

Shanah, Shinui, Shoneh — Year, Change, Difference – Erev Rosh Hashanah 2015 / 5776

Shanah tovah, everyone. A good year to all of you. This is the “back to” time of year. Back to school. Back to routine. Back to religious school. Back to the gym. And back to temple. It’s an especially good time of year for getting back to basics. We take stock in ourselves and the life we are living. We ask ourselves... What is the essence of who I am? Whom do I aspire to be? What is the essence of my relationships? Am I being true to myself? Am I being and living as my best? As the aspen leaves begin to glow and then spiral to the ground, we feel the need to act, and this time of year is especially ripe with opportunity, as Isaiah reminds us: “Call to God while God is near.” It is said that though God always hears our cries, God’s ears are even more receptive to our prayers this time of year.

So we wish each other Shanah tovah, a “good year” in hopes of bringing all this goodness into the lives of those we meet. Though the words fall easily off of our lips, this unassuming greeting is particularly full of meaning and promise.

Shanah, as you know, means “year,” as in *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, “the new year,” which literally means “head of the year.” Interestingly, the word *shanah* derives from a Hebrew root with several meanings. From the letters *shin-nun-hey* we make the word *shanah*, but we can also create the word *shinui*, which means “change,” and the word *shoneh*, which means “difference.”

So how appropriate and (I have to say COOL) it is that from those three little letters – *shin, nun, and hey*, we can make *shanah, shinui* and *shoneh* – year, change and difference. So in saying the word “year,” we are also implying change and difference. When we wish each other “Shanah tovah, a “good year,” we also are saying may you experience a “good change” and may your life spark something different.

This simple greeting “Shanah Tovah” reminds us that time and change go hand and hand and that we cannot speak of one without the other.

Let me share a story with you about this connection. One day King Solomon tested his minister by asking him to bring him a special ring. “What kind of ring,” asked the minister. “It has special powers,” answered the king. “If a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad, and if a sad man looks at it, he becomes happy.” The minister searched high and low for such a ring but could not find one. How can there be a ring that can make a sad man happy and a happy man sad? He searched and searched for months and months to no avail. One day the minister happened to walk down one of the poorest streets in Jerusalem where he saw a lowly merchant laying his wares on a carpet. The minister asked the merchant, “Do you know of a ring that makes the happy wearer forget his joy and the broken-hearted wearer forget his sorrows?” The merchant took a small gold ring, engraved it and handed it to the minister, who read the engraving and smiled.

When King Solomon next saw the minister, the king asked, “Well, my friend, have you found what I sent you for?” The minister said, “Here it is, your majesty,” and gave the king the ring. Solomon took the ring and saw that it was inscribed with three Hebrew letters: *gimmel*, *zayin*, and *yud*, which stand for “*Gam zeh ya’avor* - This too shall pass.” At that moment Solomon realized that the wisdom of the entire world was inscribed in that ring.

This too shall pass. All things pass, everything changes. As they say, the only things certain in life are death and taxes... and change. Change itself is the wisdom of the world, the essence of all that is. In this year, in this *shanah*, that is passing and the year that is just beginning, change (*shinui*) is a certainty.

As Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, wrote about this time of year, “This moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices are before us, as is the possibility of transformation. This year some will die, some will live, and all will change.”

All will change. And so we can't help but ask, “What kind of change will this year bring for me, for my community, for those I love?”

As we know, it all depends. Change is partially about the choices we make. Unlike any other creature, we humans have the unique ability to decide to change and to perform *t'shuvah* – to return to our authentic selves, to improve our relationships, to forgive others and to seek forgiveness, and to change the very course of our lives - IF we choose to do so.

Of course, some changes occur in our lives that are unexpected and totally beyond our control. We lose a parent. A child becomes ill. There are financial troubles. *Gam zeh ya'avor*. All things pass. Happiness can die away, losses are surely a part of every life, and those life trials always change us...but while we can't avoid life's challenges, how we react to them and how they change us is completely under our control. If we search deep within, we can find the way for even losses and failures to germinate seeds of acceptance, growth, gratitude, and success.

You probably know Babe Ruth because of his home run record (714 during his career), but along with all those home runs came a pretty hefty amount of strikeouts as well (1,330 in all). In fact, for decades he held the record for strikeouts. When asked about this he simply said, "Every strike brings me closer to the next home run." And Albert Einstein who didn't speak until age 4 and couldn't read until age 7 was told he would never amount to anything, and we know how he turned out.

Life's struggles can tear us down OR erode away the extraneous layers to reveal what lies buried in the depths of our being – a beautiful soul and a strong foundation that may buckle in the wind but never be destroyed. Every day challenges come our way and we have the choice and the chance to turn our hearts, to return to what is real, and to do *t'shuvah*.

T'shuvah is not always easy. Change can hurt and it can be frightening. What can we do when change seems too hard, too risky, too painful? Change can be a lot to ask, but we also have to ask ourselves, "Am I happy where I am?" "Am I comfortable enough holding this grudge?" "Are the things that I do that hurt the ones I love really worth it?" The beauty of Rosh Ha-Shanah, this new year is the promise of *shinui*, the promise of change. *Shinui* is a gift that I urge you to embrace, even though it involves risk and it can be the most difficult thing we face.

So this is where the third word that we learned comes in. *Shoneh* – difference – can help us. When the change in our lives brings us fear or sorrow, our tradition teaches that we need to create a new story, a new narrative. Amisha Patel said: "Life is all about evolution. What looks like a mistake to others has been a milestone in my life. Even if people have betrayed me, even if my heart was broken, even if people misunderstood or judged me, I have learned from these incidents. We are human and we make mistakes, but learning from them is what makes the difference." Learning from them is what makes the *shoneh*.

The Talmudic rabbis created parables and stories, not to espouse a certain theology regarding why certain things happen, but to help us find meaning, empowerment, and comfort when they do happen. These stories become our new personal narratives. The words we speak to ourselves are powerful. Just as God spoke and the world came to be, so can our words make things happen in our lives. Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to shift our stories from the "whats" in our lives to the "whos."

We depart from “What do I have? What do I want? What did I do?” and we direct our focus to “Who am I? Who do I want to be? Who is important to me? Who can I help? Whose life can I make better?”

Shanah, shinui, shoneh: The year will, indeed, bring change, and our recreating our narrative about it can help us to learn about our true selves and discover the power that we have to make spiritual change for the good. Perhaps this is what the poet Robert Frost meant when he wrote: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I, I took the road less traveled by. And that has made all the difference.” That has made all the *shoneh*.

A story is told of a bird during the days of God’s creation of the world. This particular bird was created without wings and when it looked around at other birds soaring in the heavens it begged God to allow it to fly. That night, while the bird was asleep, God affixed wings to its body. When the bird awoke and saw two new appendages to its body it cried to God, “God, I asked you to make me fly, not to give me weights to make me heavier.” God replied, “Little bird, just flap them and you will see that you will fly.” And the little bird soared to the heavens. Often times what can seem like extra baggage can actually allow us to fly and soar to new heights.

So at this *shanah bi-shinui*, during this this year of change, let us invite God to help us create the *shoneh* – the difference we need to make the most of these ten days of *t’shuvah*, to turn all the weights we carry in our lives into wings that will lift us higher and make us better. Again, I wish you a Shanah tovah – a year of all that is good. May it make all the difference for you and your loved ones.