

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 2013 - "From Dreaming to Doing"

by Rabbi Moshe Thomas Heyn – Temple Israel of Greater Miami, September 5, 2013

An Amish boy and his father were in a mall. It was their first visit to the big city and they were amazed by almost everything they saw, but especially by two shiny, silver walls that could move apart and then slide back together again. The boy asked, "What is this, father?" The father (never having seen an elevator) responded, "Son, I have never seen anything like this in my life. I don't know what it is." While the boy and his father were watching with amazement, a frumpy old lady in a wheelchair moved up to the moving walls and pressed a button. The walls opened and the lady rolled between them into a small room. The walls closed as the boy and his father watched the small circular numbers above the walls light up sequentially - 1-2-3. They continued to watch as the numbers then began to light in the reverse order - 3-2-1. Finally the walls opened up again and a gorgeous 24-year-old blonde stepped out. The father said quietly to his son, "Go and get your mother."

I heard this story from an Orthodox rabbi, though he never explained what it meant. But for me, the meaning is clear. We sometimes see people undergo transformations in ways that cause us to wonder, "How did they do that?"

Now is the time, at the beginning of the Jewish New Year, for each of us to think about what kind of transformation is possible for ourselves, with or without the sliding doors, so that we're less mystified about it than the Amish boy and his father.

First we must ask the question: what kind of transformation do we seek, if any? We may be happy with things as they are. Or we may not be so happy, and feel stuck. Whatever the case may be, I invite you to dream with me now about what's possible.

Of course many of us want to be younger, healthier and more secure, and these are good things. But what else we might want? Not just outer changes or upgrades but the inner qualities of character we seek? Close your eyes for a moment and allow yourself to actually feel what it might be like to be more passionate, more creative, more loving and spontaneous, more relaxed and connected, more balanced and generous. All these qualities are available to us, but there are three conditions needed for change to happen. First, we have to want to change.

Theodor Herzl, the visionary behind modern Zionism, said: ***"If you will it, it is no dream."*** We all know is true in a personal way, but Herzl believed this principle applied as well on a collective basis. We know that Israel is still a work in progress, but the fact that it now exists as an independent State bears the truth of what Herzl believed a hundred years ago when he wrote that "The plan would seem insane enough if a single individual were to undertake it; but if many Jews simultaneously agree on it, it is entirely reasonable, and its achievement presents no difficulties worth mentioning."

Now we all know that getting Jews to simultaneously agree on anything is impossible, which may partly explain why Israel is still very much a work in progress.

But we learn from this that for change to happen, we have to make up our minds and decide: what, if anything, do we want to change? If there is no motivation, no clear intention, no singularity of purpose, then you have to accept whatever is handed to you. Being motivated, desiring change, could simply be a matter of not being satisfied with the status quo. It could begin with a gnawing sense of angst that something is not quite right. Or it could be a matter of reaching the point when you can no longer bear the pain or suffering; or when you can longer sit idly by and watch the suffering of others. There comes a point when we finally say, "something here has to change."

This is true in our individual lives and collectively. Think about the changes needed to address issues such as poverty, gun violence, educational equality, immigration reform and peace in the Middle East. Motivation and singularity of purpose, or lack of it, is indeed part of the problem, and certainly a necessary condition for change to occur.

But now, the second condition is this: you have to be able to imagine, feel, and form a clearer picture in your mind's eye of the change you envision.

I'll give you an example of this. You might have read recently about the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles. It's located on the edge of downtown Los Angeles in a district which was once home to the city's movers and shakers, but is now known as "Koreatown." It's one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the city, made up not only of Koreans but also Latinos, Japanese, Filipinos and many other new immigrants. The Jews have long since left that area and now live far away.

But the congregation and its rabbi knew that, to avoid an irreversible loss, change was needed. Although they already had more modern satellite campuses in West Los Angeles and Malibu, they decided it was time to restore their original sanctuary, built in 1929, to its former glory.

You gotta hand it to them, because the members of that Temple had to raise a lot of money to do that. What if I said they needed to raise \$10,000 to renovate their sanctuary? How about \$100,000? How would that impact your wallet? How about \$500,000? How about \$1 million? How about \$5 million? Could you imagine if we had to raise that kind of money? But we're not even close, yet. \$10 million? \$50 million? \$100 million? Try \$150 million.

That's what they spent to renovate their sanctuary. Singularity of purpose, imagination, and a lot of money can certainly help get things done. But I'm not asking you for money. Not yet. I just want to focus on how important these first two conditions are when it comes to change. (1) Motivation and singularity of purpose, and (2) a clear idea or picture of the change you want to see; the dream you want to realize.

Last night we began this process when we talked about *cheshbon hanefesh*, an "accounting of the soul;" taking an honest assessment of ourselves and our expectations. I think it was productive because I see a lot of people here today who are ready for change in this New Year. You know that the word in Hebrew for "year" - "*shana*" - is based on the same root as the word "*shinui*" which means "change." The course of a year and the flow of time necessarily involve change. I think we all instinctively know that, and that's why we're here. Look around and see how many of us are ready for change.

We are also beginning to form a clearer vision of who we want to be - as individuals and as a congregation. Last night I spoke about the many positive changes over the past year that are moving us closer to that vision, though we've already been working on it for a long time. Our congregation's founders and benefactors built this beautiful sanctuary, in 1927, as a space in which this vision to be nurtured and realized. I'm relieved that I don't have to ask you for \$150 million to renovate this sanctuary. I'm sure you're relieved too. There are other things we could use that money for, but we'll save that conversation for later.

Right now, I want to tell you what the third condition is for positive change to occur by way of one more story.

There was an old Jewish man who lived alone in the country. He needed to plant his potato garden but the task was too daunting at his age. His only son, Sol, who used to help him dig, was in Federal prison for insider trading and stock fraud. The old man wrote to his son:

Dear Solly:

I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my potato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, all my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me. Love, Papa

A few days later, the old man received a letter from his son:

Dear Papa:

For heaven's sake, don't dig up that garden. That's where I buried the money and stocks.

Love, Solly

At 4:00 a.m. the next morning, a team of FBI agents arrived at the old man's house and dug up the entire garden area without finding any money or stocks. They apologized to the old man and left. That same day, the old man received another letter from his son.

Dear Papa:

Go ahead and plant the potatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances.

Love, Solly

Even with our limitations, there is still much we can accomplish. We just need to be creative, come up with a plan, and then take action. That's the third condition: (1) be ready, (2) be clear, and (3) take action. That's right. 1-2-3.

The biggest challenge, when it comes to taking action, is establishing the structure and patterns that will support the desired change and ground it in reality. And this is where we are now in the process of transformation.

We can't just think about and hope for change. It's like preparing a garden. It takes sweat and labor, digging and planting, watering and tending long before you can even begin to see the fruits of your labor. It's the same with fitness. You wouldn't go to a Zumba class just to watch the instructor get a good work out, would you? (I think I saw some guy over here start to raise his hand.) And taking one or two classes a year is not likely to accomplish anything. What's required is a lifestyle change, which means incorporating into your daily life the habits that can generate the focus and energy needed to help you realize – to make real – your dreams.

As I said before, this is true on an individual level but even moreso on a collective basis. We need only thing about the March on Washington, the 50th anniversary of which we celebrated last week. MLK, Jr. was able to mobilize millions of Americans to come together and take action, advancing the cause of racial equality and the passage of sweeping civil rights laws.

Now, I believe that your dreams and my dreams are closely aligned. In fact, I believe that being here today proves to me that you're not only ready for change, but that you have come here to be with others whose dreams are closely aligned with your own.

If we can bring our shared dreams into a sharper focus and begin practicing on our own and together the daily habits that can make them a reality, we'll generate a very powerful energetic field and not only will we notice the changes that begin to happen in our lives, but others will notice them as well.

This Temple will once again be the place we can come to, to reconnect with that higher vision of ourselves. A place where we can support one another and be supported. A place where you can look at a stranger and know that you share something in common on a very deep level, creating a powerful sense of community and belonging.

Now that we are ready, with a clearer vision of who we want to be, now is the time to take action.

This morning, I'm going to ask you to do something; and not just for today. Just ask anyone on a diet. It takes sustained effort over time to see results. It may be 30 days, maybe a couple weeks of changing one's daily habits. There may be a very good reason why there is a period of ten days

between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, so let's start there. I'd like to ask you to make just a small adjustment or two in your daily routine for the next ten days, and if you do so I guarantee that you'll begin to see results in yourself and those around you.

To help with that, I'm going to offer "Ten Suggestions." You can follow one per day, or better yet, try a few of them every day. I also offer ten knowing that, this being a Reform congregation, it would be a stretch for us to talk about ten "commandments." But suggestions, we can always use, especially when we recognize their value. I believe you will. You'll find them in your service booklets if you haven't already.

Like diet or exercise, these activities are most effective when practiced and reinforced not only once or twice a year but on a weekly basis. Read them with me:

1) **Be inspired.** Make time to be inspired. Read something from the 'Resources & Inspiration' page on our website (below.) Or if you find something elsewhere, share it with us. We can inspire one another.

2) **Learn.** This is a core value of our tradition and the reason for our survival since antiquity. No matter how religious (or not-religious) you are, Jewish learning is an exciting journey that never ends.

3) **Bless/sanctify.** Eating is such an important part of our daily lives. Find some way to be more 'mindful' about it. Making ever-more-conscious choices when eating can also make it into a 'sacred' activity.

4) **Pursue justice.** If you are already doing this on a daily basis, let's consider working on a project together. There are a few causes for which we could use your support, such as immigration reform, reducing human trafficking and gun violence, and advocating for equality at the *kotel* (the Western Wall). If you are involved in other social justice causes, share them with us. As Helen Keller said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

5) **Do something to support Israel.** Become an advocate. Support the peace process. Talk with your friends and family about Israel to raise awareness. And join me and my wife, Alexandra, in planning and preparing for our congregational trip to Israel in 2014.

6) **Do something to support Temple Israel.** Call me and we can come up with some ideas of ways you can help. It could be offering your time or expertise in letting people know what a treasure we have here. Or it could mean coming to a class or a service and bringing a friend.

7) **Give *tzedakah*.** “Charity” is a nice thing to give. *Tzedakah* means doing what is just and right on a daily basis. There are many worthy recipients who justly deserve our support, including Temple Israel.

8) **Let the children in your life see you doing something Jewish.** It could be lighting candles, building a *sukkah*, or cooking *matzah* balls; anything that reinforces your Jewish identity and theirs.

9) **Say the *Shema* before you go to sleep.** It's only six words, yet it's a wonderful and timeless way to reaffirm your Jewish values, your faith in God and humanity, and your role in shaping our future.

10) **Set aside one day of the week to “unplug.”** We call that *Shabbat*, a day for “being” instead of “doing;” a day to dream, to stretch, and to rest. Come to Temple Israel on Friday nights and Saturday mornings to see how we support one another in doing that joyfully as a community.

If you're already doing these things on a weekly basis, I commend you. Perhaps our community can support and inspire you to do even more. Or perhaps you can support and inspire others to do more. But we can agree that these efforts are beneficial for all who engage in them and that “one mitzvah leads to another.”

There may be some here from a classical Reform background who might think I'm trying to make you more Orthodox by asking you to say a blessing, or recite the *Shema*, or observe a day of rest. But I'd like to debunk that claim right away. Whether one is religious or not, it's easy to see the psychological and social value of these practices.

Last night we began this process of transformation with *cheshbon hanefesh*, an “accounting of the soul,” which takes us through the first two steps of wanting to change and then being able to envision and feel the change we aspire to realize. Now it is time for the third step in this process, making a

commitment to practice daily habits that will support that change and ground it in reality.

Like digging and tending a garden, it takes work and effort on a daily basis. Practice these ten suggestions and when you come back in ten days, I know you will see and feel the results.

The process of transformation is not really so mystifying. With or without the sliding doors, it can be just as remarkable as this: 3-2-1.

The transformation has already begun.