

Rabbi Lexi Erdheim
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783

The Only Constant is Change: Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5783

I want to invite you to take a moment to remember a time in your life when you went through a profound change: Graduating from college, struggling with an illness, getting married, being let go from a job, moving to a new city, the death of a loved one...Think of that moment of change in your own life. Take a breath or two. Close your eyes. Notice what feelings bubble up? Perhaps fear, excitement, anxiety, relief, joy, sadness – or multiple feelings all at once.

This is a sermon about change and how we deal with it. I know, everyone's favorite topic. As you know, change can elicit a wide range of emotions. Because change is a paradox. Change is constant. The world turns and the seasons change. Everything that grows also withers.

Whether big or small, whether joyful or somber, whether life giving or life taking, change is always accompanied by the loss of what was. What was no longer is. Sometimes, when we feel that change is happening too fast, when we experience loss and grief that accompanies change, we try our hardest to exert control.

I remember when it happened to me. The summer of 2019 was filled with huge changes: rabbinic ordination, moving from Los Angeles to New Orleans, leaving my friends, becoming a rabbi in a congregation, living in the same city as my partner, Charlie, after three years in a long-distance relationship.

As I drove away from Los Angeles towards all the potential ahead, I practically covered up the rear-view mirror of my car, so I couldn't look back in painful longing for all that I was leaving behind. It may sound a little silly, I know and I certainly would not recommend it as a safe driving practice. I willed myself to only be excited for what was to come, instead of mourning what I left behind.

Over the next few months, I found myself grieving the absence of my friends, the loss of my home. I searched for other ways to exert control in my life. I wanted to bring more LA to NOLA. And then I found it: Charlie and I would keep a kosher home, just as I had while in rabbinical school.

This might not seem like a big deal because you know, I'm a rabbi. But Charlie is a New Orleanian through and through. He was raised in a culinary city known for crawfish boils, shrimp po-boys and muffulettas. Charlie expresses himself with cooking. Forcing someone to change the way they cook and the way they eat is a big deal. What I came to learn is that despite being really happy living with Charlie, excited about my new job, and discovering a new city - no amount of Kashrut control could help from also missing my friends or the life I had built for myself. The gains and the losses lived together. Exerting control on how we ate at home didn't make the sting less painful. It just made grocery shopping in New Orleans really difficult.

I have come to learn that to experience change well means surrendering to a loss of autonomy and the painful realization that we do not control our lives as much as any of us would like. We can all think of a time when we responded to a change by sinking our heels into the ground, closing our eyes, covering our ears, and pretending that we are in control.

This type of rigid mindset is what my colleague Rabbi Benj Fried calls the “*Mikdash* Mindset.” The *Beit haMikdash*, or *The* ancient Temple in Jerusalem - functioned as the home of God. With high thick walls and a labyrinth of corridors and chambers, it was designed to be as everlasting and omnipresent as God. But, like everything else in our world, it wasn’t. The Jews that defended the Temple from the Romans could not conceive of a world where they were not in control, where God did not step-in to preserve the ancient priesthood. So, against the advice of many rabbis to consider a different path, they refused to change, refused to adapt, and were ultimately killed. When the Romans burned down the *Beit HaMikdash*, it was not just a destruction, it was an apocalypse.

Too often, we live with a rigid *Beit HaMikdash* mentality. We hide behind the walls of self-deception, isolate ourselves from good advice, exert rigidity in how we engage in the world and behave towards others. We become consumed with the project of soothing ourselves with illusions of control. We blunt ourselves from our own feelings and blind ourselves to the feelings of those around us. We trick ourselves into believing that if we build strong enough walls, if we reinforce them with steel, that we can make ourselves impervious to change or that we can control the change. But when change inevitability arrives – as it always does - the walls crumble, and we find ourselves struggling to adapt, to pivot, to grow. We hold on tight to the myth of the Temple.

Insisting on a kosher home was the *Mikdash* Mentality. I tried to harness control of something that I could not actually control. It was a futile attempt at assuaging my fears and

the challenges of adjusting to my new life. And, even worse, it blinded me to the needs of my partner. We all want *Mikdash* stability. The problem, however, is that it is a mirage.

Rabbi Fried suggests, Judaism provides another way, a flexible, adaptable mindset, that of the *Mishkan*. And it's the *Mishkan* mindset that has helped generations of our people live through tumult and turmoil. The *Mishkan*, or tabernacle, was the portable dwelling place of God that traveled with the Israelites as they wandered through the harsh, unforgiving, and unpredictable landscape of the wilderness.

A collaborative and continuous project, its construction required the talent, time, and gifts of every Israelite. Each night, when the Israelites set up camp, they put the *Mishkan* together, and every morning, when they left camp, they would deconstruct it and carry it with them on their journey. It was an ongoing, never-ending act of co-creation. The Israelites used their minds, their hearts, their skills, and their imagination to design and to build, to dismantle, to journey, and to build again.

When we adopt the mindset of the *Mishkan*, we recognize that we will always encounter change along the journey of life. So, when change happens, we are better prepared to pack up the pieces of our lives, to move forward, rebuild and reconstitute. With the *Mishkan* mindset, we channel the chaos that follows change into creation and recreation, into the act of imagining and reimagining.

But even more importantly, a *Mishkan* mindset realizes that we need our loved ones and our community to help us through the most trying times. The *Mishkan* would not have been built each day if it were not for each tribe, each person, doing their part.

The Israelites wandered in the desert with the *Mishkan* for forty years. For forty years, they built and dismantled, and journeyed and rebuilt in a new place with new unknown challenges. With the constant movement of change, it makes sense that when the Israelites settled in the land of Israel, they started making plans to build a permanent rigid structure, the *Mikdash*, so they would never have to rebuild it again.

As wonderful as it would be for us to be completely adaptable, completely flexible at all moments, prepared for whatever change or challenge comes our way, the reality is that we need – we want and desire - structure. Ask any parent with a kid, structure is great. We are hard-wired to crave familiarity, consistency, routine. It is the reason why we have Jewish rituals to guide us through the seasons and cycles of the week and year, through the major life transitions, birth, adulthood, marriage, sickness, death. Jewish tradition and ritual make meaning out of the instability of liminal moments. It helps ground us, orient us amidst the swirling chaos.

The ideal is not the rigidity of the *Mikdash*, nor the complete flexibility of the *Mishkan*, but something in between, something that Israeli social entrepreneur Gidi Grinstein calls, “flexigidity.”

The Sukkah, the semi-permanent dwelling place that we inhabit throughout the holiday of Sukkot, models this approach to change. With only three walls and a thatched roof so we can see the stars, the sukkah is a semi-protective structure within which we eat, drink, and spend time with friends and family. It is a more rigid structure than the *Mishkan*, but more flexible and impermanent than the *Mikdash*.

It acknowledges that as human beings we need the symbols of structure, stability, routine, and ritual to bring shape and order to our lives. But the sukkah also insists that we not trick ourselves into believing that those structures and rituals will prevent change, but rather that they will help us adapt to them. We will still feel the sun, the rain, the chill of the wind. When we are aware of who we are, then genuine self-growth can emerge from change.

The sukkah is a brilliant reminder that the structures we build to protect us are not impenetrable or impervious. Knowledge of our vulnerabilities is a sacred act. There is holiness in confronting our fears, directly, alongside friends and family. We can show-up for the people we love. We can allow people to help us in our needs. We can find the joy and celebration with friends, family and community.

This is why the holiday of Sukkot is so important: Because the Sukkah mindset of flexibility helps us to be vulnerable without giving into fear. It helps us to build structures of support and rituals that can give greater meaning to our lives. It teaches us that honesty about our challenges can co-exist with the comfort that we bring to one another. The holiday comes at the end of the High Holy Days because we build from the pieces of our lives that we find and rediscover starting tonight, on Rosh Hashanah.

Avinu Malkeinu-

God who dwelled in the Mikdash

And the Mishkan

Who commanded us to dwell in the Sukkah –

During these days of awe – and every day,

help us create routines and rituals that bring richness to our lives.

Help us know that change is inevitable,

That because we are human, we will face the elements of life.

And with that knowledge we build sukkot – shelters

That help us to see the comfort in the discomfort,

And to know that we are not alone –

Because there is strength with family,

With friends, and the support of our community.