

[SUNG]

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,...
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look ...
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

*So teach us to number our days,
That we may grow a heart of wisdom...*

Have you ever had that experience, of hearing a certain song, or reading a particular poem or quote - and feeling it go right into your *kishkas*?

And then that one line or paragraph that just won't leave you alone as it continues to bubble up through the noises of every-day life?

Do you ask yourself "what is it that speaks to me in this song? What do I resonate with - so strongly that these words won't leave me alone?"

And how often does it speak exactly to where we are in our lives, at that time, on that day, in that place?

This description fits pretty well with the experience I had this past winter, when I first read the Stanley Kunitz poem paired with the lines from Psalm 90. (You just heard the beginning of the text sung...)

It was one of my cantorial classmates who sent me this poem, as a possible text for a piece of music he was commissioning - a piece of music to celebrate the 25th anniversary of our ordination as cantors.

I thought it was the perfect choice! It spoke to me on many levels, it resonated with where I found myself in my life, in my middle age, in my career, wondering about the next chapter of my life....

As we all reconnected, our group of friends and classmates begun reflecting on our lives and careers as we started looking back over the past 25 years.

We all had walked through many lives, and we were not quite who we used to be. We looked behind because we were compelled to, and while we all saw the milestones dwindling toward the horizon, we celebrated those milestones as well! My friends and I asked ourselves, if we did indeed grow hearts of wisdom – and while we all got somewhat wiser perhaps, the jury is still out on the final result... We certainly walked through each other's lives, as we celebrated and mourned the various milestones in our lives.

I too felt compelled to look behind, as the poet writes - and realized it was important to see the milestones, and celebrate them!

I found this particular academic milestone (25th anniversary of my ordination) at this precise time in my life to be far more meaningful than I had ever imagined. We used to joke about this honorary doctorate and called it the DD – Didn't Die degree. And then it was our turn... and it felt like so much more - it felt like a major accomplishment to have made it to this moment in time, and to be able to celebrate who we had become!

I am not who I was. The person who started the cantorial program in Jerusalem, in the fall of 1987, was not the same person who was ordained 25 years ago. When I started my studies, I really knew nothing about what it meant to be a cantor. I loved Jewish music and

text, and wanted to learn more and immerse myself in this incredibly rich tradition. When I was ordained four years later, I had the very beginning of an inkling about what it really meant to be a cantor – and music was a rather small part of it!

The person who showed up here in Floral Park, 7 years ago, knew more about being a cantor perhaps, but knew almost nothing about being the spiritual leader of a congregation.

And today, I stand here - - a changed person yet again, in great part due to the time I have spent with you - here in this community of Temple Sholom. You taught me so much and you made sure that I am not who I was seven years ago.

As the poet looks back at his life, so do we during this HH season – spending time in the process of *cheshbon hanefesh*, accounting of our soul – asking the big questions of ourselves...

And perhaps one of the biggest questions we can ask ourselves is: Am I living the life I am meant to live? The life I truly want? Yup, that's a big one to contemplate. Even a bit scary. But now is the time to pay attention to it.

To pay attention to it as individuals, as members of our families, our synagogue community and of course our larger communities as well. None of us are today who we were a year ago, even less, who we were seven years ago or 27 years ago...

Not as individuals, nor as a community...

So what a beautiful gift we are given, this season of reflection and introspection, a time set aside for the sole purpose of looking inward and acknowledging the milestones and the shortcomings - - so that

we may grow in our wisdom - so we may grow a heart of wisdom. So that we may become who we are meant to be.....

[SUNG]

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings...

*So teach us to number our days,
That we may grow a heart of wisdom...*

That big question - am I living the life I am meant to live, the life I truly want to live? - is one I have asked myself over the years, it is a question that comes back from time to time – it is the quintessential question for the HH as well. Are we really living the life we are meant to live? And even more basic, are we really living? This is something that will come back in our explorations tomorrow, as we wrestle with the words of *unetaneh tokef* – who shall live and who shall die....

So on this Rosh Hashanah, I pose this question to all of us– are we living the life we truly want? The life we are meant to live? And I dare us all to answer our own question.

The process of reflection during the past year has made me take a closer look at the balances in my life; the balance between teaching and congregational work, the balance between work and play, between city time and country time, between solitude and company...

And I realized that it might be time to adjust some of those balances, and to give myself the time to explore new strengths and new opportunities to share those strengths.

After all, when we arrive in the world to come, we are not asked “Why weren’t you more like {fill in the blank} so-and-so? What we might be asked instead is “Why weren’t you more like you?!?”

The poet continues in his poem “Layers” - telling us about the “tribe of his true affections, a scattered tribe...” And then he asks the question : “How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?

When we contemplate our lives, the tribes of our true affections play a large role - they are our family, our friends, our neighbors, our temple community; as do the losses we have experienced in those tribes...

My class lost one of our own, at an age far too young - and we each had losses in our individual lives...

Each one of us here today, has experienced a “feast of losses” as the poet calls it, losses that marked us deeply, losses that made us who we are today.

We experienced perhaps not only the loss of people, but also the loss of dreams, loss of futures, loss of expectations, even the loss of the familiar use of our bodies...

And as **we** go through this coming year together, we will face and experience our own unique loss -- the special relationship we have here, between you and me, the relationship between clergy and congregation. And that loss might sting bitterly in some moments. It may also impel us though to continue to learn how to number our days, how to grow hearts of wisdom....

What we are all looking at is change, and change can be a challenge...

The beautiful thing is, that change is literally part of our celebrations this season!

Most of us know the words Shanah tovah – happy new year, and we know that Shanah means year. But the Hebrew root **Shin - nun - heh** - *shanah* means more than that, it comes from the root to repeat, or to teach, and it can also mean to change....!

How can the same root lead to repetition and teaching, and also to change?

Yes, the result of repetition can be a deadening of the senses; it can lead to going on auto-pilot;

And it can lead to a honing of skills and insights, a broadening and deepening of understanding – and that can lead to change...

Yes, indeed, the same root can lead to repetition and teaching, and also to change! So, what do we wish each other when we say Shanah Tovah?

A good repetition and a good change!

As Rabbi Laura Geller wrote:

“Your book of life doesn’t begin today, on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents siblings and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people's decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like. But the message of Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, is that

everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day-by the choices you make. The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit it, decide what parts you want to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to leave behind. Shanah Tovah means both a “good year and a good change”! Today you can change the rest of your life. It is never too late.”

It is never too late to take stock and determine what will be written in your next chapter!

Shimon Peres used to say: “You're as young as your dreams, not as old as your calendar.”

And many of you in this room are amazing - living examples of that very thought! You have continued to be active and involved, you continue to be interested in the world around you and you continue to play an active role in writing the next chapter in your book of life.

Whether it is through your participation in Temple events, your visits to the opera, your explorations of new interests - writing poetry, restoring old houses, moving to new and warmer locations - or thru modeling ways to gracefully grow older, the ways you face and embrace new challenges, you are living examples of this beautiful human capacity to continue to dream and to change.

[SUNG]

Yet I turn, I turn,

exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered...
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me...

*So teach us to number our days,
That we may grow a heart of wisdom...*

No doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

Yet - the poet says - I turn, with my will intact to go wherever I need to go - and every stone along the road is precious to me.

As I slowly turn to go wherever I need to go, I see the stones along the road. Every stone along that road that **we** have been traveling together is precious to me.

Every milestone, every experience we had together has added meaning to our journey. Every moment of celebration has added joy; every moment spent in sadness has added depth; every moment spent in learning together has added excitement and inspiration.

Together, we contributed to our *Sefer Chayim* - the book of our community's life. And together we decide what parts we want to emphasize, and what parts could be improved on perhaps...

And together we play an active role in what the next chapter may look like, the next chapter in our very own book of transformations.

There is a chassidic story, about a man asking to meet with his rabbi to discuss his life. When he arrives at the rabbi's study, he is welcomed in and takes his seat, uneasily fidgeting and clearly worried. The rabbi asks him "What brings you here today?"

And the man tells the rabbi what is going on with him.

"I found out that I will have to move to a new city, and I am worried sick about what that will be like. I am worried about finding the right place to live, the right school for my children, and even more importantly, what kind of people will I meet there?"

"Interesting," said the rabbi, "I wonder how things are for you here, in our town? What kind of people have you encountered here these past couple of years?"

“As a matter of fact,” the man answered, “I have been so disappointed in them. People seem unkind and impatient, and I never find anyone nice enough to befriend...”

“In that case,” said the rabbi, “I believe you might expect the same kind of people in your new hometown...”

A few days later, a woman asks to speak to the rabbi, to discuss her life. Once she takes her seat in the rabbi’s study, she too tells the rabbi that she is preparing to move to a new place. And she too is somewhat worried, and wondering what kind of people she might meet.

The rabbi asks her the same question, he asked the man a few days earlier: “What is life like right here in your current home, what kind of people have you found here?”

“Ah,” the woman smiles, “I have only met the nicest people here, everyone has been helpful, and kind; my neighbors were always there when I needed them, and we became good friends; I will miss them all so much!”

“In that case,” the rabbi responds, “I am quite certain that you will meet many wonderful and kind people in the place you are moving to...”

How does the rabbi know this? He doesn't of course know anything for sure. But what he does know is that each of us contributes to the relationships we form, the experiences we have – if our attitude is generous and forgiving, we may encounter many more people with kindness and compassion. If our attitude is tinged with unrealistic expectations, or anger or disappointment, we are likely to meet more of the same in others...

When I arrived here at Temple Shalom seven years ago, I met many wonderful people who welcomed me with open arms. I met all of you! You gave me many gifts, and we will have lots of opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate those gifts in the months to come. Perhaps the biggest gift of all was the gift of embracing me completely as I am, allowing me to be myself – for this I am so incredibly grateful!

And it is in that spirit, that I am sharing these words, sharing my thoughts and feelings with you during this High Holy Day season.

As we enter into this New Year, I pray that we may follow in the footsteps of the late Shimon Peres, who said:

“keep reading, keep learning, keep your curiosity, dream big, be engaged, serve your fellow man, change the things you don't like”.

May the New Year be full of opportunities for meaningful connection, generous exchange, joyful celebration and compassionate presence.

May it be a year of health and contentment, harmony and joy.

And may our year together truly be a *Shanah Tovah* – a good year with good change!

[SUNG]

No doubt the next chapter
in **our** book of transformations
is already written.
We are not done with **our** changes.

SHANAH TOVAH!

[Music by Bob Remstein,
text: from “the Layers” by Stanley Kunitz, and Psalm 90]