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Rosh Hashinui: Time to change!

Happy New Year! Now all I need is a silly hat, a horn, and a glass of champagne. Or, maybe not. Although our new year is a joyous time to be spent with family and friends, eating apples and honey and enjoying ourselves, it's not a time of frivolity. Tomorrow we'll hear our strange horn, the shofar, but its message is very different from the horns blown on New Year's Eve. The party horn tells us to let loose and forget the past. The shofar calls on us to review the year that has elapsed, to renew our relationship with that which is enduring and holy, and to recommit ourselves to the task of redeeming our world.

Two weeks ago I was on a rabbis' conference call with Sen. Barack Obama in which he said how much he respected the way we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, our new year. It's a time of "determined rejoicing," he said.

Determined rejoicing. We pray and eat, we contemplate and laugh, we spend time with family and friends, and we search our souls. The Book of Life is open, and we see all our deeds written there. In a society that's overexposed on Facebook, Blogs, and YouTube, we may think there's nothing hidden anymore. But even in our bare-all world, we still control what is posted. Not so in our relationship with God. There, everything we did or failed to do is in the Book of Life. The Almighty cracks open The Book, flips to our chapter for the preceding year, and says, "Here, do yourself a favor: Give this a read." Our souls are bared right there on the page. We try to flip to a different chapter. (Hmmm, we think, I'd really prefer to read someone else's chapter ...But the Almighty has his thumb on the page. Read the darn chapter! AND NO SKIMMING!")

We cannot run away from our deeds. We are exposed like Adam and Eve, who tried to hide from God after eating from the Tree of Knowledge. "Ayeka," God asks them, "where are you?" What, God doesn't know their whereabouts? Of course, God knows, but do they?! Adam and Eve, like us today, must realize they cannot hide from themselves or God. God calls us today to take responsibility, to live the examined life.

So. Where are we? As I look into the congregation on this, our annual family reunion, I know some of the joy and pain, victory and disappointment, sickness and health, birth and death, celebration and heartache that people in our community have experienced. I have had the privilege to accompany many of you during significant moments on your life's journey. We enter this sanctuary with gratitude and frustration, hope and disappointment, looking for solace, guidance, and connection with God, others, and ourselves.

In the vicissitudes of our own lives, we are also aware that we are living in a time of great insecurity. What will happen to my savings, my home, my car loan, my heating bill, my child's education? This month many of us watched the flooding of our basements or

those of our friends and wondered what kind of environmental event will disrupt our lives or those of our loved ones in the year to come? Will instability in the Middle East threaten us, threaten Israel? Who will inhabit the White House and will a new administration bring a “*change*” for the better?

To be sure, there is uncertainty and fear. We begin this new year partly with trepidation. The words of *Unetaneh Tokef* ring sharply in our ears – who will live and die, who by fire and who by flood. Life seems so uncertain and unstable. What can I expect in the coming year?

In the midst of this jumble of concerns, the shofar pricks our conscience and reminds us that we do have some control, that we can change ourselves and the world. Tomorrow we’ll read these words of Maimonides in our shofar service: “Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep! Rouse yourselves, you slumberers, out of your slumber! Examine your deeds, and turn to God in repentance. Remember your Creator, you who, caught up in the daily round, lose sight of eternal truth; you who waste your years in vain pursuits which neither benefit nor save.”

The shofar rouses us out of our complacency and calls us to change. This call to change is even embedded within the name of the holiday. Shanah – year – is also the root of the Hebrew word Shinui – change. Rosh Hashanah is Rosh Hashinui: the beginning of change. Yet we live in a time when the word change is losing its meaning: “It’s time for change, The change we need, Change is coming, Change we can believe in...” That change has become a campaign slogan may make us cynical that real change is a possibility. Yet annually the shofar calls out to us, urging us to change.

The shofar calls on us to accept God’s sovereignty, to recommit ourselves to the values of our faith. The shofar calls on us to reflect on the past year, to remember what we did and failed to do. It calls us to introspection, reflection, and a commitment to change. (Shofar service – Malchuyot)

The shofar calls on us to rise above our narrow egocentric concerns and “consider the forces that rule our lives, the currents of instinct and longing that rise from the depths of our being, the tides of ambition and desire that sweep away our will, the little waves of habit and routine in which our vision drowns.” (Forms of Prayer)

The shofar calls us to account for our mistakes and to make amends. Somewhat paradoxically, it also calls out to God to go easy on us. In the shofar service we remind God of the compassion exhibited for our forebears, rescuing Noah and the animals in the ark and freeing the Israelites from slavery. God, show your compassionate side to us as well. (Shofar service – Zichronot)

Change can be difficult because we are afraid of failure. Like the Israelites wandering in the Sinai desert, as soon as we hit parched territory, we want to return to Egypt. Sure, Egypt was confining. Sure, we were slaves. Sure, we were denied freedom to worship and identify as Jews and lived a life of squalor while building pyramids to demigods. But

aside from that, there was something comfortable about it! At least life in Egypt was familiar and predictable.

I attended a conference for clergy last spring where one pastor said that, in his church, they call the people who want to go back to the old ways of doing things, the “Back to Egypt” committee!

Doing things the old way is much less risky. Change is fraught with the possibility of making mistakes.

Give us the courage to make changes. Bolster our strength and conviction to try again when we fail. Don't let our inevitable mis-steps, mis-cues, bad instincts, dumb remarks, impulsive actions diminish our convictions.

The shofar calls on us to remember what we did and failed to do last year so that we can learn and grown from our mistakes. The shofar calls on us to persevere despite the difficulty.

The shofar calls on us to redeem our world. We recall the times in our people's history when the shofar was sounded, indicating that something new and significant was afoot. The first shofar was the horn on the ram caught in the thicket that was sacrificed in place of Isaac – a clarion call to Abraham that child sacrifice would no longer be an acceptable way to worship God. We recall the sounding of the shofar at Sinai, signaling our new relationship with God, one that calls us to responsibility and partnership with God. And the shofar will sound in the future when all are free and cared for. (Shofar service – Shofarot)

And so we review our year, make amends, recommit ourselves to the ideals of our faith, and reaffirm our responsibility to redeem our world.

During these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are called to review our personal lives and commit to the change we want to see in the coming year.

This evening I'd like to take a few moments to review our communal year. As I look out into the congregation I see new faces and familiar ones. I am saddened by the absence of others, some due to sickness and death, others who have left our community because they were angry, hurt, or frustrated about something here – a bad experience in Hebrew school, the lack of caring response in a time of need, the feeling that what we are doing here is irrelevant and inconsequential, the last kid in the family just had his bar mitzvah.

Yet, as I read our community's chapter in the Book of Life, I have memories, still fresh, of so much good that happened here. I am struck by the incredible generosity of so many of you who give your time and love to this community, visiting the sick, making Shabbat meals for people, serving food in the soup kitchen, tending to the dead, teaching Torah, greeting strangers at services. And the more thankless, but equally important tasks: creating a budget, raising money to support all these activities. *Im ain kemach, ain*

Torah. (Pirke Avot) Without material sustenance there is no study of Torah or living the life of Torah.

A few snapshots from the past year that I want to highlight:

Last winter, Nikki Zarefsky spoke one Friday night about her love of knitting and her desire to share her love and talent with others. Nikki is the founder of Soul Stitchers, a group of BE congregants who knit shawls and chemo caps for those in our community who are ill. Rabbi Knobel and I have had the privilege of giving these shawls to people in our community in need of love and healing, watching as their faces light up as they feel enveloped in the warmth and caring of community when they receive one of these shawls. On the evening that Nikki spoke, all the shawls were arrayed on the bima. After services we invited people to come to the bima to take a shawl for themselves or for someone they knew who was in need of healing. I was so moved hearing stories about ill family and friends as people picked out just the right shawl for their loved ones. I was particularly struck that evening by the bar mitzvah boy who chose a shawl for his friend whose mother had just died.

I recall the joy and surprise on Rabbi Ofer Sabath Beit-Halachmi's face, the rabbi of our sister congregation in Israel, when we presented him with the quilt made by the children of both of our communities and stitched together by Carolyn Reiner; the powerful way that Cantor Frankel touched our hearts and souls during the month preceding the High Holidays with her soaring renditions of popular music and its connection with the themes of the Holidays, of reflection, regret, renewal, and possibility; the laughter and tumult of small children enjoying Shabbat dinner here with their families on the first Friday night of the month; the panelists who spoke passionately and eloquently on Selichot just last week about their commitments to social justice issues; the transformation of our post Bnai Mitzvah programs at Beth Emet because we were blessed last year to have a full-time youth director, Aaron Gunning, who is talented, smart, and incredibly hardworking. These are just a few of the many extraordinary things that happened at Beth Emet this past year. There are many more, and probably some of which I'm not even aware.

At the same time, we were petty, arrogant, and thoughtless. We didn't care adequately for those in need. We complained more than we contributed. We were needlessly impatient. We were self-righteous and self-centered. We failed to listen to others and to understand someone else's perspective. We argued not just over important issues like stem cell research, the war in Iraq, the state of the environment, and how and when we want to worship on Shabbat, but trivial matters as well.

We are at a crossroads at Beth Emet. We have a glorious history of intellectual debate, spiritual experimentation, and social activism. But in recent years our membership has declined, our school population is down, our building is old and once again in need of renovation and repair. Our budget didn't balance last year. Will we balance it this year? How?

We are all painfully aware of the state of the economy. Will we have enough money to continue to keep a full-time youth director? The conversations last year about the budget were difficult. What will happen this year? This is our community. We are all stakeholders. How do we want to educate our youth? Care for those in need? Who do we want to be? This is not a health club where we pay a fee for services, but a sacred community where we contribute to the best of our ability because we believe in the purpose and mission of this congregation. If this is not who we are, we might as well close our doors and go home. How are we going to get to where we want to be? And where is that? A strategic planning committee has been thinking about and studying these questions. In the coming year, you will be invited into the conversation to voice your opinion. You will be invited to shape the future direction of our community.

And on the societal level, we must insist that our leaders also heed the call for a different approach to solving the problems confronting our society. We must demand that they put the values of caring for the greater good and finding long-term solutions above those of ego, political expediency, and short-term gain. Change must not be just a campaign slogan but something that arises out of a moral call to action.

Change that is guided by values and introspection, change that is predicated on reviewing our past and making an effort to learn from it, change that is strengthened by perseverance and guided by the quality of compassion, now that is change we can believe in, WHOEVER THE NEXT PRESIDENT MAY BE!

A few weeks ago I was asked by a member of the congregation why we celebrate Rosh Hashanah before Yom Kippur. Wouldn't it be better to repent and make amends first so that we could begin the new year on a clean slate? Then Rosh Hashanah could be a time of pure rejoicing. But the fact is that while every year we attempt to do complete teshuvah, we never completely finish the task. Perhaps Rosh Hashanah comes first to remind us of that fact. Life is not so neat and tidy that we can scrub our souls clean of every stain. It's not up to us to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it. (Pirke Avot)

Rabbi Hayyim of Zans (19th century) told a parable:

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing the right way out. Suddenly he saw a man approaching him. His heart was filled with joy, "Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way," he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the man, "Brother, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in this forest for several days."

Said the other to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together."

“So it is with us. One thing I can tell you: the way we have been following this far we ought follow no further, for that way leads one astray. But now let us look for a new way.”

And so we begin now.

The shofar calls like an insistent alarm, and we can't push the snooze button again. Groggy and lethargic, we awaken to the task ahead. We gather together on these Holy Days, lost, but not alone. Accompanied by the rituals of our tradition, the values of our Torah, and the support of one another, we will find our way out of the wilderness.

We come tonight with gratitude and trepidation, hope and fear, the Book of Life opened, our individual and collective mistakes and our triumphs displayed before us. God help us hear the shofar's alarm, heed its message of change, and “rise” to the challenge. May we be guided by Your light and Your wisdom to do what is needed and what is right for ourselves, our community, and our world.