

## **Where You Sit - Rosh Hashanah, 2007**

*The following is the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis on September 13, 2007*

When I was a kid, we would get to High Holy Day services at least an hour early so that we could get good seats in the sanctuary. We didn't sit in the same row each time, just somewhere close to the bimah. My mother's hearing wasn't so good, so she liked to sit up front. My Dad has long legs, so he always liked the aisle seat.

You can imagine that the first year I got to this congregation, it was a shock to me. I was here an hour before Erev Rosh Hashanah services and not another soul was here, not even the ushers. But I've learned that, even if you don't get here early, you do have your favorite seats. How fortunate you are that, in Reform congregations, there is no hereditary pew and all seats cost the same.

Sometimes I look out and remember where people used to sit. Matty Schneider sat over there on the inside aisle. He didn't have much use for prayer, but he always came and he always sat there. When the Temple joined the Reform movement, he wanted to know if that meant he didn't have to wear a tallit anymore. Sallye Klein, who died just this summer, always sat over there on the outside aisle. It was hard not to notice where Sallye sat. She would wear a matching muff and coat, spike heels and false eyelashes - and she did this when she was well into her 70's and even 80's, although she would never tell you her age. Forgive me, Sallye; she was 90 when she died.

The goal of these holidays is to make you think about where you sit. Where do you sit on Jewish practice, where do you sit on Israel, where do you sit on relationships, where do you sit on what matters? These holy days come as a reminder that where you sit in life is always a choice.

There are areas in our lives where we have no choice. We don't choose to be born; we don't choose who our parents are. We don't choose where we are born or under what circumstances. Most of us don't choose how and when we die. And yet there are choices that do belong to us and only to us.

I have a friend who has only recently begun to get along with her parents. For many years, their relationship was strained and she was angry with them. Her anger was for good reason, from what I know, but that is beside the point. One day, she was talking to a coworker about her parents. Her coworker, who was from Nigeria, spoke a stream of words in Nigerian. When she translated them, this is what she said: "When you go to the river, if you go to the same place each time, you will see the river the same way. You have to cross over the river and look at it from the other side if you want to see things differently."

Those words were instantly transformative for my friend. When she heard them, it felt like a weight was lifted off of her shoulders. Since that time, she has been able to be nicer to her parents and to have a more comfortable relationship with them. What was the magic in those words? I think the words allowed her to see that she had a choice where before she had seen none. Just as she had previously chosen to tolerate a strained relationship, so she now chose to treat her parents more lovingly.

My friend learned that just because you have always done something one way doesn't mean you can't choose to do it another way. You can look from the other side of that river. You don't have to be enslaved by the past.

Rabbi Yitzhak of Gur says each one of us has to retell the story of leaving Egypt "because in every generation there is a new understanding. Egypt is inside us. We all have our own pharaohs." (Quoted by Mordechai Gafni in *Soul Prints*) When the past does enslave you, it is because you choose to allow it.

I have a friend whose family kept secrets and let him know by implication that certain subjects were taboo. This isn't an uncommon situation except in degree. He is a successful adult in many ways except that he still feels trapped by those emotional taboos. They stop him from talking openly to the family he has created as an adult. He is sure something terrible will happen to him and to his family if he chooses to defy his parents' unspoken rules.

Observing the old taboos gives him the feeling of being in control. And yet, it is his choosing to preserve those old taboos that is making his life spin out of control. His past training prevents him from seeing that he has alternatives. He lives as if he is still a child who has limited choices. He has become his own Pharaoh. He can't choose his past and we can't choose ours. But by letting his past be in charge of his present, he is missing the opportunity to choose a different future for himself and his family.

People often say that they can't make different choices because they are constrained by their husbands or wives or children or their partners or their parents or friends. If they could only change their partners or their children, they could make different choices. Those of you who have tried to change someone else, tell me honestly - does it work? That's why we laugh at the title of that show, "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change." You can't change someone by telling him or her to change. But if you choose to change the way that you relate, you might find that they respond by choosing to make changes as well.

Last year, there was an article in the New York Times called, "What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage." It was the most frequently e-mailed article of the week for the Times. It was written by a woman named Amy who kept trying to change her husband. "Like so many wives before me," she writes, "I ignored a library of advice books and set about improving him. By nagging, of course, which only made his behavior worse; he'd drive faster instead of slower; shave less frequently, not more; and leave his reeking bike gear on the bedroom floor longer than ever... Then something magical happened," she continued.

"For a book I was writing about a school for exotic animal trainers, I started commuting from Maine to California, where I spent my days watching students do the seemingly impossible: teaching hyenas to pirouette on command, cougars to offer their paws for a nail clipping, and baboons to skateboard...Eventually it hit me that the same techniques might work on that stubborn but lovable species, the American husband.

The central lesson I learned from exotic animal trainers is that I should reward behavior I like and ignore behavior I don't...Back in Maine, I began thanking Scott if he threw one dirty shirt into the hamper. If he threw in two, I'd kiss him. Meanwhile, I would step over any soiled clothes on the floor without one sharp word, though I did sometimes kick them under the bed. But as he basked in my appreciation, the piles became smaller.

When my training attempts failed, I didn't blame Scott. Rather, I brainstormed new strategies...I dissected my own behavior, and considered how my actions might inadvertently fuel his." After two years of exotic animal training, she reports, "My marriage is far smoother, my husband much easier to love. I used to take his faults personally; his dirty clothes on the floor were an affront, a symbol of how he didn't care enough about me. But thinking of my husband as an exotic species gave me the distance I needed to consider our differences more objectively."

Amy learned that if she could stop taking things personally, she could choose how she related to her husband and bring about a happier outcome. When she confessed to him what she was doing, he was amused; and then he, in return, began to treat her as if he were an exotic animal trainer. The point is, when it comes to change in relationships, it is possible, but someone has to choose to go first.

Sometimes you have to cross to the other side of that river so you can see others differently; sometimes you have to do it to see yourself differently. This is true of us as individuals; this is also true of us as Jewish community. We have choices about how we see ourselves.

I heard a speaker offer a wonderful example this week. Dr. Jonathan Sarna is an expert in American Jewish history. He said that, "We can't project the American Judaism of the present in a straight line into the future because much of what we've believed is true about American religion for 30 years is changing." In particular, he said we have to unlearn the myth of "Protestant, Catholic and Jew" that was created by Will Herberg in the 50's.

"The grouping of these three makes us sound like we are up there with the big three," he said, "but we are not, not by a long shot. We are a minority. We are an endangered religion," he said. "And you need different rules for endangered species to make sure they survive. We can't play by the same rules as Protestants and Catholics who are not part of an endangered species. When a Catholic marries out of Catholicism, you just don't hear Catholics bemoaning the demise of Catholicism the way you hear Jews worrying about the impact of intermarriage on the Jewish future."

For years, the traditional recommended solution to our being a minority was to increase the Jewish birth rate from 2 children per family to three as a somewhat inadequate way to

compensate for those we lost in the Holocaust. (Prof. Sarna says that his Orthodox friends tell him that "4" is the new "3.")

Another traditional solution was endogamy, the technical term for in-marriage. Earlier in this century, we American Jews could count on anti-Semitism as a way to keep us endogamous. With the rise of tolerance in American society - and there is a rise - anti-Semitism is no longer a force that can guarantee that Jews marry Jews. A swastika on our building will not guarantee that Jews will marry Jews. You can keep standing in the same place at the river and you can keep trying these traditional solutions, but they still won't work. So again, we have to sit in a different pew in order to get a different view.

The rise of religious tolerance in our country has allowed us to be joined by members from non-Jewish backgrounds who have cast their fate in with ours. Some have joined us officially as Jews by choice and others are more like temporary residents, what the Bible calls the *ger toshav*. All are committed to supporting this congregation and raising Jewish children, and by extension, insuring a Jewish future. It is up to us to find new ways of being inclusive while also preserving who we are. You might be interested in knowing that the Native American tribes that survived what this country did to them were the ones that could incorporate non-members. The ones who couldn't disappeared. We can choose not to disappear if we can see new options where previously we haven't.

I think it is also time for us to choose new ways looking at Israel so we can feel more connected. American Jews feel less and less connected to Israel as her birth feels more and more distant. When I studied in Israel in the seventies, my grandfather came to visit. He had been born in "LondonEngland," as he used to say, but had spent his entire life in Jersey City. Except for an occasional two-week sojourn to Miami Beach, my grandfather didn't go far - until the year he came to visit me in Israel. He was 75 at the time. He had spent years raising money for Israel but had never been.

He was a little afraid, I think, but finally he let my parents convince him to go. He was thrilled to be there but it quickly became clear that he could only see Israel through the eyes of someone from Jersey City. As we drove into Jerusalem from the airport, I felt the same thrill I always felt as we were greeted with the sun's rays reflecting off of the Jerusalem stone of the buildings - when my grandfather asked, "Are we in the slums?" Why did he think we were in the slums? Because there was laundry hanging out on people's balconies, and in Jersey City, that was a sure sign you were in a slum. By his definition, all of Jerusalem had to look like one big slum. On the other hand, Jerusalem quickly redeemed itself because its streets had no potholes; Jersey City, as you can imagine, had plenty of potholes.

My grandfather's two weeks in Israel brought more of the same. He couldn't believe the highway signs that said "90" - "Wait until I tell the Brotherhood their speed limit is 90," he said. I tried to no avail to tell him that 90 was kilometers, not miles; but he wouldn't have any of it. He hated the food. He loved the country; every stone was a miracle to him, every day there a gift. He never stopped talking about that trip. But he could only see Israel from his own perspective; and because I saw it with him, I saw it with new eyes.

Recently I was lucky to hear Rabbi Andrew David, the Israeli head of [Arza](#), offer a new perspective on the Reform movement in Israel. He said that despite occasional media coverage of the huge difficulties Reform Jews and Reform Judaism face being accepted in Israel, there are now 25 Reform congregations throughout all of Israel, including two kibbutzim in the desert north of Eilat.

These congregations have celebrated 700 weddings and 1,500 b'nai Mitzvah. There are now 48 Reform rabbis who grew up in Israel, studied at the [Hebrew Union College](#) in Jerusalem, and were ordained there. Reform has become an Israeli movement, not just a transplanted branch of an American movement!

The [Israel Religious Action Center](#) (the IRAC), the Israeli Reform Movement's legal arm, employs 10 full time lawyers who work tirelessly in the courts (including the Supreme Court) and in Israeli society at large to guarantee the rights of Reform Jews and of other groups that have been historically marginalized in Israel. They serve the needs of Israeli society beyond the Reform Movement. The Dean of HUC in Jerusalem, Michael Marmor, says, "I believe that there is much happening in Israel today which represents real growth, a flowering of culture, expression and spiritual search. Our movement is part of this flowering, and we should learn more about it and feel involved with it."

It was eye opening for me to hear this information because I wasn't aware of these Israeli successes of our movement. I have always loved Israel but this new information enabled even me to gain a new appreciation and to tighten my connection. Even today's Israelis have a hard time being able to connect to Israel in a move meaningful way. Moshe Ben-Atar leads the Israeli wing of the international Zionist movement. His job is to advance and invigorate Zionist ideals.

He says it is an uphill battle for many of the same reasons people have had a hard time connecting to Judaism, including changes in the world and the challenge of globalization. Almost a million Israelis live overseas; they themselves are not connected to Israel in a meaningful way. Ben-Atar says, "Today we've reached the point where the early Zionism of Herzl and his friends, who wanted to establish a shelter for Jews, has been fulfilled. But the Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, who talked about a society of equality, of quality of life, a society deeply connected to the Jewish people that joyfully absorbs aliyah - this is still ahead of us." ([International Jerusalem Post](#), Sept. 7-13, 2007, p. 12)

Our relationship with the Israel of the present and the Zionism of the future is still ahead of us. We need to open our eyes and our hearts to it. Wherever you presently sit when it comes to Israel, try putting yourself in a different place. Subscribe to Israeli periodicals in English. Be a member of [Arza](#), the Reform Zionist arm. Donate to Israeli causes you feel comfortable supporting. Teach your children and your friends to love Israel, whatever her faults. See what you can do to deepen your connection to Israel in her 60th year. Maybe you'll even find yourself in a seat on an El Al flight to Tel Aviv.

In the 1960's, American orthodoxy had a fight over where to sit. That is, they had a fight about whether you could be Orthodox without having men and women sit separately. And it

was a defining moment in the history of orthodoxy in this country when they decided that separate seating was necessary.

It isn't just Reform or Orthodox Jews who get preoccupied with where to sit on these holy days. We are told that even God changes seats on these holy days. Rosh Hashanah is like a courtroom, says the Talmud, where God sits on the Throne of Judgment, deciding whether we get life or death. It is our prayers that inspire God to move from the Throne of Judgment to the throne of mercy. We are the ones who have the power to change God's mind. Where we sit affects where God sits. Choosing where to sit may seem simple but can be a defining moment.

Crossing a river and looking from the other side can be a defining moment. Just changing how you think can be a defining moment.

It reminds me of the story of the Rebbe who said to his students: "We are as far from where God wants us to be as East is from West," and then asked them, "By the way, just how far is it from East to West?" One of the students raised a hand and said: "Eleven thousand miles, I just heard that on television." Another student raised a hand and said, "22,000 miles. That's the circumference of the world." The Rebbe said: "No, that's wrong. The distance from East to West is one step. You are facing East. You take one step and turn around. And now you are facing West. In the same way, repentance is not a change in personality; it is a change in direction." In this new year, may we choose our seats as if we have the choice.

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