

Message for *Parashat Pinchas* / 29 July 2016: “A Season of Transitions”

Please, forgive me if you have heard it ...

Q. How many Hassidic *rebbe*s does it take to change a light Bulb?

A. What is a light bulb?

Q. How many Orthodox Rabbis does it take to change a light bulb?

A. Change?

Q. How many Conservative rabbis does it take to change a light bulb?

A. Call a committee meeting.

Q. How many Reform rabbis does it take to change a light bulb?

A. None, anyone can change it whenever they want.

Q. How many **congregants** does it take to change a light bulb?

A. CHANGE! We should CHANGE that light bulb? My grandmother donated that light bulb!

Change is part of life; it is inevitable. Change will happen, and we shall resist whenever it tries to intrude! Though, perhaps, we could learn to live with change and learn from it.

Back in early June, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar for rabbis beginning their new positions this year. It was offered by the CCAR, in New York, and it was titled, “The First 100 Days: A Transition Seminar for

Rabbis.” The seminar was an intense two days dedicated to prepare us for the many changes that awaited us ....

During the seminar, one idea kept coming up: Change happens, but **transitions** are managed. Example: If you move from Indiana to Kansas, the change involves crossing two states, Illinois and Missouri, and then learning your way around Overland Park. It happened all right; I’m here! At the same time, I transitioned from living in a house that overlooked a lovely pond; a house where I knew where everything was, to a new house here where everything is unfamiliar –ah, and no pond to look at. How well I adapt to this new situation, to my new environment, will depend on how I manage my transition. And how I manage my transition depends, in great part, on how I **end** my time in Indiana.

William Bridges, who spent his entire career thinking about transitions writes:

“The starting point for dealing with transition is not the outcome but the **ending** that you’ll have to make to leave the old situation behind.

Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place.”

An example of a bad transition would be if I were to come home every day after work longing to see the pond and hoping to find all familiar things I had in the other house –some which I hated, mind you, but they were mine.

Behind every joke there is a kernel of truth: The congregant upset about changing the light bulb that her grandmother donated is not upset about the “change” itself; she is upset because changing the light bulb reminds her that she must let go of her grandmother. I would say, she never went through the transition; she got stuck with the change ...

The more I think about change, the more I realize that the key to succeed in life depends, on how we adapt to new situations. How many times have we held on to our “old identity.” Change is inevitable, yet some of us insist on holding on to who we were. Having left my native Argentina at age 24, never to look back, I know what radical change means. I successfully transition from one culture to another and I knew I had to do it and do it quickly. After my first couple of months in rabbinical school, we were invited to the home of our mentor, a local Reform rabbi. We were told to come at 7:30, in the evening. Well, I thought 7:30 meant “dinner.” Growing up, I was used to eat dinner at around 9:00 PM, so I figured 7:30 meant an “early dinner.” It did not. We stayed until half past 9 and by the time I go back home I was starving!

Obviously, everything around me had changed, but I had not transition to the Midwest ... So, I decided to start having dinner like civilized people do, at a quarter to six or so. I adapted to the change and successfully transitioned ...

As heirs to the Reform tradition, change should be second nature to us and transition our middle name! After all, the Reform movement began as a movement in Central Europe determined to change everything we held dear as a religious people. Our founders asked everyone to let go of old ways; to leave

behind old eating habits that were considered primitive; to let go of prayers and practices which had defined them for generations.

The early Reformers' successful transitioned from the old to the new.

However, at one point in our history, it all stopped, and the new became old again. The innovation, "Stop wearing a kippah," a *yarmulke*, as expression of how modern and progressive slowly turned into prohibiting rabbis to wear a kippah on the *bimah*. It is what I call the "Orthodoxy" of Reform Judaism.

The once new, became old; congregations held on to their old identity, and would not let go of the past, even if doing so stopped the process of reforming our tradition to fit our new needs.

Transition is about letting go of our past identities, but, the flip side, transition is not a rebellion; letting go also means honoring the past. As a congregation, we have a history, a past, and as your new rabbi I am prepared to honor that past. The Torah teaches, *kaved et avicha ve'et imechah*, honor your father and your mother. The rabbis explain that we must honor by practicing what they taught us. You may hear an Orthodox Jew say, "I do it this way because my father did it this way, and his father before him ..."

Honoring the past does not mean that the past gets to tell us what is good or appropriate for our circumstance, and what is not. At age 17, I had read Modechai Kaplan's books, and one teaching has stayed with me. Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, writes: "The past has a vote, but not a veto." I understand it to mean that, if we consider this or that prayer, we cannot simply get rid of it on the basis that we do not agree with its ideas. The

past must inform the future but we should not be bound by it. A better reading might be, "Past understandings of what it means to be Jewish have a vote but not a veto in our how we live our lives as Jews today."

mean it when I say that I want to hear all your input, that I want to learn from you and with you. I want to honor the past AND I want to get excited about our future. I consider the transition our congregation MUST go through, my guiding principle is: I shall honor the past AND the past has a vote, BUT not a veto.

Our congregation is but a slice of life. What we learn here, we must take into the world. I am not talking ONLY about how we as a congregation abandon the old identity we held for our own identification as Beth Torah. I am talking about how we live our lives together in relationship with each other and with other not here tonight. Knowing how to manage our personal transitions is as important as what we can do for our congregation.

The great Jewish teacher, Woody Allen says,

"I'm not afraid of death. It's just that I don't want to be there when it happens."

It is funny because it contains a kernel of truth: we must be there for all the important changes **in** our lives. Once an important change in our lives happens: A loved one or a close friends dies; our relationships come to an end; we moved to a new city; we lose our job; we start a family; we get a new job; our physical abilities diminish; in those moments, change happens, and

whether we can move to the next stage of our lives and find meaning in our new, changed, situation or not will depend on how we “manage our transition.”

Rabbi Rami Shapiro teaches, “When [we] cling to the known, [we] live in the past: today imitates yesterday, and tomorrow replicates today. Living with wisdom is living in the present moment: no imitation, no replication, each moment new, fresh, and surprising.

*Elohe hamazalot*, God of the Changing Seasons of our lives, help us to understand change; guide us as we try to navigate the difficult move from old to new; show us the path to wisdom so that we can stay new, fresh, and amazed. Adonai, bless us with the ability to respond to change and move forward to a better place in our life as a congregation, as individuals, as families, and as a people.