—stay open and inquisitive and grateful.

And with regard to our synagogue and the Judaism we practice and live together, “do and come to understand” so that we can all actively participate in our ancestors’ legacy to us—be part of Judaism’s evolution that only makes our tradition richer and more resilient. What better gift could we give to those who will come after us?

L’shana tova.