

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770
Rabbi David Englander

You Haven't Changed

In a moment we welcome the new year – let's take just a moment to review the one just ending. What did 5769 feature, writ large? Economic crisis that threatened, for a time, the fabric of the worldwide banking system, a contentious presidential campaign, the election of Barack Obama, tragedy in Mumbai, pirates off the coast of Africa. Israel interceded in Gaza to stop rocket attacks, swine flu, North Korea nuclear tests, Benjamin Netanyahu elected again, Mahmoud Ahmadinijad re-elected, thousands protested in the streets of Iran only to be crushed, including a woman named Neta who becomes a symbol of a so-far failed revolution. America is still at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care debate rages and brings out the worst in some people and something better than that from others, and a plane was landed safely in the Hudson River by apparently the calmest guy on the planet. Michael Jackson dies and becomes the favorite subject of many a news cycle, Ted Kennedy dies and gets a tenth of that coverage, and the president gives a speech to school kids and causes a couple of days of mini-crisis. The Pittsburgh Pirates have set a record for futility with the most losing seasons in a row of any major professional sports franchise, Tiger Woods went 0 for 4 in majors but will probably win 10 million dollars next week anyway, a mom won the U.S. Open and the it's the High Holy Days so the Mets have been eliminated from playoff contention. All in all, a heck of a year on the national and world stage.

But...our lives aren't lived on the world stage, not me and not most of us, anyway. As Stephen Covey might describe it, our circle of concern is much larger than our circle of influence. It is our circle of influence, those aspects of our lives over which we can hope to exercise some control or have some immediate and perhaps lasting impact, that should matter most to us on these days. We pray for the peace of the world and hope that those prayers join with others to make a real difference. I believe they do. But mainly, we are here to look inward and upward, to first improve ourselves, to reflect on the year we had in our own lives lived oh-so-very-locally, and to pray for the possibility of rejuvenation, renewal, and return as we continue a lifelong journey. It is a journey that is recalibrated year after year at this very time, toward our best selves and our best relationship with God and each other.

Our year is made up of moments, some memorable, some less so. I'd like to share one of mine with you.

I got the dreaded reply. This summer instead of driving up north we flew but then did a bunch of smaller trips around the northeast. Though I didn't realize it while we were planning it I was working on a little bit of a nostalgic reunion tour, catching up with some classmates I haven't seen in a while. So there we were pulling into a driveway somewhere in the middle of New Jersey to see an old friend who I had not seen in almost the full decade we've been out of school. And on seeing him my first thought was also

his first thought but he got it out first and I decided to keep it to myself. You know what it was – Du-vid, that’s what he called me – you haven’t changed.

Now, he didn’t mean anything negative by that, and I know that. And even though he meant it probably kindly, after all my hairline is more or less intact and I can still wear the suit I wore to my rabbinical school interview now 16 years ago, I knew that so much had changed since we had last seen each other, for me and for him too.

Now kids, before debit cards and charging a pack of gum to get the half a mile in frequent flyer points, there was a thing called change, which were these metal coins that you would get if you didn’t have the exact amount something cost and had to overpay a little bit. And sometimes in a store there would be a sign that said “Count your change” – and that seems like a sign that could be posted here as well for each of us.

It’s an old interpretation but one that speaks to me this year especially. You know the typical or standard greeting for Rosh Hashanah, which we just sang. L’shanah tovah, which we translate as “it should be a good year.” And that is an accurate translation, but the richness of the Hebrew language is also embedded in this simple phrase. The Hebrew word Shanah is from the same Hebrew root that means “to change”. And so shanah tovah is elevated from wishing someone a good year to wishing someone a good change.

Why a good change? I have a rabbinic fantasy that one day I may get up the courage to actually do. Not this year – maybe next. And that is to take the service at its fullest and to ask those in attendance a few questions. It is proven that there is wisdom in crowds, and since we have a crowd wise enough to come to shul on the holidays, they must know something that all those who are outside of synagogue life don’t. So I would ask them: will things be more or less peaceful in Israel at this time next year? Will B’nai Torah be reasonably calm or in some crisis or other? Will the stock market be higher or lower at this time next year? And the one thing that I can guarantee you about that – other than people telling me not to do that again the following year – is that no one will say there should have been a third question – will things be the same for me, my family, my community, Israel, and the world at this time next year? Because we know they won’t be the same. That’s why we wish each other a good change, because change is coming, but we hope it will be, as much as we can control it, a good one.

Coming together to sing the same songs and read the same Torah readings and say the same words would not mean nearly as much if the exact same person saying them last year is also saying them this year. We might tell each other ‘you haven’t changed’ but we know we don’t mean that, not fully, anyway. May we each be able to keep on doing the good things we’re doing and maybe be privileged to find a way to do them a little better, and may we all be willing and able to shed some of the things about ourselves we know misrepresent the very best that we are capable of being. Then we’ll be able to say to ourselves, you’ve changed, and that will be good in God’s eyes and in the eyes of friends old and new as well.