

Rabbi Gail Swedroe  
Congregation Agudas Achim  
Kol Nidre 5782 – To a Good Change

For the past few weeks, we have been wishing each other a shanah tovah, a good year. Even after Rosh Hashanah, when many may switch to or include the greeting “G’mar Hatimah Tovah” – may you have a good sealing: in the book of life, health, prosperity, and so on, so many continue to also say shanah tovah. Yes, “shanah tovah” is a bit less of a mouthful than “g’mar hatimah tovah”, but it also seems appropriate to continue saying this week in its own way.

The word “shanah”, means year. And yet, the Hebrew root for this word, shin, nun, heh is also the same root as the verb L’shanot- to change, to do things differently and better -which is certainly a theme of the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Doing things better is indeed important, but what has been resonating for me even more lately, is doing things differently not to be better but because the old ways just aren’t an option. Or don’t feel safe. Or don’t have meaning in the same way because the context has changed so drastically. And while the need to be creative is sometimes exhilarating, after awhile, it’s exhausting. It is hard to feel that progress is being made when one feels the need to constantly reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

Much of the American myth teaches that our lives are to follow an ascending path both from generation to generation and within our own lives as well. And so when that narrative is disrupted – whether by external factors or through decisions of our own choosing, it can feel as

though we have massively failed or at least that we should be having a bit of a pity party because things are not going the way they are supposed to – whatever that means.

But this is largely related to the fact that our collective understanding of time has changed. Our ancestors didn't understand time as being linear but rather based on natural time – seasonal, cyclical. It's what our Torah reading cycle is based upon – knowing that even if we've done something before, that we are no longer the same person each year and so there are new lessons that we can glean from our sacred texts. It is how our holiday celebrations are based and why we are on a modified lunar calendar – following the sun is much more abstract than the visual representation of the moon each month. And in this way, as Bruce Feiler writes in his book Life is in the Transitions, “there was virtually no sense of chronology in the ancient world, of history, of one life even influencing the next. Instead, most cultures believed that humans followed a preexisting circle of life...In this cyclical worldview, the highest form of living was not to forge your own path- to be the hero of your own story- but to reexperience what already happened- to replicate the universal story.”

When we think of time as being cyclical, things improving or going up over time seem like a non sequitur. If anything, this model of time and experience would reinforce an understanding that changing one's circumstances or ways of being in the world would require a real force of effort. It supports the idea that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, and why it is hard to break free from established patterns – even when the circumstances have changed and these patterns no longer make sense or perhaps even no longer serve us. It explains why the concept of teshuvah, of turning inward and doing things differently, is connected to the holiest days of the year – because it is hard.

While it can certainly be helpful to have a sense of what one might experience next in life, one lesson that I, at least, seem to repeatedly learn, is that we are never really sure of what the future holds. This is really hard for someone who likes lists and spreadsheets and schedules, which is probably why I keep needing to relearn it. And so, in this paradigm, planning our lives around what **should** happen is not nearly as helpful as planning our lives around what **could** happen. When we live our lives based on the idea of “should,” we start following external cues rather than internal ones – eating when the clock says it’s time to eat rather than when we are hungry (a phenomenon I hadn’t really considered as being unique to the modern world), starting a family because we are of a certain age or feeling badly that we are not starting a family because we are of a certain age, thinking we are stuck in a particular life trajectory or career path because we’ve already taken so many steps forward in that direction when there are many examples of people who have successfully made a shift once they were already rather far-travelled down a particular path. In our own tradition, Rabbi Akiva didn’t begin to learn the alef bet, let alone texts until he was 40 years old and yet he went on to be one of our most esteemed commentators. But lest the Talmud not be as convincing of an example, in pop culture, Harrison Ford was a carpenter in his 30s and Julia Child wasn’t a famous chef until she was 50, having worked in the precursor to the CIA previously.

Even the ways in which we consider grief in the modern era, has taken on a linear approach, with the mourner being told that they will experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance in a particular order. And this set order even emphasizes that there is always a positive trajectory, ending with acceptance. While this ground breaking theory was heralded when it first came out, we rarely discuss that the creator of the model, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, has since retracted her original theory. Dr. Kubler Ross, well-known for articulating

the 5 stages of grief, has said that she no longer believes these emotions are linear – rather, she now says they are cyclical- people experience them in all different orders, never experience some and experience others multiple times – even going “backwards” after having reached a point of acceptance.

And yet this newer approach is not as well known or as often cited because it spoils the myth that we are constantly moving forward.

The need to constantly move forward is not reasonable. Which is probably why when we try to do it, it is exhausting. It’s also why our tradition has built in systems to push pause. Weekly with Shabbat. Every harvest season with chagim (Sukkot in the fall, Passover in the spring, Shavuot in the summer). Every 7 years with the shemittah year – which began on Rosh Hashanah this year- where humans are commanded to let the land lie fallow and rest. Which also means that **we** must rest from our planting and harvesting.

We know that Judaism does not give rules in a vacuum. Whenever the rabbis would say “don’t do this” it was because people were doing that thing. Just like you never hear a lifeguard yell “Walk!” at a pool unless someone is running. No one said that pausing or taking a detour from an upward trajectory would be easy – whether it was intentional or involuntary. And so our tradition put a system into place to support these vital interruptions for when we feel the need to keep pushing forward.

The scientific phenomenon “The Butterfly Effect,” popularized by Edward Lorenz in 1961 at MIT, is considered to be the origin of viewing life as a non-linear experience. As those who participate in our Shabbat morning services know from our resident meteorologist, Bob Rose, weather is not regular or periodic. Tiny influences on one part of the system can transform

the outcome in others. It can be disconcerting to think of life as random as Lorenz's 1972 paper posited: "Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?" But again, who said that a linear view point was ever accurate? Nonlinearity, as Bruce Feiler further explains in Life is in the Transitions, is why we feel so overwhelmed all the time. "Trained to expect that our lives will unfold in a predictable series of stately life chapters, we're confused when those chapters come faster and faster, frequently out of order, often one on top of the other. But the reality is: We're all the clouds floating over the horizon, the swirl of cream in the coffee, the jagged dash of lightning. And we're not aberrations because of this; we're just like everything else."

So how do we cope with life when our attempts to see it as one logical step after the other not only prove to be untrue, but actually can be harmful to our ability to be resilient when we face adversity? And more than just coping, how can we thrive?

(From <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>) Psychologists Dr. Marshall Duke and Dr. Robyn Fivush studied the role of family narrative in children's emotional health. They found that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale, consisting of 20 questions including: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that

happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth? turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

Two months after their study, was Sept. 11, 2001. As citizens, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush were horrified like everyone else, but as psychologists, they knew they had been given a rare opportunity: though the families they studied had not been directly affected by the events, all the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time. The researchers went back and reassessed the children.

“Once again,” Dr. Duke said, “the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress.”

Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?

“The answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family,” Dr. Duke said. There were three archetype narratives that emerged:

First, the ascending family narrative: “Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you. ...”

Second is the descending narrative: “Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything.”

“The most healthful narrative,” Dr. Duke continued, “is the third one. It’s called the oscillating family narrative:

‘Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.’ ”

Being part of a larger family, knowing that there have been good and bad times, bad times and good times – seeing a larger picture of life as an example that things are not linear so that when we too experience ups and downs, that we can see the unpredictability of life not as something to be afraid of but just as something that is – knowing that we are part of something bigger and have people to turn to, who can say they’ve been there before.

As I mentioned before, one of the quintessential ways Judaism demonstrates the idea of a cyclical lived experience, is through the annual cycle of Torah readings. We recognize that we are part of a larger narrative and therefore have similar lessons that we can benefit from relearning each year at particular times. In this vein, I’ve always wondered why we celebrate the reading of the Torah a few weeks **after** the High Holydays.

Wouldn’t it make sense to begin the Torah reading cycle, with its narrative of creation on Rosh Hashanah, which we understand to be the birthday of the world?

Instead, on Rosh Hashanah we read about Abraham and Sarah finding out after years of struggle that they would finally have a child, only for Abraham to come this close to sacrificing

that child, and of a handmaid, Hagar, being kicked out of her home only to be told that her son would be the father of a nation. And on the Shabbats surrounding Yom Kippur, we read of how Moses, the greatest prophet of our people is unable to accompany the people to whom he has dedicated his life as they enter into the Promised Land. Perhaps, these Torah readings are placed here in our lifecycles and holiday cycles specifically in order to show us that each of us here is part of a larger family that has experienced more than its share of ups and downs. Perhaps, it is just when we are reflecting on our lives and how we have treated each other and how has the year treated us – our health, our business, our loved ones, our hearts- that we are reminded that we come from a long line (no pun intended) of people who have experienced life in a non-linear way. And sometimes it was okay and sometimes it was really rough. And yet, we still remember them. We still say that their lives mattered.

Yom Kippur is all about teshuvah, of turning. It is not about moving forward or praying that we find a way to move forward. It is about knowing that our lives are cyclical – that eventually we will return to the same place. And when we do, are we able to make a shinui, a shanah, a change, and act differently than we did the last time we were there? What do you want to change for 5782? How do you plan to live your life differently than you did last year – regardless of what circumstances you might find yourself in? For the part that you can affect – how will you be different?

And as we reflect on these changes that we want to bring into our lives, may we feel supported in knowing that we are part of a larger community to help us, to hold us accountable, to travel with us on our non-linear, winding journey.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah. And just for good measure, may we each have a Shanah Tovah.