

I recently heard the story of a couple, a husband and wife, many years ago who were looking to join a Jewish community. They weren't sure where they wanted to go, and they knew there were a lot of options, so they looked around at the local newspapers and Pennysavers and they found one that seemed nice. The couple decided to attend Kol Nidre services at a newly formed congregation, where the services were being held in a church. It was a rainy, dreary night, but they ventured out anyway, hopeful with what they would find. The crowd was so huge and the church was so packed, that they ended up having to stand at the back, outside, and in the pouring rain, sharing only one umbrella as they huddled together. But they weren't the only ones. There was a big crowd outside. As soon as the sounds of the Kol Nidre prayer filled the air, and reached the back of the crowd, everyone began swaying and humming softly, together. The new couple swayed with the crowd and their hearts filled as they heard the dulcet tones of the traditional melody wash over them. "This is community" they thought. They decided, right then and there, that they wanted to be part of this special group, and they joined the community as members. That young couple was Phyllis and Artie Angstreich and that congregation meeting in the church was the beginning of a new community called Temple Chaverim.

This is just one story of hundreds among us, that brought us here to this day. That was their beginning. And I'm sure, if I asked you, you could tell me yours - what memory, what person, or what moment led you to wanting to be part of this Temple Chaverim community. But I don't think that we get the chance, very often, to tell that story to one another. So, I'd like us to take a moment to do that. I'd like you to take a moment and turn to someone sitting in front of you or behind you. Turn to someone you didn't come here with tonight, and share your story of

the moment, the realization, the instant you knew that this was where you wanted to be. Describe who was there, what you felt, and your WHY for being here. Please take about 2 minutes each, to share. (Bring them back together: Thank you for sharing your stories with one another. I hope you will continue to share these stories for years to come).

Honoring our own journey, and how we reached this moment in time, is so important to the work that we do, this time of year. The High Holidays, and Rosh Hashanah, in particular, are moments in time where we really stop and we reflect on where we have come from and where we are going. We perform *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of our soul, to figure out what we've done in this past year and what we still have left to accomplish. But, what is most important about this concept is that we use the past, we reflect on the past, and we honor the past by helping it guide us towards our future. It is a time for new beginnings - to have the opportunity to celebrate what has been and get excited about what can be.

Tomorrow morning, we will read from the Torah about the first days of creation. Perhaps the most famous of all beginnings we know of, some biblical critics speculate that these days were not 24 hour periods, but rather an explanation of what happened in the span of a single millennium. Shawna Dolonsky, author of "The Multiple Truth of Myths" explains that the ancient Israelites had creation stories that were told and retold. Eventually, these stories reached the authors of Torah who wrote them down. But these stories were etiological, Dolonsky argues. She says, "The creation stories in Genesis served to provide answers to why the world was the way it was, such as why people wear clothes and why women experience pain during childbirth".¹ Over time, the story of our beginning took on such telling and retelling that it became synonymous with our understanding of the world. When we pondered our existence and

¹ Ngo, Robin. "Should we Take Creation Literally?" Biblical Archaeological Society. June 20, 2019

the universe and how it all came to be, we used these stories that had been told and retold in order to make sense of it all.

On Rosh Hashanah, we use the story of creation to think about our ultimate beginning, in order to help us think about where we have been and how that informs us towards where we are going. We are literally commanded to cease from all work, on this day, and to do a mental reset. In this time that we are given, we are asked to think about our intentions for the future - what do we want to accomplish? What do we want to create? What requires our attention? What are we going to mend? What will bring us joy? Where will we spend our time? And with whom?

For me, personally, this is an exciting New Year ahead as your Senior Rabbi. I am so lucky to begin my new year with this community - one that is as interested in meaningful and joyous Jewish experiences as I am. This community has already told me, throughout the last many months, that you are just as eager as I am to build more engagement amongst members, think about how to harness our own community to engage potential other members, and to try new innovations that keep us feeling energized and connected to one another and to our greater community on Long Island. And, you've taught me much about the history here, the sacred ways in which this community was built and how we can use that foundation as a launchpad towards our next chapter.

All beginnings bring about a sense of change. As the British politician Benjamin Disraeli said, "Change is constant. Change is inevitable." And there will be some changes here at our synagogue. That is also inevitable. As many of you know, this summer we began researching and trying to find the best time for regular Shabbat worship. Throughout many discussions, with families, regular, non-regulars, the staff and our Religious Practices Committee, our service times will now be at 7:30pm throughout the year, as opposed to 8pm. While this might feel like

a slight change, it was done so as to accommodate as MANY people as possible to be able to come and be an active part of our community. We'll also be changing the way we utilize our clergy. It is INCREDIBLE to have two Rabbis in our congregation, and we are BEYOND lucky to have Rabbi Bennet as one of the jewels in our crown. She and I have agreed that there are times that she can be more present in people's homes than having to be on the bimah every Friday night. This year, she will be piloting a "SHABBAT IN THE HOME" program where she will go to host homes and celebrate Shabbat prayers and dinner with that family and a few others that they invite over. In this way, we can be serving populations of our community both within and outside of these four walls. That doesn't mean that you will NEVER see her on the Bimah on Friday nights, or conversely that I will never be in your home. It just means we're working on how to expand what we do and how we engage people.

If you have been to any of our Friday night services, you might have seen that we now have an area with children's books and toys that is dedicated to families who want to bring their young children with them to services. You might have also known or noticed that we have hearing devices available for anyone who might need it. And a few years ago, we lowered the Mezuzot on our doorways to make them handicap accessible. This year, we are going to continue to expand our definitions and our actions of INCLUSIVITY in our synagogue - being proactive about welcoming in all those who feel some sense of being differently abled, who might look different from you or have different personal preferences. This could include permanent name tags, so people never have to struggle with whom they are meeting. This might include using microphones at all gatherings over 10 people so that we know all have access to hearing what is being said. Or, it could include signs that help people know where to go for what, in our building. Temple Chaverim is a synagogue of warmth and friendship and I want us

to ensure that all who enter explicitly feel a sense of belonging, whether through signs, through what is set out around the building, or through how we consciously practice our inclusivity. I am excited to begin to reset this year and make many of these changes, with your help and your guidance as to the needs of our community.

I also want to acknowledge that with change, can also come hesitancy and fear. As many of you indicated earlier, to one another - there is a concrete reason why you are here today. And sometimes there is fear that with change, might come a change in the reason you sought out being here in the first place. Or, there is the fear of the unknown. Take this year's Bnai Mitzvah class and their families, for example. They don't really know me and I don't know them. We don't have the luxury of having spent year's together, creating memories and funny stories. But we will - over time I'll work with these students as they enter into our teen program TNL, as they become Confirmands of Judaism, and as they graduate high school. It will just take some time. For now, we're all doing our best to get to know one another in some introductory phone calls, at our "meet and greet" events, and having family meetings together. And, on one of the most important days in their young lives, I will stand there doing my best to really know who they are and who they have the potential to become as we bring them in to the beauty of Jewish adulthood.

The same is true of the rest of us - I have had some WONDERFUL opportunities to get to know many of you throughout the last months, as you've gotten to know me and my family. But our relationship will solidify over time. As we share in each other's joys and sorrows, I will be present and here to learn about you, your family, your life and what is most important to you. And I will carry that with me as sacred, the relationship that we're able to build, over time.

There are times where change can be uncertain and scary because we are also afraid of failing. Failure, for many of us, is a deep fear and something we view as unenjoyable or even unacceptable. It's painful to fail, especially after you've put a lot of work in to your task or your endeavor. But failure is also a way to teach us, to help us grow from our past, from our mistakes and to take on the future with more knowledge and confidence than ever before. Let's think, for example, about a baby who is learning to walk for the first time. They stand up, put one foot forward, teeter a bit, and then fall down. Did they fail? Yes. But did they learn about their balance and their body? Yes. So the next time, they get up, they put one foot forward, maybe teeter a little less and then maybe plant the next foot. Or maybe they fall down again. Either way, their failure is helping them to learn about their body. And, each time they get better and better until they've learned about the motion of walking. True, they will end up looking like a drunk orangutan for most of the next month, but they are learning, each and every time, how to perfect their skills, just a little bit better. Until one day, we realize that they are walking just like everyone else. Why? Because babies aren't taught to FEAR their failure. They simply use it to learn and progress. They learn to fail FORWARD.

Failing forward is a concept that believes in the inevitability of failure and the ability to use that failure to grow and change towards ultimate success. Otherwise, if you fail and do nothing with what you've learned, you're failing backwards. Babies fail forward when learning new skills. Entrepreneurs often fail forward when testing and retesting their marketing, their designs, and their products. A great musician fails forward when she is struggling with a particular few bars of a piece and works tirelessly to improve what is giving her trouble. Failing forward is about NOT giving up, about checking your ego at the door. It's about realizing that

there are always lessons to be learned in our failures on how we can eventually reach success. Failure is not to be feared. It is to be used as a tool that we can learn and grow from.

We will likely have failures here, in the next year or two, here at Temple Chaverim. But we have to look at these failures as a chance for growth, as a moment to embrace what might need to change, and as a way to understand how to make progress and move forward towards success. Failure and change are hard, but it's really just about challenging our mindset that can sometimes get stuck in the same mode. It's about challenging ourselves to say, "Is this the best version of who we want to be, as a community?" And then having the courage to make the changes necessary, to fail forward, and to learn and grow into our best self yet.

The history of Temple Chaverim is one that is made up of all of your stories - all of your past failures and successes. But more importantly, it's been about your past growth and change to the community that we are today. Temple Chaverim doesn't look the way it did when Phyllis and Artie Angstreich decided to join, many years ago. It doesn't even look that way it did five years ago. There have already been some changes that are inevitable. But we must continue to honor the journey that our community has been on, what we have accomplished and how we have changed and progressed, if we ever want to continue to build towards our best future selves. One of my favorite English readings, from our Shabbat prayer book, *Mishkan T'fillah*, reads as follows:

“This is an hour of change. Within in we stand uncertain on the border of light. Shall we draw back or cross over? Where shall our hearts turn? Shall we draw back, my brother, my sister, or cross over? This is the hour of change and within it, we stand quietly on the border of light. What lies before us? Shall we draw back, my brother, my sister, or cross over?”

Rosh Hashanah is such an important time in our Jewish calendar. It helps us reflect and honor the past that has helped guide us to where we are today. It's a time for us to pause and take stock of our own lives and where we want them to go. It's a moment to admit that there are some things that have gone well and others that need focus, attention, and maybe even a little healing. It is a deeply personal experience to reflect on yourself and on what needs to continue to be worked through. But there can be reward in doing this work - the reward of helping yourself evolve and change and be the best version of yourself possible.

This is an exciting moment in time. We stand on the precipice of a new year - fraught with opportunity and possibilities that could be just around the corner for us. It's a moment of reinvention of ourselves, of innovation to help bring in the new, and to join together and celebrate what we have and where we are going. By nature, I am an optimist - I always see the glass as half full. But whether you are an optimist, a pessimist, or somewhere in between we all have the ability to challenge our mindset to become one of GROWTH at this New Year.

As we begin to contemplate all that is possible in 5780, I would like to leave you with a prayer that I wrote for you, our Temple Chaverim community, at the start of this New Year:

Adonai our God

Wake us with the courage to face our new day

With humility, with honesty, with strength and with hope.

Imbue in us the spirit of change

Of challenge

Of growth

Of gains.

Build for us a community

Filled with friendship

Learning, laughter, and love,

Filled with abundance and joy and blessing.

Protect us from our past mistakes.

Teach us to be unafraid to grow even in the failure.

Adonai our God,

May each of us remember WHAT gave us the courage to begin

HOW we want to exist and WHY our community is sacred.

May each of us build a life of goodness, of kindness, of wholeness, of balance and of peace.

And may each of us, as we continue on in our journey of understanding, of awakening, and renewal, be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.

May this New Year bring many blessings of sweet beginnings to you and your families.

L'shanah Tovah