

Constancy of Change

Sermon for Erev Rosh HaShanah, 5775

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I wanted to be ready to download IOS 8—the new operating system on the iPhone; I’m what tech geeks call “an early adopter.” I went to download it, and I got this horrifying error message: “this update cannot be installed because it requires at least 6.8 gigabytes of storage.”

What? 6.8 gigabytes of storage? I looked it up. 6.8 gigabytes is approximately one million, seven hundred and fifty thousand times more memory than the computer on the Apollo 11 spacecraft had on it. So let me get this straight. We can get a man to the moon and back with 4 kilobytes of memory, but I can’t download IOS 8?

But I really WANT IOS 8. I looked it up! I hear it’s super cool! You can do slow motion videos! IOS 7 is just so LAST YEAR!

So what do I need to do to make room on this phone to make 6.8 gigabytes of memory? I looked it up, and all the websites agree. The most important thing I can do is to download all the pictures on my phone to my computer, and then delete them from my phone. So I did.

I plugged my phone in to my computer, and it pleasantly asked me: “do you want to import 829 pictures?” (I bet my computer is much more pleasant than Neil Armstrong’s ever was). I clicked, “why yes, I do.” And off it went.

It was pretty amazing. I could watch an entire YEAR of pictures download in a few minutes. Each photo appeared on my computer screen for a split second as it imported itself magically on to my computer. I bet the Apollo 11 spacecraft couldn’t do that. It was kind of a remarkable, overwhelming review of the last 12 months or so since I got my iPhone 5s after last Yom Kippur—my iPhone 4s simply wouldn’t do anymore. In the three minutes or so it took to view all those pictures, I felt a huge rush of emotions wash over me. It was like I could see my whole life, at least the last Jewish year of it—flash before my eyes. But it went too fast. And so, when the importing was done, I turned off my phone and started to review my year in this unique way. And, at the risk of (slightly) embarrassing some people I love very much, here are a few moments from the life of one blessed husband, dad, Jew, rabbi living in northwest Bergen county.

A trip to Israel with my son and synagogue.

A winter hike with my boys.

A family retreat.

Mourning the death of an 8 year old.

Snowmen.

Painting a bathroom with my boys as a surprise to an Elyssa on vacation.

Birthdays.

Young men in my house with super long hair.

Meeting Senator Cory Booker accidentally while lobbying in Washington, D.C. with a bunch of BHSS 10th graders.

Ari in the driver's seat for the first time.

Meeting the CEO of a gun company.

Young men in my house with very short hair.

A beautiful seder table.

Vacation with my family.

Paddleboating with Cantor Perper, Rabbi Kirzane, Rebecca, Iris, and Lisa.

A U2 cover band.

Me with NO hair.

Sending my son off to a trip of a lifetime/war zone.

A selfie with my bride of 22 years.

Kayaking with my mom.

Sunset on Lake Michigan.

Getting Harold Baines's autograph.

Braces.

Baking challah with homebound congregants.

A selfie of the men in my house sent to the hospital bed of the woman of my house.

How do you measure, measure a year... In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee; in inches, in miles, in laughter in strife...

In my case, one way to measure a year in my life was with 829 pictures.

The story is told of a poor man who came from Europe to America. In time, he married, had a family, became wealthy and well known. As he stood under the *huppa*, the wedding canopy of his youngest daughter, he began to call out in Yiddish – *gib mir a naygel*. His guests thought he had gone crazy and tried to calm him. Still, he called out – *gib mir a naygel, gib mir a naygel*. “Give me a nail!” Finally, he explained.

“Life,” he said, “is like a wheel, a wheel that forever turns. Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down. When I came from Europe I was at rock bottom. But now, as I marry off my youngest child I am at the top of the world. As much as I'm enjoying the moment, I recognize the inevitability that the wheel will not remain at the top – it will one day descend. And so, I call out, *gib mir a naygel*, and let me take it and drive it into the wheel, so that it never moves – so that it remains at its greatest height.”

Each of us in this sanctuary has a photo stream of 5774. You may not feel the obsessive need I did to download all your pictures and review them one by one. But you've got a photo stream in your mind. It's filled with memories of your year—good ones, bad ones, happy ones, sad ones, memories you want to cherish forever, and moments you wish you could forget. I think it's why we want to take pictures, keep pictures, download and archive pictures—because we want to hold on to sacred moments—moments we want to drive a nail through to keep the wheel from turning.

So I'd like to ask you tonight: If I could give you a time-warping nail, what moment in this past year would you drive a nail through, in hopes of freezing it for the moment? Even though you know in your wise mind that you can't stop time, and you can't go back and change the course of events, I'd like for you to find a person in this sanctuary that you do not know. You might need to move from your seat in order to do this. Find someone you don't know. Introduce yourself; tell them where you're from. And take a minute or two each to tell the other a story. If I were going to stop the wheel of my life for just a moment from the year now past: THIS is where I'd drive the nail. If I were going to press pause and replay a minute or an hour from the last year: THIS is where I'd like to stop and really take it all in. Ready, go.

If only we could drive the nail, stop the wheel in those moments. It's as if we believe that the best moments are behind us, and believe they'll never come again. At the same time we're afraid of the speed of the wheel, it's like we're simultaneously afraid that it's slowing down! And yet, when I look back on a year's worth of pictures, I'm amazed how much has changed, for myself, for my family, for the congregation. How can we feel both things at the same time- that the wheel is speeding up and slowing down, simultaneously?

I recently watched a talk on the internet called *The Psychology of Your Future Self* that explores how much people change over time – and how little people think they will change. The presenter, Dan Gilbert, a Harvard psychologist, notes, “Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished.”

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Gilbert, also the author of a brilliant book called *Stumbling on Happiness*, argues that we have a fundamental misconception about the power of time. Each of us knows that the rate of change slows over the human lifespan—that our children seem to change by the minute, while our parents seem to change by the year. Gilbert's question is: what is the magical point in life when change suddenly goes from a gallop to a crawl? Is it the teenage years? Is it middle age? Is it when we get old, whatever that means? The answer, it turns out, for most people, is right now, whenever right now happens to be.

Gilbert convincingly argues that all of us, regardless of what age we are, are walking around with an illusion, an illusion that history—our personal history, has just come to an end, that we have just recently become the people we were always meant to be, and will be for the rest of our lives.

How did Gilbert learn this? Well, he asked thousands of people about their values. He asked half of them to predict how much their values would change in the next ten years, and the others to tell researchers how much their values had changed in the last 10 years. This study allowed Gilbert to compare the predictions of people, say, 18 years old, to the reports of people who were 28, and do that kind of analysis throughout the lifespan.

If you think that change slows as we age, you're right. And, at the same time, you're wrong, because it doesn't slow nearly as much as you think. At every age from 18 to 68, people vastly underestimated how much change they would experience over the next 10 years. Gilbert calls

this the “end of history illusion.” To give you an idea of the magnitude of this effect, Gilbert shares a scientific study. When researchers asked 18 year olds to predict how much they think their values are going to change in the next 10 years, and when those same researchers asked 50 year olds how much their values ACTUALLY changed since they were 40, a remarkable thing happened in the data results. The 18 year olds vastly underestimated how much their values would change before they turned 28, whereas the 50 year olds were surprised how much their values had changed in the past 10 years.

This phenomenon doesn't only work with values. When half of the people in a study were asked how much they think their personality would change in the next ten years, and the other half were asked how much their personalities actually had, the latter group clearly stated that they had changed much more than the former group predicted they would.

And this doesn't work just with ephemeral things like values and personality. Ask people about their likes and dislikes, their basic preferences. Ask them to name their best friend, their favorite kind of vacation, their favorite hobby, their favorite musical act. People can name these things. Ask them if they'll enjoy the same things in 10 years. Ask them if they enjoyed the same things 10 years ago.

Ask people to predict how much money they would pay right now to see their current favorite musician perform in concert 10 years from now. On average, people said they'd pay 129 dollars for that ticket. And yet, when asked how much they would pay now to see the person who was their favorite 10 years ago, they say they'd pay only 80 dollars for that ticket. In a perfectly rational world, these should be the same number, but we overpay for the opportunity to indulge our current preferences because we overestimate their stability. Wherever we are in our lives, Gilbert says, we are convinced that change is behind us, and that nothing but sameness is ahead. It's a fascinating phenomenon, and I encourage you to check out Dan Gilbert's work.

But it's Rosh Hashanah, and what does any of that have to do with us?

In fact, Rosh Hashanah affirms—this whole period of the High Holidays affirms—that we humans are, in fact, works in progress that mistakenly think we're finished. We think our most dynamic days are behind us; we think the opportunities we have to change and grow have long since passed us by. We, too, suffer from the end of history illusion, and the fact is that Judaism, through these High Holidays, anticipated Dan Gilbert's scientific studies by a few thousand years.

Perhaps the reason we turn up in such numbers on the High Holidays is because they challenge our illusions. The holidays assert that we can change. Judaism affirms, like Dan Gilbert, that we will, in fact change—perhaps more than we can possibly imagine. And the High Holidays affirms that we can, if we choose, have a great amount of influence over what direction that change takes.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us stop and appreciate the past. Let us cherish the memories we've made; let us examine the high points, and the low ones as well. Let us recognize that nothing lasts forever. We know that the nail will be engulfed by the wheel. That can be a scary and sad

thing. Like the father at his daughter's wedding, we want to stay in the good and perfect moments of our lives.

On the other hand, would you really stop time if you could? If you could freeze time in the perfect spot, and live forever in that moment, would you really do it? Would you? Even if you knew, as our *machzor* says in the *Yizkor* service for Yom Kippur, that never again would there be a child, or a youth, or first love, never again new persons with new hopes, new ideas, new achievements; ourselves for always and never any others-- could the answer be in doubt?

Time is a powerful force. It transforms our preferences, it reshapes our personalities and our hairlines. We seem to appreciate this fact, but only in retrospect. Only when we look back do we realize how much change happens in a year or a decade. It's as if, for most of us, the present is magic time. As if right now is a watershed on our timeline. As if right now is the moment we become ourselves.

The irony, the beauty, the opportunity of Rosh Hashanah is that it affirms that now IS magic time. Now IS a watershed moment. Right NOW, we can become ourselves—the best we've ever been. So much possibility, so much change, so much excitement, so many memories lie ahead. Let's embrace that fact, together. However you measure a year in your life, let us begin again. Right now.

Shana tova.