

Rosh Hashanah 5778: Change! ... No, Don't Change!



Dear Friends,

Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new Jewish year. Rosh Hashanah is an interesting name for a holiday with some unlikely customs, such as blowing a shofar and eating tempting sweet fruit...

"Rosh" means "at the head", or "first", but it can also imply "it's all IN the head"... Without the head there would be no thoughts; without thoughts there would be no feelings; without feelings we would experience nothing; if we experienced nothing there would be no sense of time; without a sense of time there would be no years and no reality.

"Shanah" contains the root ש.נ.ה., which is also the root of the word שינוי, or change. So perhaps Rosh Hashanah is a time for the beginning of change, or an acknowledgement that change begins in the head. Read in this way, Rosh Hashanah seems to contain an invitation to change.

If we add the word "shofar", which has the same root as שיפור or improvement, we may understand that the shofar, too, is calling us to improve ourselves, to change ourselves for the better.

But wait... there's another option:

"Shanah" has another possible root, ש.נ.ו., from which the 6 tractates of the "Mishna" come. It stems from the word, "shinun", which means repetition – the exact opposite of change! Understood in this way, Rosh Hashanah is actually only the beginning (the head) of a new cycle, in which things will simply repeat themselves.

So which is it - change or repetition? This is the perfect question for the New Year.

Rosh Hashanah is usually a time in which we make new and important resolutions. We promise ourselves that we will change our ways and improve ourselves. Some of these promises are kept, and most fall by the wayside.

Over the years we begin to wonder: is change really possible? *Can* we improve? Is it necessary to do so? Why not repeat known habits and customs?

King Solomon, the wisest of men, pondered the very same question – either out of despair, or from a place of joy and relief, not clear at all – thus:

"Futility of futilities... all is futile [vanity is an inaccurate translation!]... One generation passes and another generation comes; and the earth abides unchanged forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and returns to its place where it rises ... it turns about continually in its circuit, and the winds too return again to their circuits. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they go again ...That which has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun." (Kohelet 1: 2-9)

Kohelet arrived at this understanding at an advanced age. What happened to him at that time? Was he disappointed with his life? Was he feeling the sorrow of dashed hopes for change and improvement that did not take place? Or perhaps, on his deathbed, he discovered a secret which he is actually trying to convey here: Forget about change! There's no such thing!

In a beautiful poem by Yehuda Amichai called "My Father Was God", he recalls how his father, on his deathbed, whispered two additional Commandments in his ear:

The eleventh Commandment – "don't change"

The twelfth Commandment – "change, change"

What is meant to change? Or perhaps the question is who should change or in what way?

Over the years I am increasingly aware - an awareness that is comforting and consoling – that actually, **we don't really have to change or improve. We can, but we don't have to.** If it is right to do so and the timing is good – fine. But if not, we are more or less just fine as we are.

The notion that something **has** to change is an ancient one. It is the whisper of the serpent that is still making its way around our life's Garden. It tempts us to change, it nips at our heels telling us to speed it up, to do it! "Yes you can! You can be as gods! You can be more beautiful, smarter, more charming, and of course, richer. And since you can, isn't it a waste not to do so?"

That primeval serpent is here, and here to stay. He was created just as we were, by the same creative Creator. He is part of the plan. He will continue to slither around our Garden, looking for our weak points. It is there that he whispers and tempts us with his deceiving promises. It is that serpent who molded Western civilization – mostly for good - to improve! We are a society which bites from the forbidden fruit over and over, and remains amazed that we continue to be expelled from the Garden.

Until one day, we may pause, and say to the snake: "You know what? Rest a little. All is mostly fine as it is! True, the sun always rises and sets in the same places, and that's okay! Why improve the cycle of the sun? Waves chase each other to the shore and then recede once again to the sea, and that is also fine! Our heart beats over and over, one beat following the next, and that too is as it should be."

And then an amazing thing happens! In an absolutely miraculous way, once we accept that change is not a must, change happens! Not necessarily the change we anticipated. Actually, NOT the change we anticipated. After all, how are we to know which changes are really improvements and which are disastrous? How do we know what SHOULD happen? Who are we to determine how things will evolve for the better?

Life changes all the time. Sometimes a little bit and very slowly, and sometimes a lot and very fast. Just when we relax and accept our reality, when we soften our stance, changes that "should" happen do. When we are able to calm the whispering serpent, and move out of the way a bit, important changes happen.

Time and time again, I see positive change happening when we begin validating our very existence. Validation of our essential Being is key to any positive change.

The serpent despises validation. He yells "No! Have you gone mad? You must change! You must improve! The sky's the limit! Be like gods - because you can!".

We, humans, so much want the snake's validation, the approval that "we made it", that we have fulfilled our potential! That we have become like gods! But he will never give us that approval. He doesn't know how. He will forever be pushing us higher and higher, to compete with God.

This year I want to wish us all just one blessing: that we stop waiting for the serpents' validation. Let it go. It won't happen! Nor will we get it from our partners, our parents, or our bosses - they all want us to change and improve (and that's ok, we need that voice too).

Avodat Halev - The Service of the Heart

This self-validation is the biggest gift of life we can give ourselves this holiday! It is the beginning (Rosh) of the changes (Shana) that are truly "meant" to happen. Validation is our ultimate task; It is a religious Mitzvah, we have no other. It is not at all easy. It is much harder than all of the diets,

workouts, diplomas, accumulation of knowledge, and all of our efforts to change and improve ourselves.

The validation and approval of our essential existence is the "T'shuva" (repentance/return) we seek for ourselves in the coming Days of Repentance/Return. It is all we can wish for – to return to our true and valid essence.

Shana Tova,
Elisha