

## Transforming Transitions

Sermon Rosh Hashanah Day I, 5784, September 16, 2023

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A few weeks ago, I found myself in St. Louis, taking my son Ari to start college. The school kindly invited all parents to spend the weekend and join in some activities; Jewish parents were offered a complete menu of Shabbat programming.

At Shabbat dinner, I joined a group of parents. I had studied with one of them at Pardes in Jerusalem 30 years ago and had not seen her again until a mutual friend's daughter's wedding in Atlanta a couple of weeks earlier. Her husband's brother and I had overlapped in rabbinical school.



Another couple had spent two *Shabbatot* at our house a decade ago. The wife, Ruth Kanef Bash, is our own Matt Kanef's sister, and her husband, Alan Bash, went on USY on Wheels with my wife Sharon as a teenager.

A woman sat down across from me and said, "We went to college together." It took me a few moments to place her since she had a new last name; she and Sharon had been together at a mutual friend's daughter's *Bat Mitzvah* in Lexington, Kentucky, several years ago.

Saturday afternoon at *Seudah Shlishit*, a woman from LA sat down at my table. I don't know a ton of Jews from the Jewish neighborhood of Pico-Robertson, but I knew of one family. I asked her if she knew my daughter Talya's boyfriend's family.

Of course, sure... they were good friends!

And so, on and on it went, meeting people with whom I had a connection.

It was like the World Series of Jewish geography.

For me and the other parents, the stakes were really not that high - I am not going to live with these people for the next four years while trying to figure out what I want to learn and to do with my life.

I am not in this most vulnerable time when young people are exploring who they are, becoming more independent, and making more and more their own choices.

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I had a flashback to my own first-year college orientation 35 years ago. I came to school knowing a bunch of kids from the Jewish high school I had attended with them and subsequently met many new people. It was like a USY convention on steroids. I stayed up all Friday night, schmoozing with people I had just met.



I felt euphoric as I anticipated the next four years would be awesome. These people were great, and I was really excited to be a part of this Jewish community.

But after a couple of days, I was lonely. As high as I had been on Friday night, I was feeling pretty low on Sunday.

I called my parents, who were spending Labor Day weekend on vacation with my sister and asked them to come and pick me up.

I was struggling with this transition.

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Thinking about my own experiences, I am reminded that transitions are hard, really hard. Change is difficult, and making all the necessary adjustments is not always easy.

Starting college seems like a particularly challenging time for our young people, who have been driven around and pretty much helicoptered by us parents and now have to fly on their own. And perhaps it's more complicated now by the fact that we can all text anytime and be in constant touch.



When many of us were in school, there were no cell phones, and therefore, communication home was less frequent and perhaps less complicated...

But, of course, it's not just transitions to college; many other experiences are similar.

We might change jobs, get married, add a child to our family, add a pet, get divorced, retire, move, become ill, lose a loved one, or even some combination of these at the same time.

All of these passages are fraught with emotions, complexities, and uncertainties.

How will things work out in the new situation, in this new place?

Will I like it?

Maybe I should not be making this change at all.

Maybe I should just go back to where I came from?

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The Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote:  
"No man ever steps in the same river twice.



For it's not the same river, and he's not the same man."

We are never the same as time moves forward; we constantly change, and so does the world.

Building on that, author Brad Stulberg wrote in a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, "[We live in] the reality of impermanence. Everything is always changing."

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In some sense, this has been a quintessential part of the Jewish experience.

Our earliest spiritual ancestor, Abraham, is suddenly told to move, and it's even more unsettling - "*lekh-lekha mei'artzekha, mi'moladetekha, u'mi'beit aveekha* - go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from the house of your father." (Gen 12:1)

It's as if the Torah wants to make it intensely hard - you are really leaving, and there is NO going back! All the emotionally fraught aspects of moving - leaving your country, your community, and your family - are all highlighted.

And it's not as if Abraham knows where he's going. He is told to go "*el ha-aretz asher areka* - to the land I will show you."

Where is that?

Unclear.

That's hard - no location and no GPS to get there.

Just go, and it will somehow work out.

... But maybe that's actually not so bad; it's honest.

It's not sugar-coated.



You are leaving, and it is going to be hard.

Since then, the Jewish people have not stopped transitioning - we have moved, by force or by choice, all around the globe.

In fact, the Jewish people were born as we transitioned from slavery to freedom. Yet freedom was frightening. While we suffered as slaves, there was food, there was water, there was structure -- there was stability as terrible as it was.

But in the wilderness - in that transitional space, there is complete uncertainty.

Our people wandered between Egypt and Israel for 40 years - a transition with constant challenges, from physical ones like the lack of water and food options to spiritual ones - as they built the Golden Calf at Sinai.

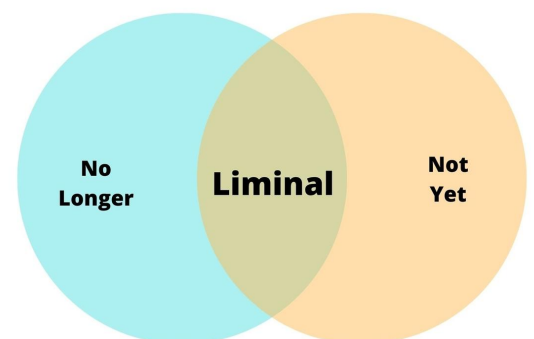
Perhaps that makes sense - at the time when they are experiencing this intensely spiritual moment, when they will be wedded to God in a covenantal ceremony, when they are undergoing this great transition, they regress; they revert to what is known, what is comfortable, building an idol to worship. In just 40 days, they move right from their covenant with the Divine back to the familiar, to what life was like back home.

Similarly, we may protest transitions and attempt to hold on to what was, causing ourselves pain and suffering.

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The rabbis were keenly aware of how difficult transitions can be.

My wonderful teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Neil Gillman, z”l, taught me that as a rabbi, I should focus on



liminal moments -- times when we inhabit two spaces simultaneously - we have a foot in each room, but we are actually on the threshold - not entirely within either space.

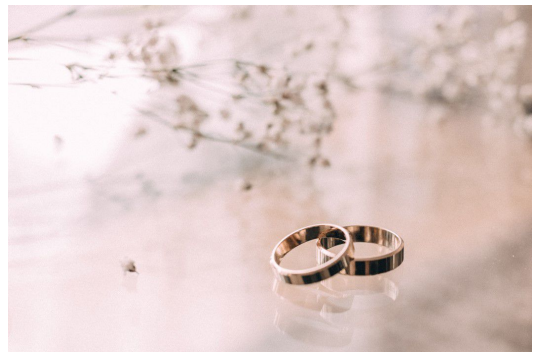
Those are places of intense emotional feeling, and we often need additional help to support us through such transitions.

Gillman pointed out that the rabbis wove together lifecycle ceremonies to guide us through those transitions.

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A wedding is a good example. Every wedding is filled with liminality. The partners enter the room as two separate people and then leave it forever bound to each other with new rings, sometimes with a changed name and a profoundly new relationship with another person.

As they wed, they stand in two places - as children of their parents whose blessing is the final ritual before the two partners enter and then as people whose lives are enmeshed with one another.



That's why there is such emotional energy under the *huppah*.

There is joy at this moment and some sadness - there is great excitement, and it is tinged with a sense of risk.

We acknowledge the vulnerabilities inherent in this transition.

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Death is, of course, the most liminal of all moments - both for the dying and for their loved ones.

Like Abraham, in both cases, we are journeying into the unknown.

The vulnerability is complete - there is only an uncertain abyss on the other side.

There is often fear. And, for the dying, there is often pain.

For this greatest of liminal moments, the rabbis created rituals to help with the feelings of total dislocation.

As we transition toward death, we recite the *Vidui*, the Confessional, helping the deceased and their loved ones, to hopefully come closer to a place of closure during this intense time. We accompany both the dying and those who will be mourners through this transition.

For the mourners, the next phase, called *aninut*, starts immediately after death and extends until burial. It is when the world of the mourners has been turned upside down. We have lost our loved one but are not yet technically mourners.

We need to make plans, we are in shock. The tradition was aware that there is no homeostasis here, and the rabbis exempted mourners from some of the commandments, like reciting the *Shema* and putting on *tefillin*. They knew that it was not the right time for these *mitzvot*, which require their own focus.

And then there is the visceral moment when we hear the first shovelful of earth hitting the coffin. This makes it all real. There is no going back.

Finally, *shivah* - spending seven days at home with the support of the community.

We do not distract the mourners but listen to them - wherever they are emotionally.



We hold their hands as they wade through this river of transition.  
They will never be able to return to where they were before this death, but perhaps, we can help them walk toward their new reality.

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Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of another period of transition, a ten-day transition until the end of Yom Kippur.

Ten days of flux.

Ten days to explore ourselves.

Ten days to look back.

Ten days to change.

Ten days to look forward.

While we are thinking back over the year -- engaging in self-reflection, we are attempting to transform ourselves, yet still aware that we can never go back to where we were before and, that that's OK.

In a few minutes, we will recite *Un'taneh Tokef*, stating that we do not know what is going to happen to us - *mi yihyeh u'mi yamut* - who will live and who will die.

We do not know, and we do not control it.

We do not know what we will experience, but it is a given that things will happen, that we will experience transitions.

We are asked to perform *teshuvah* - to return.

I have long thought of it as returning to some previous state, some more perfect place.

But that's not it.

We are never going back to that.

Brad Stulberg explains that the theory of allostasis is helpful. It turns the conventional wisdom of homeostasis around. Homeostasis posits that



there is order; when things fall out of order, we want to get back to that initial order. X to Y, back to X.

Allostasis says that homeostasis is not necessarily the most helpful approach. Instead, we are always moving from order to disorder, and we are always learning to flow with it, moving towards a new reordering, not back to the old order.

In other words, X to Y and then to Z.

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It turns out that this message is embedded in the Musaf Amidah which is filled on the High Holy Days with verses from the Tanakh which we will recite shortly.

I have to say that over the years, my eyes have generally skipped over these verses.

[pic of Elie]

But my cousin, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, points out that there are nuances and reasons why the rabbis choose to incorporate specific verses into our liturgy.



For example, in the *Malkhuyot* section - the verses about God's Kingship, we find a quote from the Song of the Sea - "*Adonai yimlokh l'olam va'ed* - God will be king forever and ever." (Ex 15:18) Choosing this verse make sense - it is a decisive moment in Jewish history.

The *Mekhilta*, a third-century midrash, says that the Children of Israel sing this line that God *will* rule, meaning that perhaps God is not ruling over them at that moment.

They could have said: “*Adonai melekh* - God is King for and ever,” and everything would have been clear.

But maybe they were saying something different.

God is not the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover.

But like us, God *will be* the Ruler - *Yimlokh*.

God is evolving as we are.

This is a daring way to see God on this Rosh Hashanah, this day when we honor God’s coronation.

But it aligns with the Kabbalistic notion that my teacher, Rabbi Art Green, explains. God is, as God introduces God’s self to Moses:



*Ehyeh* - God is what will be, God is Becoming.

God is in transition, and God is perhaps most acutely felt in moments of transition.

Maybe we are celebrating that God’s coronation is not when we freeze God or ourselves in some static existence, or try to get back to where we were, but to acknowledge that we are living in a flowing existence - one where the only constant is change.

And therefore, life is about transforming ourselves as we transition.

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While thinking of a changing God might be destabilizing at first, it is resonating with me more and more.

We live in a world of flux.

Becoming aware of God and the universe and all of us, as becoming, as transitioning, may paradoxically help us become more stable even amidst volatility.

And there is lots of volatility - Covid, climate change, natural disasters, political meltdowns, war, anti-Semitism, racism, LGBTQ hate, challenges to democracy, and perhaps, most frighteningly, a lack of agreement on facts or what is true.

And there is constant change in our personal lives.

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These - these ten days of *teshuvah*, these ten days of turning, acknowledge that we are always turning.

We try to deal with it as best we can, but we know we cannot control who will live and who will die.

We flow in a river of uncertainty.

As Stulberg sums it up: “We need to transform our relationship with change, leaving behind rigidity and resistance in favor of a new nimbleness, a means of viewing more of what life throws at us as something to participate in, rather than fight. We are always shaping and being shaped by change, often at the very same time.”

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Last week, when I thought I would be in my office preparing for the High Holy Days, I found myself on the 11th floor of the NYU Medical Center with my mom. She had fallen on First Avenue, was taken by ambulance to the ER, and was admitted.

I was grateful I could come down and help, but it was hard to see her there.

This experience highlighted the complexity of her current living arrangement. She lives in an apartment alone in Manhattan with her



children in different cities. She is legally blind and doing her best to navigate this period of her life.

Since my father's death, my sister, mother, and I have had several conversations about what we should do next.

Should my mom move to Boston or to Philadelphia and be closer to her younger grandchildren?

And if so, when?

And how will she and all of us deal with all the logistics needed to manage this change?

How will we cope with the anxiety and feelings of loss in such a transition?

I have to say, as her son, I feel a great responsibility and often feel a bit overwhelmed by the situation.

It's hard to watch our parents age.

It's hard to watch our friends age.

It's hard to watch our partners age.

It's hard to know what to do. They are vulnerable and scared, and so are we. And it's hard to age.

Even though we may joke that "getting older beats the alternative," it's not so easy to live through that transition.

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So, as I think about what to do and my emotions, my mother's feelings, and my sister's, I will try to make peace with the uncertainty, the lack of clarity.

We will figure this out.

We will make plans, knowing they are "subject to change."



We will do our best.

Our tradition invites us into this space.

And to practice being in flux.

Maybe that's what this holiday and these ten days are all about: we acknowledge that change is inevitable, and we practice holding that.

Can we accept that our reality is not constant?

Can we move from X to Y to Z?

Can we swim in the river of change?

Can we let transition transform us and not try to control it?

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Thankfully, my mother was released from the hospital, As I brought her home, I was thinking out what help she would need to get around, to cope with her new reality of needing a walker, I thought about how many times I have changed, that our world has changed.

Along with everyone, I have experienced this, and I suspect that we all, in a sense, hope to continue to do so.

Since we are constantly experiencing change, how we support each other through that reordering is the essential work of life.

May these ten days help us practice living in this state.

May we be written and continue to write, to scribe our journeys that allow us to become more at one with the river, the flow, and the never-ending transitions that lie at the core of existence.



Shabbat Shalom and Shanah tovah.