

The Sacred In-Between

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Remember getting ready for the first day of school when you were a kid? The new school supplies, organizing your backpack, figuring out what to wear... I can still feel the nerves about finding the right room. Who will my teachers be? Will I make friends? Labor Day weekend was an anxious time, and as Monday night rolled around, I would be sad that summer vacation was over and nervous about being back in school the next day. Of course, the anticipation was always worse than the reality. The first day of school would come and I'd be able to let go of summer and embrace the year, and before I knew it the summer seemed like a distant memory.

Tonight is that Monday evening. Tomorrow is the first day - not of school, obviously, but of the New Year. Perhaps we are all ready - our spiritual backpacks packed with all the necessary supplies, and our new clothes laid out - or perhaps not, and we are entering into the New Year unprepared and anxious - In either case, Rosh Hashanah is a transition into the new year with everything that entails.

The midrash teaches "*kol hatchalot kashot* /all beginnings are difficult"² not that we needed our sages to tell us that. Still, acknowledging this fact and speaking it aloud can relieve some of our stress. Yes, change is taxing. But the more we honor new beginnings for what they are—times of transition — the more prepared we can be for the unexpected lows and highs that follow.

The Hebrew word for change is *shinui*, from the root *Shanah*, which should sound familiar as that is the reason we are here tonight - it is Rosh HaShanah - the beginning of change.

In their book [Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes](#)³ William and Susan Bridges explain the difference between change and transition. Change is simply what happens. Transition is the process we go through and the work we do to internalize come to terms with the new situation that the change will bring about⁴. Transition begins with the ending of that which was, and ends with the beginning of that which is to be. Susan

¹ Written in collaboration with Rabbi Sharon Stiefel

² Mekhilta Yitro Bachodesh, 2.

³ <https://wmbridges.com/books/>

⁴ <https://wmbridges.com/about/what-is-transition/>

Bridges writes: The essence of life takes place in...transition. It is in that interim spaciousness that all possibilities, creativity and innovative ideas can come to life and flourish.”

Rosh Hashanah teaches us to honor transitions; it is a laboratory for dealing with changes big and small. It trains us to deal with the many changes that life throws at us as well as the changes that we strive to make for ourselves.⁵

One of the names we Jews are called in the Torah is *Ivrim* - Hebrews. *Ivrim* comes from the same root as *L'avor*, which means to “cross over” or to “pass through, and in modern Hebrew, *Ma'avar* means transition.” Thus, you could say we Jews - *Ivrim* - are “Transitioners.” Abraham became an *Ivri* - a Transitioner when he left his homeland, and his father’s house to cross over to monotheism; Moses became an *Ivri* - Transitioner when Miriam placed him in the basket in the reeds; the Israelites became *Ivrim*/Transitioners when they passed through the red sea. In fact Bridges uses the Israelites’ time in the wilderness as his model for understanding transition.

Nobody can ignore the huge changes the Pandemic forced upon us over the past year and a half. In an article called “[The Pandemic is a Portal](#)” Arundhati Roy writes, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”⁶ This summer we started to think the Pandemic was over, and then it wasn’t - so here we are, in what Rabbi Don Rossoff calls “that unsettling and uneasy time between the no longer and the not yet.”⁷

Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of change, is also a time between the no longer and the not yet, but the difference is that we have a little more power over the “no longer” part. Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to decide what in our lives needs to become the “no longer.” It is a moment for discerning our deepest truths about what is important to us - what in our lives and our souls should be maintained and cultivated, and what needs to change.

James Baldwin said, “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.”⁸ I’m sure he didn’t know it, but he was also describing the purpose of this season of transition, I might even venture, the purpose of Judaism, or at

⁵ Rabbi Gidon Isaacs <https://www.jewishvoicesnj.org/articles/rosh-hashanah-teaches-us-to-honor-transitions/>

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

⁷ Rabbi Don Rossoff

<https://www.templemanuelph.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Rabbi-Donald-B.-Rossoff-Rosh-HaShana-All-Beginnings-are-Hard-5779.pdf>

⁸ For the provenance of this attribution see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/04/06/hides/>

least of Torah. The sages taught that the text of quill on parchment is just the chapter headings, that the real meaning of Torah is found in the questions raised by the text. Put simply, Judaism teaches us to question what we think we know.

Going back to the Bridges' difference between change and transition, when the facts of our situations change, they can expose essential questions that need to be addressed. The evacuations from Afghanistan are moving us to ask deeper questions about our nation; the terrible storms and fires are pressing more incisive questions about how to adapt to climate change and economic inequities. The pandemic and the return to our building this summer pushed us to think more deeply about how we understand community, inclusion, and the role of technology in our Temple life. This liminal moment, at twilight on the eve of the New Year, asks to unearth the questions that lie behind the answers in our lives, so that we might enter the new year wiser and with purpose.

Our sages taught: pray in the moments when light and darkness touch. As the sun sinks and the colors of the day turn, we offer the Ma'ariv blessing for the twilight, which is neither day nor night, but in-between. Tonight, as light gives way to dark, the old year and the new year meet. We cannot ever pinpoint the exact moment when the old year disappears forever. But we know that there is a time at sundown when it is no longer the past year and it is not yet the year to come. It is old and new, both and neither one, at the same time. For fleeting minutes on this eve of Rosh Hashanah, time and certainty are suspended, and we who have come to pray are lifted up into twilight and its mystery.⁹

Rosh Hashanah is the twilight period of the year, the beginning of change - when we - the Ivrim - begin to cross over from past year into the coming year, from was to what will be. May the sacred in-between of this evening suspend our certainties, soften our judgments, widen our vision. May it lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers, and illumine our way.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon; May it be God's will.

⁹ Rabbi Ruben Zellman http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/Holiness_of_Twilight.pdf

ANTHEM: [Changes by Phil Ochs](#)

Sit by my side, come as close as the air,
Share in a memory of gray;
Wander in my words, dream about the pictures
That I play of changes.

Green leaves of summer turn red in the fall
To brown and to yellow they fade.
And then they have to die, trapped within
The circle time parade of changes.

Scenes of my young years were warm in my mind,
Visions of shadows that shine.
'Til one day I returned and found they were the
Victims of the vines of changes.

The world's spinning madly, it drifts in the dark
Swings through a hollow of haze,
A race around the stars, a journey through
The universe ablaze with changes.

Moments of magic will glow in the night
All fears of the forest are gone
But when the morning breaks they're swept away by
Golden drops of dawn, of changes.

Passions will part to a strange melody.
As fires will sometimes burn cold.
Like petals in the wind, we're puppets to the silver
Strings of souls, of changes.

Your tears will be trembling, now we're somewhere else,
One last cup of wine we will pour
And I'll kiss you one more time, and leave you on
The rolling river shores of changes.

Sit by my side, come as close as the air,
Share in a memory of gray;
Wander in my words, dream about the pictures
That I play of changes.