

Sermon on Identity in Transformation
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In thinking about the concept of change and particularly of change in the Jewish world, one cannot but remember the story of the Fiddler on the Roof and Tevye, the Traditional Jewish Father. When I say Tevye, I'm sure that one word comes to mind: TRADITION!

Tevye offers some sage advice:

Because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.~ Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as... as... as the fiddler on the roof!

He is right about that. Orthodoxy provides expectations that progressive Judaism does not. Reform Jews do not believe in commandments and obligations in the same way as the Orthodox. We do not necessarily know "what God expects" us to do, nor even who we are in the grand scheme of things. We are Jews, but each of us is different as a Jew. Each one of us has differing beliefs and practices. We come from different places and come to Judaism in different ways. The changes in our lives therefore affect us differently as individuals.

In some sense, we can all identify with Tevye's concern about the attention paid to the Jewish people in the broader world, often not to our benefit and we can laugh his statement:

I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?

Why is it that we identify with that statement? Because in some way, we can identify with the suffering of our fellow Jews and the suffering of our ancestors, even though few of us here today have faced remotely the difficulties and challenges faced by our parents and grandparents.

This is true even in the story of the Fiddler on the Roof in which Tevye's daughter Chava falls in love with someone who is not Jewish and Tevye's world seems to spin around him. Chava's statement to her father is as simple as it is profound, "The world is changing, Papa."

Clearly, in the story there is a strong emphasis on the conflict between assimilation and maintaining traditions. Often lost in the discussion is the connection between those traditions and our identity as a people. A father such as Tevye in 19th century Poland, you have your pick of Stetls, would have assumed that his daughters would marry Jews, not only because it was Tradition, but because one's identity as a Jew meant that those who were not Jewish would almost certainly not socialize with his daughters, much less marry them. The Jewish community was insular both by its own choice and to no small extent

by pressure from outside of the community preventing interaction. The social groups with which Tevye was concerned were rich Jews and poor Jews, not Jews and Gentiles, and Tevye for his part dreamed of being rich like the Rothschilds. The original words to the famous song were, "If I were a Rothschild," the wealthy Jewish banking family.

Chava's statement, "The world is changing, Papa" comes not only as a shock to Tevye that HIS DAUGHTER would act this way, but that she believed that in the changing world, her actions would be acceptable. Things that were once impossible were now possible. Things that were once taboo were now acceptable--but not to him. In the modern world, love was more important than the tradition to which Tevye clung.

Tevye was not ready for the world to transform around him.

Ultimately, while maintaining our Traditions as much as possible, sometimes transformation MUST occur and we cannot be as we were before. "The world is changing."

We know this to be true on many levels. This is a lesson taught by science. Extinctions have occurred time and time again because species were unable to transform in order to adapt to new realities. They could not adapt to rising or falling temperatures, a paucity of food, competition from other species for resources or any number of other changes to their environments. Species that could adapt to the new realities became more successful.

"The world is changing" is also a lesson taught by business. There was a time when large SUVs were flying off of car dealer lots and companies were producing vehicles that would give Sherman Tanks a run for their money in a collision. There was no care or little care about the fact that they consumed gas as if it were free. Now, the manufacturers are laying-off workers because demand for those vehicles has fallen precipitously.

The world changes generation after generation. The joke is of course about the grandparent who talks of walking to school barefoot uphill in the snow, both ways! The reality was slightly different, but a far cry from today's reality.

Even when I was young, it was common for elementary school children to walk home from school, let themselves in to the house, feed themselves snack, perhaps watch over younger siblings all while home alone for a couple of hours before an adult arrived. These abandoned and horribly neglected children by today's standards were called "latch-key children." I was one.

Kids would go out after dinner on their bicycles and parents would tell them to come home when the street lights came on. There were, unconscionably, I realize, no cell phones! There wasn't even email or the internet. Atari came out with a video game that had two rectangle blips, one on each side of the screen, that moved up and down to meet a square blip that was supposed to be a ball. The game, the exciting new abyss for children's time, was called "Pong." Pong is to today's video games what the horse and buggy are to today's cars-- well, perhaps that's generous.

There were no satellites. You could not watch events unfolding in distant locales around the world with only a momentary delay. Remember things called vinyl records? You had to figure out where to put the needle on the record if you wanted to cue up a song. Remember black and white television? How about those bars that occupied the screen when the channel had stopped broadcasting for the day?

Just think about our childhood illnesses! For example, Chicken Pox was a standard part of childhood when I was young. Parents would often send their children to stay with others who had Chicken Pox just to get their own child's infection over with! Misery loved company. Today, children receive a vaccine that prevents them from getting Chicken Pox at all. Polio, mumps, measles, rubella—none of them trouble children today, at least not in nations with modern medical care.

Yet, while our memories of past times remind us that our world is changing, the example of change that is most real, most tangible for us, is the closest change of all. We ourselves are changing.

We have each experienced profound changes to our bodies and to our abilities. Transformation is a constant for us, we are born, learn to walk and talk, grow up into men and women, face new experiences, new places, new people. Our bodies are constantly transforming: we grow taller, we gain weight, we lose weight, our hair grows, our nails grow, we become ill, we heal, we become depressed and sad, we become happy, we get stronger, we get weaker, our hair migrates from places we would like it to places we would not, our abilities increase and then later in life, they begin to decrease. Each and every morning we awake with a different body than the one in which we awoke the previous day. The changes are often subtle, yes, but they are always occurring.

One thing we know about these changes to our bodies is that they can be painful. It is not unusual for children to have terrible pains in their knees from simply growing. Hormones can cause all sorts of painful and distressing things as they affect our bodies. Along with these physical changes often comes a change in our identity.

For example, in my youth I was actually considered a good athlete. I could throw a ball with the best of them, in fact better than anyone I knew. In 7th grade, I tried out for quarterback on our football team, knowing that I could throw farther and more accurately than anyone else. The coach of the team looked at me standing next to the other guys and said, "David, at your height you should be a flanker."

Couple that disappointment with the result of my first play as a flanker, when the defensive end, all 6 foot 2 inches of him, jumped over the significantly undersized lineman pretending to block for me and knocked me into next week, and my dreams of being a star on the football field were short lived.

Baseball was my best sport, but when my blazing speed in middle school turned into average and then slow speed by the end of high school, thoughts of playing in the major leagues drifted away. I would be no John Elway, starring in baseball and football in

college, no Babe Ruth, hitting homeruns to thunderous cheers, not even a Doug Flutie, known for being a short though very talented quarterback. Doug Flutie by the way is at least a couple of inches taller than I am. My identity shifted from athlete to student, to professor, and then to rabbi.

But it was not easy giving up those dreams. I lobbied for my high school to start a baseball program every year from 8th grade until I graduated. My lobbying worked. The school created a baseball team during my freshman year in college.

These times, full of changes, helped me to redefine myself and helped me to create a new identity. I found new skills, new hopes, new dreams, even as the old ones faded from my life. I found love, Julie and I started a family, and now as rabbi, I help others through the changes in their lives, happy and sad. It is very meaningful work for me. I enjoy sharing some of the most profoundly happy times in your lives and I feel good knowing that during the sad and difficult times I may be of some comfort.

I stand before you and before God during these High Holidays, knowing that I am imperfect. None of us is perfect. None of us is without fault. None without sin. We all could do better. We all can improve ourselves. We all can make changes for good. We all worry that we will fail and remember times in our lives when we did. But we need to try. We, as Jews, take comfort in our Traditions and support from them.

During the High Holidays, our Traditions bring structure and strength to our lives. We feel more confident in our ability to look at ourselves, to do Pikuach Nefesh, to take an accounting of our souls, even if only because we feel required to do so. On Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, we feel more strongly our identity as Jews because of our traditions.

That said, in our modern world, we often avoid seeing ourselves and others seeing us as being bound by labels. In fact, we go out of our way to avoid them. We may avoid traditions precisely because we do not wish to be labeled, "Traditional." But in avoiding traditions, we do not necessarily want to be branded a "rebel" because that label would group us with other "rebels" and we are consummate individuals.

You may have noticed that I am a bit of a sports enthusiast and a baseball fan. Professional baseball is in no small part a sport played in front of fans who are watching the game while remembering every other they have ever seen or participated in. Today's players are constantly compared with those of the past. Today's feats regularly set against those of players whom we saw in our youth. Baseball is a game full of traditions.

One former player, a former all-star first baseman on the Los Angeles Dodgers, Steve Garvey, when speaking of today's players said something that I think applies in profound ways beyond the game of baseball and to our attitudes in our own lives.

Steve Garvey said,

The difference between the old ballplayer and the new ballplayer is the jersey.
The old ballplayer cared about the name on the front (– the team's name).
The new ballplayer cares about the name on the back (– his own name).

Our children will tell us "The world is changing" just as Chava did to Tevye. Will our response to them be to turn away and to deny the reality? Will we be willing to face the pain brought by the changes? Will we care more about the name on the back of the jersey, ourselves, or the one on its front, the larger organization and community to which we belong, the others who are dependent upon us?

What would our Jewish jersey look like? Think about that for a moment.

Would the word on the front be "Jew," "Reform Jew," "Progressive Jew," "Des Moines Jew," "Spouse, Mother, Father, Son or Daughter of a Jew," "Temple B'nai Jeshurun?"

What would caring about the name on the front more than the name on the back mean to us? What commitments should we have? What responsibilities?

When we stand before God next week, in awe and humility, the front of our jersey may well say, "Children of God" or simply "Mortals." Perhaps, the team name on the front will be "Skeptics." For some, hoping to find something greater than themselves, the name may be "Lost and Searching." Others, who have felt blessed by God may wear, "Thankful."

Some will dress in white without any names on the front or the back. Each of us, because we are individuals, will dress ourselves in different spiritual garb.

We do not stand as Tevye would have us stand, all with the same name on the front of our jerseys. We do not know for certain what God wants from us. We may not even be sure of whom we are in a spiritual sense. Things are different for us. "The world is changing, Papa." The world is changing.

May we be blessed with the courage, fortitude, and ability to adapt to the changes in our world. May we come to know, as Tevye suggested in the story, who we are as members of the Jewish community and as individuals in the modern world. May our traditions, old and new, bring us support and guidance amid the seas of change. And let us not live our lives as...as...as shaky as the fiddler on the roof.

L'shanah Tovah.