

ROSH HASHANA 5778 (Day 2)

An ancient teaching, quoted by everyone from monks to Hasidic rebbes, states: “When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn’t change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn’t change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could, indeed, have changed the world.”

It is probably safe to say that, over the course of the past nine years, almost everyone in this Sanctuary, with an opinion, has advocated for change.

More than that, however, may not be safe to say. Our nation has been enduring a period of turmoil and stress, the likes of which it has rarely seen in peacetime. Playing on that tension would be easy, but Rosh Hashana is not a campaign rally, nor is it a performance.

Our Rosh Hashana service is worship, it is about renewal, on focusing on how we will improve ourselves and our community in the year ahead.

We have all experienced a great deal of change this year and in the past nine years, dating back to the beginning of the Obama administration.

Many of us feel one way about some of the changes, others feel differently. However, our nation has experienced enough in the way of division. What I hope is that, today, we can all emerge united.

We certainly start out united today, in that we are using a new makhzor, the latest High Holy Day prayer book of American Reform Judaism. Like all changes, it may take some time to adjust. Some of us may be upset that a reading we enjoyed has been changed or disappeared, while others may be thrilled at the new wealth of readings and changes in language.

The truth is that “Gates of Repentance” served our community and Reform Judaism in America very well for close to forty years, but the time has come to move on. Change is inevitable.

I have frequently noted that one of my favorite sources of sermonic material, over the years, was the TV series “Seinfeld.” Yet as relevant as “Seinfeld” seemed to so many of us for so long, today it is kind of “quaint,” like “The Honeymooners.” The only computer on “Seinfeld” sat in the

background; he never touched it. There were no cellular or smart phones. As such, this very clever show must take its place on the “oldies” shelf . . . and we move on.

Forty five years ago, my dad and my brother were part of a group of weird people who would shlep our newspapers to the community recycling center every month. In the early 1970’s, environmentalism was seen as the province of tree hugging characters, like Euell Gibbons, who did TV commercials for Grape Nuts cereal. Caring for the environment was as foreign to the overwhelming majority of Americans as loving relationships which were not heterosexual.

Yet, within forty years, recycling and caring for the environment went mainstream. The rights of gays and lesbians to marry is now the law of the land.

Society is changing very quickly, which is also a big change. For most of human history, change came only occasionally. Now, it is a regular part of our routine and frankly, a lot of people don’t like it.

For many people, part of the charm of Pearl River used to be that it was the community that modernity forgot. People used to call it Mayberry, evoking the “shucks”, good ol’ fashioned, imaginary North Carolina

community where Andy Griffith served as sheriff for thirty minutes at a time.

Pearl River prided itself on avoiding many of the changes which came to neighboring communities. In order to keep non-whites out of the community, a former Orangetown supervisor consistently rejected federal funds to build a community pool.

Orangetown has recently passed regulations regarding who may use its public facilities, including parks. Residents of Orangetown and other neighboring communities have social media sites devoted to keeping certain people out and maintaining a particular type of life style.

Mahwah, New Jersey is currently going through a rather ugly struggle to make its community less attractive to Orthodox Jews by fighting the installation of an eruv on local telephone poles.

Ultimately, though, change is as certain as babies learning to walk, talk and get toilet trained. We don't know exactly when it will happen, but we do know that it is going to happen.

Wherever one is stands on the political spectrum, I am sure that we agree that America is a very special place. I am also confident that we agree

that nazis and white supremacists advocate a hateful, evil and obnoxious way of life. Still, the beauty of America is that they have a right to hold and even voice their opinion . . . as do their opponents.

What we do not have a right to do is to incite or engage in violence.

America does, however, offer everyone, from presidents to nazis, freedom of expression, regardless of what the rest of us may think of the message.

We have the right, one might even say the obligation to get involved in our nation and make things better. Signing a petition, an act which once had some value, is now usually nothing more than a fundraising vehicle.

Letters to Congress still have significant value (though for security reasons, it is best to text, fax or email them), but clicking on a website does not. Taking the time to actually go and do something, whether it is to protest or support a cause or a candidate, does make a difference.

The 1960's were a time of activism and excess, but people spoke their mind and acted according to their conscience. Perhaps it was because they didn't have video games and smart phones to distract them, but they made a difference by gathering in large numbers, shouting, protesting and speaking up.

Following the violent protests in Charlottesville, a group of white supremacists planned to march in Boston the following weekend. 15,000 counter protesters made the point that while it may be legally-protected speech, they were going to fight the hate every step of the way.

To make a change requires a physical presence. Reforming society means raising our voices and our consciousness, not clicking on a mouse.

The Torah portions we read this Rosh Hashana dealt with disturbing themes related to child abandonment and child sacrifice. Children remain incredibly victimized in our country and around the world. We can read and click or we can read, get angry and get involved.

There is no shortage of causes that need our caring, our time, our passion. During these days of Rosh Hashana, we have read about many of them, as we will do on Yom Kippur. There is an enormous amount of good that each of us can do individually, but even more that we can do together.

On Rosh Hashana, we confess our sins in the plural. When we see our broken world, it is not someone else's fault, it is our fault. If we are not actively part of the solution, then we are actively part of the problem.

This year, our congregation is intensifying our efforts at interfaith dialogue, feeding the hungry, planting trees in Israel and much more. We are limited only by the number of people who choose to join us in these and other acts that make a difference.

We can stare at our TV, phone and computer screens or we can get off of our butts and change the world, by changing ourselves. It is not enough to click “like” or “angry” on Facebook; to change the world, we actually have to do something. The choice, as always, is ours.

How do we change the world? We begin by changing ourselves . . . and if not now, when? AMEN