

Shanah Tovah.

Fear is in the headlines a lot these days. Artist Phillip Niemeyer recently published an op-ed called "[100 Years of Fears](#)," with a little graphic and a heading for the major cultural fear of each year. Here are a few:

1921 - Reds

1924 – Immigrants

1929 – Tomorrow

1934 - Hunger

1943 - Evil Germans

1957 - Pelvises (as in "Elvis")

1967 - Hippies

1991 - Serial killers

1999 - the year 2000

2001 - Flying

2002 - Everything

2014 - ISIS & Ebola - fear itself

And you could fill in your own heading for 2018. But we don't have to look to the world stage to fear the changes in our county or our town. We even fear changes within the Jewish community. What will Judaism look like for those who come after us?

In our own lives, we fear losing a parent, or transitioning from a lifelong career to an uncertain future. We ask, "Will I be able to face what will come next?"

Gandhi brilliantly said, "The enemy is fear. We think it is hate; but it is fear."

No one wants to fear, but we do, even though we know it blocks spiritual growth and happiness.

But perhaps the biggest fear of all is the fear of change itself. When I like the way things are, I want them to stay that way. Period. It is comfortable, it feels good. And not only that – when you have invested a lot of time and effort into creating and nurturing a certain existence, a certain life that you are proud of having created, why would you want it to change?

But really, the scariest thing about change, is risking rejection from others, of what I value and cherish. **What does it feel like, when those who come after you, don't value and cherish what you did? When they make different choices, rejecting what you hold so dear?**

On this Rosh Hashanah, we linger on *zikhronot*, the value of remembering. We reflect on what we remember, how we remember. What happens when our memory is at odds with the memory of someone we care about? When we can't vision the future together, because we can't agree on the values of the past and the present?

There is no one who knew this better than Moses: Moses, who poured his heart and soul into leading the Israelites and into serving God. He invested his whole

life in guiding our people. He thought he really knew what God wanted, understanding it fully, in his kishkes.

Moses dies, goes up to heaven. He sees the letters of the Torah that he received from God and gave to the Jewish people. Each letter had been perfectly formed accordingly to God's instructions. But now, he looks at the tzadee, that he had worked so hard on, and he sees God affix a crown to the letter. But wasn't the letter tzadee, perfect the way it was? What was God doing to Moses' letters?

Moses, sees his whole life before his eyes, made worthless by future generations. How could God allow things to be different? Wasn't Torah eternal? How could God do this to him? He had been such a faithful servant and had given his whole life to guiding the Jewish people.

Moses says, "God, what's going on? Why are you attaching these things to our letters?"

God says, "Moses, they are crowns. In the future, people will build and expand the holy text that you received. A man named Akiva ben Yosef will be a wonderful teacher to thousands of students. His lessons and insights will crown your words. People will learn our laws and build upon them, interpreting them for the times, making sure they will last."

Moses says, "Show me, God. I want to see this. "

God takes Moses down to the beit midrash of Rabbi Akiva. Moses was confused. The students were learning a law that he didn't recognize. What had become of his teaching?

A student of Rabbi Akiva's says, "Rabbi, how do we know we are supposed to do it this way? Where does this law come from?"

Akiva responds, "We learn this from the Torah. It was given to Moses at Mount Sinai and was passed down to us. It is our job to learn and expand it."

Everything was rooted in those words given from God. And the law grew. Judaism grew through the ages.

But in the beginning of this midrash, Moses could not envision how Judaism could be passed on to future generations and yet, look different from his own perception of it. It was only when he descended from heaven down to Rabbi Akiva's beit midrash and heard his own name referenced that he got it, that he could release his own fear of change and see his incapacity to fully see the future.

Moses' question is our question: Does change have to be so hard, so disorienting? And when change comes, do we feel so invalidated by it? Or even violated by it?

I deeply identify with the feeling of being disoriented by change, afraid of what will be, fearful of not knowing what the future looks like. I understand what Larry David says, "I don't like to be out of my comfort zone, which is about a half-inch wide."

Moses' reaction to change was centered on the transmission of Torah. My reaction to change is centered on prayer. What happens when prayer as I have meaningfully experienced it, is no longer a part of my life? When I feel threatened by the way in which others pray, because I miss what I no longer have?

When I first moved to Marin, many people would ask me, "Do you miss your old synagogue in LA?"

Given that I was new to Kol Shofar, I didn't exactly feel comfortable being totally honest about this. After all, if the new rabbi misses her old pulpit too much, does the new congregation feel like: "What are we? Chopped liver?" or "She is not really happy here – is she going to leave?"

But I did miss my old synagogue. I missed how we prayed, when we prayed, the melodies we used – well, pretty much everything. To be frank, I walked around in a bit of shock for quite a while: just because everything was different here. And much of the time, I resented those differences. I wanted *to make things the way they used to be*. I was living out the age-old struggle - the reality of the world as it is and my desire to have the world as it should be, according to me. As Leo Tolstoy said, "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing one's self." Changing myself was off the table – I was going to try to change everything around me!

It's been 6 plus years since I moved to Marin – and people don't ask me as much if I still miss LA. And, now I can look back and see how my desire for things to

be the way they always were, paralyzed me and kept me from seeing what could be. It kept me heart from softening, it blocked the compassion for myself, for my having moved away from a community I loved. It kept me from embracing the present. My challenge was: Could I draw on my past with confidence, without staying mired in “how things were?” Could I move to bearing witnessing to my community instead of trying to define it?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us that “Israel is not a people of definers, but a people of witnesses.” [He is also, by the way, the person who wanted to do away with surveys about the Jewish community – another way in which we seek to constantly define who we are, which can be a distraction to bearing witness]. We are often fooled into thinking that living Jewishly, means thinking about ideas about God or spiritual life, but it is really about bearing witness. We Jews like to live in our head – we are intellectual, we are problem-solvers, we have opinions. But witnessing? Well, to many of us that sounds downright Christian, passive really.

But here Heschel challenges us to open our hearts and give our brains a rest. Can we move to bearing witness in our community instead of trying to define it?

When I feel that fear that Moses felt when he saw the crowns attached to the letters, I remember this: to adopt the open-hearted posture of a learner. This helps me bear witness and restrain my tendency to offer immediate analyses and solutions. Because of grappling with this, I am now a happier rabbi and a happier Jew.

A few weeks ago, I had a very interesting conversation with a congregant, (whom I will call Leah), who shared with me her feeling about changes in our prayer experience here at Kol Shofar, specifically around the Shabbat Sit meditation that takes place in another room, at the same time as the end the Torah service and the final Musaf service in this room. About 40% of our congregation, on any given Shabbat, leaves to participate in the Sit.

Leah shared with me how sad she feels when this room is not as full after people leave for the Sit. She wonders, "Why do these people leave?" What is it that they find so meaningful about sitting in silence in another room?" Why can't the Sit happen at another time?" And, "Why don't they like the Musaf service?"

These are all great questions. We may have felt these types of questions bubble up inside of us when there is change. But I think the existential question (and I shared this with Leah) is: **What does it mean for me, when others don't cherish what I do? When they make different choices? When it feels like they reject what I value?**

My heart goes out to Leah, because it is not easy to face these questions. And yet, facing these questions is a part of zikhronot, of memory and remembering. Facing these questions is a part of being present, being sure not to miss the opportunity to witness, to adopt that open-hearted posture of the learner.

When I feel these questions bubble up inside of me, I remember Heschel's words, reminding me to witness instead of define, to listen instead of to opine, to watch instead of tackle, And I don't know what the future of prayer will be for me or this community, but I do know that my faith, trust and courage are the tools I

take with me into the future. This is what has helped me helped me to evolve and grow in ways that are challenging but are ultimately rewarding.

I conclude today with words of the British writer David Whyte who says:

We can never know in the beginning, in giving ourselves to a person, to a work, to a marriage or to a cause, exactly what kind of love we are involved with.

When we demand a certain specific kind of reciprocation before the revelation has flowered completely, we find ourselves disappointed and bereaved, and in that grief, may miss the particular form of love that is actually possible but that did not meet our initial and too specific expectations.

As we look to the new year of 5779, may we see change as an invitation into a deeper and as yet, unrecognizable form of affection and meaning. Like Moses, may we see this approach is a fruitful way to overcome our personal list of 100 years of fears.

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