

## **RH Sermon Day 2—The Necessity of Change**

**This is the season of transformation.** As the New Year arrives, we take stock, examine our deeds, and resolve to transcend our shortcomings. We seek to abandon habits that no longer serve us, to be kinder, more generous, more spiritually connected. With the image of God sitting in judgment fresh in our minds, we become newly committed to actualizing our potential. This is a tall order. While we will leave this day filled with good intentions, the truth is that these changes will not come automatically. Lasting change is a process—it takes time and attention. Sometimes the changes we seek to make continue to elude our grasp. And sometimes we make changes to ourselves without intending to, without even realizing it. Often, these are the changes that are most transformative.

**Take a moment and think about a time when you were aware that you were making, or had made, a change in your life. What was the experience like? How did you come to make that change? Did it seem to happen naturally, or was it a conscious process?**

I came to my practice of Judaism almost by accident. My parents both came from strong Jewish backgrounds, and we belonged to a shul, but we weren't particularly observant at home. I wound up in private school because my parents weren't happy with my experience in the public kindergarten; at Schechter because my mom had a friend who sent her daughter there and it was affordable. While my parents certainly weren't upset that I would study Judaics alongside my other subjects, that wasn't their primary motivation for enrolling me.

I remember my first years at Schechter fondly—I felt nurtured by the teachers, excited to be learning Hebrew, and happy to be happy in school. Learning so much about Jewish practices and observance, it never occurred to me to compare what I was studying in school to what I knew from home—until second grade, when we started discussing *kashrut*. Separating milk from meat, waiting three hours after eating meat, which animals are kosher and which aren't—these were all concepts I readily understood, but didn't know what they looked like in practice. At first, I just accepted that this was 'school stuff,' and wasn't bothered by the dissonance. Cheeseburgers were for home; cheese sandwiches were for school. Then, the school announced a food drive. There were posters all

over the building, flyers went home, and our teachers instructed us to bring non-perishable, kosher food items in for our collection. Wanting very badly to participate, I went home from school and asked my mother, “Mommy, do we keep kosher?” “No,” she answered. “Can we?” I continued. “No,” she said. And that was the end of that. (Although we did donate some pasta and sauce for the drive.) As time went on, I largely forgot about that interaction, continuing to learn in school about aspects of Jewish observance we did not practice at home, without concern for the inconsistency.

The issue laid dormant for a number of years. I became involved in my shul, reading Torah regularly, teaching in the Hebrew School, and tutoring *b’nei mitzvah* students. It was clear that I was on a path toward greater Jewish involvement, but somehow, *kashrut* didn’t feel like a necessary part. When I decided to attend JTS for college, I knew that I would be living in a kosher dorm. The summer before I headed off to school, I began to prepare, purchasing a set of dishes to contribute to my suite’s kitchen, debating with my suitemates whether we would be ‘*hekhsher* kosher’ or merely ‘ingredient-kosher,’ and yes, savoring my last cheeseburger. The change was finally upon me—I would be keeping

kosher—while I was happy making this transition in my observance, I don't know if I would have been motivated enough to do it without the structure of dorm life basically doing it for me.

Within a few weeks of arriving at school, any reservations I may have had about switching to a kosher lifestyle were gone. The vibrancy of Jewish life in my dormitory had sold me on being observant, and I eagerly learned everything I could about *kashrut*. Shortly after the start of the semester, I went back to Baltimore for Rosh Hashanah. I explained to my parents that I was keeping kosher now, and that I wouldn't be able to eat the brisket. Keeping kosher was new for me, and I needed my boundaries to be high. A few months later, when I came home for Thanksgiving, I decided that I couldn't eat on their un-kosher dishes. Graciously, my mother went out to the dollar store and got me a set of glass plates, and two sets of silverware. And then there was *Pesah*. Many more trips to the dollar store, and rolls of aluminum foil later, I was comfortable eating in my parents' house. In my teenage fervor, I knew that my way was the right way, and I imposed it on my parents. Admittedly, this was not the kindest approach, and I remain grateful that they tolerated this stage in my development.

Once *kashrut* had become more natural for me, I began to let down my guard. Now, on visits home, *sh'lom bayit* was my chief concern, and I stopped insisting on using my glass dishes. Over time, my observance of *kashrut* became a non-issue. Still, my change in practice had impacted my parents. Slowly, quietly, my mother stopped serving meat and dairy together and began frequenting the kosher supermarket. My dad made sure there were *pareve* snacks to take in his lunch on days when he ate meat. Around graduation time, my parents asked if I wanted them to *kasher* the house. Grateful for their offer, I suggested that they think about it some more. After all, I no longer came all that often, and if they were going to make such a significant change, it should be meaningful for them. A short while later, we boiled the pots and utensils, bought some new dishes, and set aside the heirloom china for a year—my parents' house was now kosher, and I could once again enjoy the brisket I eschewed all those years before.

My transition to observing the laws of *kashrut* was one that brought me, and my parents, closer to the Jewish tradition. While I can look back

on the many changes I made along my journey, it's difficult to identify one defining moment that set me on that path. My relationship with *kashrut* was an evolving one; it involved innumerable smaller tweaks in my practice, each coming from a different motivation.

The ideas, beliefs, and experiences underlying my becoming kosher did not hew closely to what a strict constructionist view of Judaism would call 'traditional' reasons. In a strictly Orthodox view—and I must emphasize that even many Orthodox Jews do not abide exclusively by these motives—our commitment to Jewish observance is a response to God's commands. The Tradition—capital T—instructs us in the proper way of life, and we obediently bend our will to God's.

My initial decision to keep kosher was less a choice to adopt *kashrut* than a decision to follow the rules of my housing agreement. Keeping kosher outside the dorm was inspired by the vibrant Jewish life I experienced in my new community, by the joy I felt in communal gatherings and celebrations. My decision to eat on separate dishes from my parents was primarily an act of teenage rebellion. Now (sort of) an adult, I wanted to make a break from my parents, and this was a tangible way to do so. When I began to eat on their dishes again, I needed to feel

close to my family, to invite them into my journey, and to share in theirs. On this journey, God and obedience *were* a part of my process—and they were accompanied by a complex of factors: community, personal spirituality, and a desire for authenticity. Of course, there was also the personal sense of fulfillment that kept me going. At each step along the way, had I not found my growing practice meaningful, I would not have continued to deepen my observance of *kashrut*.

To state the obvious: I'm a rabbi. I believe in the power of Jewish observance to make our lives gratifying, meaningful, and significant. I believe that Jewish rituals and practices bring us closer to each other and closer to God. I believe that each of us—the novice and the expert alike—can benefit from pursuing greater understanding and involvement in Jewish observance. I get up in front of the congregation frequently and sing the praises of *kashrut*, Shabbat, Torah study, and prayer. Like I said, I'm a rabbi. I want us all to be moving toward greater connection with our tradition. Just as my journey with keeping kosher did not follow what we might call a 'traditional' path, I couldn't possibly stand up here today and suggest that we all consider increasing our observance "because the Tradition says so." What's more, I don't believe that that motivation is

actually traditional. The rich and abundant tradition of our people is far more sophisticated, and I'd like to share with you now a little of how the Jewish tradition sees itself, how it envisions religious growth and development.

The Midrash on *Shir HaShirim*, the Song of Songs, spends a great deal of time exploring the figurative depth of Torah. It compares Torah to wine, to milk and to water. "Just as water stretches across the entire world, as it says, (*l'roka ha-aretz al ha-mayim*) לְרוֹקַע הָאָרֶץ עַל הַמַּיִם, "[Praise the One] who spread the earth over the water" (Ps. 136:6), so too Torah encompasses the entire world." (Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:19) This passage seems to espouse what we might call the 'traditional' view of Tradition—it is monolithic, all-encompassing.

But the Midrash continues: "Just as rainwater comes down drop by drop, eventually forming rivers, so too Torah – one learns a few *halakhot* today, a few tomorrow until one becomes a flowing stream. Just as with water a great person is not ashamed to ask a lesser person, 'Give me a drink of water,' so too with words of Torah – a great scholar should not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, 'Teach me one chapter, one statement, one verse, or even one letter.'" (ibid.)

These analogies present a different message. Rather than being singular and imposing, acquiring Torah is a process. Becoming closer to the tradition, more knowledgeable, more attuned to the rituals of Judaism, is something that happens gradually, accumulating like drops of water. The analogy to a stream which is always flowing asserts that the acquisition of Torah is a change that is never complete. The path of religious awakening and development is one of eternal growth and change. It doesn't happen all at once, and it need never stop.

The second analogy reveals another crucial aspect of our tradition's vision of spiritual growth—it is not a linear process. One can be a great scholar and still have your eyes opened by a complete novice. One can be a neophyte and still unlock unexpected wonders in the tradition. Each of us, no matter our previous experience, can keep growing, keep learning. Just as there are no prerequisites for entering into a process of Jewish exploration, there is no way to 'place out,' either.

This perspective opens us up to a whole new way of approaching the tradition. From this viewpoint, it becomes our task to participate in "an ongoing conversation between ourselves and [the] tradition. At times we will bend our wills to the demands of the tradition; at other times...we will

re-conceptualize what the tradition itself is. Judaism becomes the grounds for a living debate and deliberation in which we share power with the tradition rather than live under its unbending authority.” (Barry Holtz, *Finding Our Way: Jewish Texts and the Lives We Live Today*, pp. 34f)

A beautiful story from the Talmud (Menahot 29b) illustrates this: When Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, he found God affixing crowns to the tops of the letters. Moses wondered why God was taking all this time on mere decoration, when the people of Israel were waiting below. God explained that there would arise a scholar who would derive entire worlds of meaning from those jots and tittles. Moses, awestruck, asked to see this great man. God transported him to the *beit midrash* of Rabbi Akiva, who was teaching a lesson to his students. Moses didn't understand a single word—as Akiva expounded the complexities of the *halakhah*, Moses was certain he was hearing an unfamiliar text. When a student asked the origin of a certain point, Rabbi Akiva answered, הלכה למשה מסיני, *'Halakhah l'Moshe miSinai,'* 'This is a law that goes back to Moses at Sinai.'

By Rabbi Akiva's time, the conversation Moses began at Sinai had grown and developed beyond anything he could have possibly imagined.

And yet, Akiva remained inextricably tied to the point of inception—what he was teaching, living, and learning was also Torah, the same Torah Moses brought down from Sinai. Our relationship with the tradition is something that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Even as its influence on us inspires change and growth, our influence causes it to change as well. When we engage with the tradition, both we and the tradition are transformed.

There is a simple term for this process: *Mitzvah*.

The word '*Mitzvah*' literally means 'commandment.' It is the word we use to describe the rituals, practices, and behaviors that make Jewish life unique. But it is not a word that stands on its own. Where there is *Mitzvah*, there is also *M'tzaveh*, a commander, the ultimate source of the *Mitzvah*, and there is also *M'tzuveh*, the one who is commanded, the one who responds to the call of the *M'tzaveh*—us. *Mitzvah* is a word of relationship. It is the currency of our culture, the very fabric of our relationship with the tradition.

Chancellor Arnold Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who blessed our community with his galvanizing words of Torah this past year

at our annual Glatzer Weekend, speaks and writes passionately about this concept:

Every Jew brings different gifts and needs to the study and living of Torah. The decisions that we make for Judaism are highly individual... We cannot but bring our personal stories to the larger story that our people have been telling for many centuries. We start where and as we are, take on the tradition as we find it, one by one, commit differently to the same covenant and so inscribe ourselves in the “never-ending story” of the Jewish people and its Torah...

[In so doing,] one embarks on a lifelong journey—paralleling Abraham’s—that necessarily joins creativity with what is given.

(Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah*, pp. xxii-ix)

Put simply, the tradition is ours: ours to explore, ours to challenge, ours to impact, ours to embrace. I’d like to offer us, in the spirit of the Midrash I shared a few moments ago, another analogy: Torah is like us. Just as we constantly change – gaining new experiences, becoming emboldened by successes, growing cautious in the wake of challenges, contributing to and drinking from our world—so too Torah, which is never still—bringing ancient insights to bear on modern concerns, developing innovative rituals to meet the exigencies of a changing community, opening up new possibilities of meaning, and sheltering us in sanctity.

Change is a constant—we cannot escape it, nor would we want to. Change is the agent, in our lives as individuals and in Jewish life, that asks us to think more, learn more, and become more through our actions and associations. This is a reflective process, something which blossoms through introspection and meditation. We tend to think of these as private activities, things we do by ourselves for ourselves. But we are also a community, and can only benefit from engaging in this process, exploring our relationship to the tradition, in community. A community of people doing this individually—together—will create a deeper understanding of what Judaism is all about, of what we are all about, than one person alone.

It is with this in mind that we will embark this year on the Mitzvah Initiative. The Mitzvah Initiative is a program that comes from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and is founded on Chancellor Eisen's vision for vibrant, meaningful Jewish living. This initiative, which brings together congregations across the country, is such an invaluable opportunity that Rabbi Lerner and I have decided to devote all of our adult education time to it. This is what our community is studying this year. Through discussion, text exploration and careful reflection, we will explore the multi-layered meanings of *Mitzvah*, discovering where the tradition speaks

to our souls, and how we can craft a relationship to Jewish life that reflects our personalities, our creativity, and our highest aspirations. We will build a core community of learners, seeking together to bring meaning and authenticity to our Jewish lives. Our rich tradition gives us access to a world of value; through our study, we will explore that world, become expert in its ways, and make it our own. The Mitzvah Initiative will provide us with multiple opportunities not only to contemplate the concept of *Mitzvah*, but to practice as well. We will connect our learning to our living, seeing how *Mitzvah* is already operative in our community and uncovering new opportunities to put our ideas into practice.

The Mitzvah Initiative will take place over 14 sessions spread throughout the year. Some of the sessions will coincide with larger-community programs, and will be open to all. Other sessions will be for the core group of learners, those who participate in the entire program. I hope you will all consider this opportunity for bringing more depth and personal meaning to our Jewish lives. Your adult ed. brochures contain more details about the breadth and scope of the program; you can also find out more by speaking with me—I'm happy to discuss any questions you might have.

The opening session will be this Sunday, starting at 9:45 AM, in which we

will explore two clusters of *Mitzvot* that connect us to the world around us—*tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*. Through spirited *hevruta*, or small group, study and discussion, we'll see how these *Mitzvot* have the power to inspire us to sacred action.

The largest goal of the Mitzvah Initiative is to open our eyes to the changes that constantly take place within our hearts and minds, and to give us the tools to be conscious participants in that process. I hope you will join us on this journey.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the Creation of the World, which has, since that first moment, continued to be in a state of becoming. On the sixth day, before bringing humankind into the world, the Holy One said, "Let us make people," "נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם" (*na'aseh adam*). Rabbi Abraham Twerski, a Hasidic rabbi and psychiatrist, wonders whose participation God was seeking—who is the 'us'? Citing the words of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the great founder of Hasidic thought, he explains that all the creatures in the world to that point—both angels and animals—had been created in a state of completion. Angels are entirely spirit, and are not subject to the changes of physical life. Although animals do grow and develop, they do

not do so voluntarily; their changes are the result of instinct; they are programmed into their genes. In creating people, God was seeking a different sort of creature, neither totally physical nor completely spiritual. Creating us in this way, it is as if God said, "I can create you completely spiritual, but then you will be just another angel. I will create you physical, but with the potential to become spiritual by your own effort." (Abraham Twerski, *Jewels of Elul* 5771) God was seeking our participation in our own creation. The 'us' is us. God gives us the potential, and it is our duty to develop it.

The process of change is embedded in our souls. Our role in this world is to be ever-changing, to be on a journey. When we let that journey happen to us, we are no different from the other physical beings in the world. But when we participate in that journey, engaging in our community and in our tradition with intention, coherence, and meaning, we become who we were meant to be—God's partners in Creation. This is a journey I hope we will all take together. Please join me.

I wish us all a new year filled with the blessings of newness, of change, and of coming ever closer to who we are meant to be.