

Shuvah: Everything Changes Shabbat Shuvah

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We just celebrated the birthday of the world last weekend. Maybe I'm the only one, but I tend to get very nostalgic on Rosh Hashanah. I think about my own birthdays. I also think about my Bar Mitzvah. While I was born in July, I did not observe becoming a bar mitzvah until October 7, 1989. It was Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, just as it is today.

So, it's no wonder I get nostalgic. I think back to the many birthdays I've had since my bar mitzvah and the many life-cycle events, and then I inevitably return to the present, taking stock of what I have, being appreciative to my lot in life, and finding myself out of breath from thinking back over the years and being amazed at what I've experienced.

So, no matter how much I look back in nostalgia, I always return to the present day. Shuvah means to return. Which if you think about it is quite interesting because we observe this Shabbat Shuvah immediately after we have celebrated Rosh Hashanah. And Rosh Hashanah can be translated as the beginning of the New Year, or the beginning of change. The Hebrew word *shannah* means year, but as a verb it also means to repeat, and to change, *l'shanot*. (Add a yud and you get *sheinah*, which means sleep, and some people do that during the Rosh Hashanah service too.

So the way I look at it, when we say *Shanah Tovah* we are saying that in the new year, this new cycle, repeating the seasons, the months, the festivals, may we change *l'tovah*, for the better.

Change is frightening, and it seems to get more so as we grow older. We become more aware of our vulnerabilities, our limits, and our own mortality. The frightening truth that we fight off for so long can no longer be denied: Nothing—no person, place, or thing—nothing is forever. Things are, by their very essence, temporary. For a short time, in a limited space, they exist, and then, quite suddenly, they don't.

This awareness makes us look at the world and the people in our life differently. It makes us want to hug our loved ones a little tighter, to enjoy each of life's delights a little more, and to let go of the frustrations a little quicker. Awareness of death makes life more precious. So, here we are, remembering and trying to change our lives before our time is up.

It has often been said, "The more things change the more they remain the same." I don't think that is always true.

Today, in my nostalgic frame of mind, I inescapably to "shuvah" and return to my bar mitzvah date in 1989. Some things, of course, have remained the same since then, but many things have changed since I was thirteen years old. What has changed? For beginners, I was a thirteen year old, eighth grader living in Michigan, cheering for the World Champion Detroit Pistons, concerned with how bad the Detroit

Tigers had become, and spending a great deal of time deciding which bookshelf stereo to buy for my room with the Bar Mitzvah gift money I would soon receive. I had much more hair on my head, I weighed a lot less, wasn't quite as tall as I am today. It didn't faze me that my bar mitzvah party would be held on a Saturday night before Shabbat was over, in a hotel ballroom with non-Kosher food.

Since that time in October 1989, so much has changed and so much of my life has been lived. I went to high school and college; started to keep Kosher and Shabbat; met my girlfriend who became my serious girlfriend, fiancée, wife and then mother of my children; decided against law school in favor of Rabbinical School; became a rabbi; had three children; got a job and bought my first home (which unfortunately I still own).

I experienced much personal change as well. I went from having four grandparents to having only one. I saw more relatives than I care to count fight cancer.

Some succeeded. Some didn't.

It's called Change. Shanah Tovah, we say, as we hope the change will be positive. And we can all look back and reminisce about the change we have experienced. Whether from the time of our bar or bat mitzvah, or from the time we graduated from college, or from the time that Kennedy was shot, or we lost a good friend or a spouse or a child.

If you don't remember the past, there is a solution that Moses gives us in this morning's Torah portion. In his poem Ha-azinu, Moses says *she'al avicha v'yagedcha, zekeineicha v'yomru lach*. Ask your parents and they will explain it, your old ancestors, and they will tell you. Yes, we sometimes make fun of how our older generation gets all sappy and nostalgic as they recount yesteryear, but think about how important it is to reflect on the past and to take notice of the change that is around us. Indeed, we as Jews do this each week as we read from the Torah, our history book par excellence.

She'al avicha v'yagedcha, zekeineicha v'yomru lach. If my children were to ask me today what has changed since that Shabbat morning in October of 1989 when I became a bar mitzvah in a suburban Detroit shul, how would I respond? What would I tell them... where would I begin?

I suppose I would start with the world situation. At my bar mitzvah, I was paired with a twin thirteen-year-old Jewish boy in the Soviet Union who wasn't free to have his bar mitzvah. I wore an uncomfortable silver bracelet with his name on it for several weeks after. I would have to explain that before 1989, there were two Germany's and that communism was the political expression of choice before I became a Bar Mitzvah. The Berlin wall fell, there was German reunification, and the Soviet Union was no more. While my children are growing up in a period when it is debated whether we can bring a cup of coffee on airplanes, I will have to explain to them that when their dad became a bar mitzvah, people were still allowed to smoke on planes.

Saddam Hussein, who is now in prison, had his country Iraq invade Kuwait starting the Persian Gulf War. Jack Kevorkian assisted his first suicide around the time

of my bar mitzvah. The Hubble Space telescope was just launched into orbit. I imagine that if it wasn't launched, perhaps little Pluto would still be a planet today.

Nelson Mandela was still in jail. Johnny Carson was still on TV. Time and Warner were two separate companies; and Princess Di was alive and well, and married to Prince Charles. I would have to explain how down we felt about the race riots in Los Angeles, how up we felt about the Oslo Peace Accords only to be saddened when they proved to be nothing more than a signed treaty that wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

What did we learn from the OJ Simpson trial? What did we learn when the World Trade Center exploded the first time? What was it like to watch Michael Jordan live? Why did a players' strike so disenfranchise me from major league baseball? And from all professional sports?

What was it like to watch the news footage of the Oklahoma City Bombing, or the Olympic Park Bombing, or the Columbine Shootings, or September 11? How did humanity respond to those events? How did humanity respond to God's disasters? To the floods, hurricanes, droughts and earthquakes?

Who was Monica? Who was David Koresh? Why was the Y2K Virus such a big deal anyway? What was it like to live without the Internet? Without cell phones, instant messaging, CD Players, DVDs, HD TV, GPS, DVR, or PDAs.

When did we become so scared? When did we become scared of Iran? Or North Korea? Of Syria? Didn't we know the Taliban was evil? How did Bin Laden get to be powerful? Or Saddam? How did Hamas get elected? When did we start talking about Terrorism everyday?

Seventeen years since my bar mitzvah. A lot has happened. Our world has changed. Our lives have changed. And more change is inevitably coming. Change is coming in all of our lives. Like it or not, things

will not be the same a year from now. The question is not whether we can stop change. The question is whether we can manage it for the better. Can we do teshuvah, can we pray with all our hearts, souls and might, can we live righteous lives? Will we have a shanah tovah—a year of good changes? It depends upon all of us.

I hope you will take the time to reflect. To pick a milestone in the past and to think about how time has changed since that point. How would you explain the past to your children or grandchildren? How did we get to “here” – how did we arrive in the present and how will we change before we get “there” – before we get to the future? I hope that all of our families will be blessed with strength, and wisdom, and goodness, and a little mazel. I pray that we will each find the resolve to make this a shanah tovah u’metukah – a year of positive changes and a year full of the blessing of sweetness.

Shabbat Shalom!