



Change

Rabbi Jeff Saxe

Temple Rodef Shalom, Falls Church, Virginia

Sermon for Yom Kippur 5769

October 9, 2008

I can't remember whether it was in the 80's or the 90's that I first started seeing this bumper sticker, but it's been in my consciousness for years, and maybe you've seen it too. It's usually on an old Volkswagen Bug or a family station wagon next to other stickers for different causes, and it's a spin on the more vernacular two-word phrase we all know: the bumper sticker says, "Change Happens."

Change, of course, is the word of the day. It is the presidential election that has led me to focus my thoughts on it this year. However, I want to tell you that this is not a political sermon but a personal one, and it is the change that happens in our own individual lives that I would like to talk about. Change does happen, and what I love about this bumper sticker is the hidden message it conveys. You might say that in the current political climate, change of some sort or other is the prize everyone longs for. But this expression, "Change Happens," reminds us that in the real world of our own personal lives, that's not always the case. Change is not only difficult, but also frightening. Sometimes we want change, and sometimes we don't. On Yom Kippur, we are charged with contemplating change in our lives. What changes have happened in the last year, and what ones might be in store for us in the year to come? Which changes do we ponder every day, but they just seem to lie there, unrealized?

There are some changes that occur inside of us, perhaps without us even realizing they are happening. Maybe there are a few of you here who were 12 years old last year at this time, and I'm sure many more of you can think back to that year of transition in your lives or perhaps your children's lives. When you're

inside of the moment day to day, you might have no idea how much you've changed until there you are, on the bema, holding the Torah for the first time, and then actually publicly thanking your parents for everything they do for you! Or maybe the change sinks in later when you are looking at your Bat-Mitzvah pictures. You see a person in the photo album who is much different from the person you used to think you were. The same thing goes for our wedding pictures, and pictures with new grandchildren. Every year we are different from the year before. It could be why Jews read the same stories from the Torah, year after year. The Torah doesn't change, but we do. The stories mean something different to us depending on what we need to hear or what we are experiencing in our lives. Different heroes and different stories speak through us and find their own voices.

What you're thinking about this Yom Kippur is different from the last, and it could be that your perspective has changed by a lot. I know this is true for me. This time last year, I had recently moved to the area, started my work here, and gotten married. Now, on my second Yom Kippur in Falls Church, I can see the difference a year makes in so many ways, from developing relationships with many of you to finally being able to find my way around town without my GPS, some of the time. We grow and change through all kinds of life transitions. Maybe you're back home from your first year of college. Or perhaps you find yourself attending yizkor services for the first time, after losing a parent or a grandparent. Some of the changes in us, of course, are more subtle. When working with children, there are landmarks of when a child

begins to read, walk, and talk, but in adulthood it all blends together. There are changes inside of us that are much better recognized by other people than ourselves: how much we have grown, what we have accomplished without even realizing it. We might need a tangible reminder, or a loved one to point it out to us. As our lives change, the liturgy of these ten days invites us to stop for a moment and notice how we are different. Unlike the secular holiday in December that celebrates the passing of another year, it asks us to think back to last year and try to remember where we were then in our lives, what was important to us, and how we are different now. It enables us to have the kinds of conversations with our loved ones in which we might become more aware of how we have changed and how we would like to change. Our prayers remind us that today is a day to do teshuvah, to return, but we also remember that the self we return to is not quite the same as it was last year.

Change happens, often in these subtle ways. But there are also times when changes come suddenly, like cold water splashed on your face. These changes could be wonderful. We fall in love. We get a great new job offer. Or, the changes might not be so positive, and we have to adapt to them in the best way we can. Illness, loss, and other disruptions in our lives challenge us – indeed, force us – to make changes we may never have imagined. While it goes without saying that events like these are painful and even tragic, and that must be recognized, it is inspirational when we see people go through a process of positive change in the face of a difficult loss. Ten years ago, I didn't know my brother in law's father, Steve, very well, and neither did almost anyone else. He was a doctor. He considered himself an atheist but had a strong Jewish identity. The Passover seders I attended at his house didn't mention God, but they passionately connected the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt to the experience of mistreated workers in the United States. Steve was a collector of the art of Ben Shahn, a Lithuanian-born, American Jewish artist whose work focused largely on the social justice themes of labor and immigration. But

Steve was quiet, reserved and difficult to get to know, and his son Michael, my brother in law, told me that Steve had a hard time opening up, even with his family. That was before he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and told he had up to six months left. With the help of his family, Steve decided to change. He began telling the people he loved how he felt, and he focused on making the most of his relationships with those close to him. At the same time, he decided to make his art collection his lasting gift. He hired a friend to organize and catalog the pieces, and before he died he donated it as an archive to Harvard University. I will always remember my brother in law Michael's birthday party during that time, with 40 people gathered in Steve's living room. He sat in his recliner, feet swollen and unable to stand up, and gave a moving presentation on Ben Shahn, his collection and what it meant to him. Afterwards, we sat around and sang labor folk songs while Steve happily looked on. Michael lost his father far too young, but the changes Steve was able to make in himself in those last months were an incredible gift to Michael, who now feels closer to his father than he ever did.

Steve had a family who knew how to help him open up when he was finally ready, but he had to meet them more than halfway, and that must not have been easy for him. We each have avenues we can take in a crisis that can make the difference between transformative change and spiraling further into crisis: support groups for people struggling with similar illnesses – physical or mental – to the ones we may be dealing with; prayer and community at the temple or elsewhere; and simply asking for help, whether from friends, family, a counselor, your clergy, or some other source. Often, the difficult challenges that come into our lives force us to address the same fears and issues we always knew were there – like Steve and his struggle with isolating himself from the people he loved – and when we are able to address them, we have managed to bring something positive out of our struggle, or sometimes even to turn things around.

The bumper sticker slogan is, of course, true: change happens, whether we like it or not. To paraphrase songwriter Bob Dylan, if you don't want to be part of the change that is happening around you, you'd better get out the way. However, the changes that happen to us, without our actively bringing them on, are only part of the story. There are other changes that we think about all the time and we never make them, from week to week and year to year. These changes – or rather, these places where we are stuck – stare us in the face every day. The thought of change is sometimes so frightening that the only way we can bring change into our own lives is to throw ourselves into its path. Take the example of Jacob. He makes some big mistakes early in his life, stealing his brother's birthright and running away from home. Twenty years later, he finds himself out of touch with his whole family, never having confronted what he did or whatever it was that led him to do it. Twenty years! It's a very long time, and it seems unbelievable that he would let it go by. But sadly, it is not. We do that, whether it's letting a resume or job application sit on the table, filled out and stamped; falling out of touch with a close friend or relative because of an issue we don't want to face; or allowing something we are discontented with in our lives to linger unaddressed for too long. For Jacob, after twenty years of festering thoughts, a desire to return home, feelings of guilt or perhaps anger at his family, he decides it is time to go back. He sends word to his brother Esau, and Esau responds that he himself is coming to meet Jacob. Both frightened and excited, Jacob sends all his family and all his possessions across the Jabbok river towards his brother. But he is still too frightened to go himself. Twenty years ago, Esau was so angry at him he wanted to kill him. How will he feel now? Is Jacob ready to deal with his past? So he spends the night alone on the other side of the river. During the night, he wrestles with an angel, who is often interpreted to represent Jacob's own conscience. As I see it, Jacob is lying on the beach, right next to the river, the border that separates where he is from where he wants to be. As he sleeps restlessly, he feels a tap on

the shoulder, and he sees an angel – but it's not really an angel; it's himself and the questions flying through his mind: Should I go? Should I not go? Maybe he doesn't really want to see me. Will I even recognize him? What could I ever say to him? Can I face him? Will he forgive me? Jacob is scared, and his fear is trying to turn him back. But he wrestles with it for hours – maybe not the kind of wrestling you would do with another person, but one that leaves you breathless and exhausted. When morning comes, he prevails, and the angel gives him a new name, Israel. Yisra'el. He has struggled with God – the part of God that is in him.

What do we learn from Jacob? What gives him the courage to face change after so long? For me, we learn that to face a change that scares us that much, we must take a first step, and we will, still, be afraid. We cannot wait for the moment when the fear is gone. Many commentators ponder Jacob's decision to stay on his side of the river that night, wondering if that is what allows him to wrestle with himself, all alone. I believe the key lies on the other side of the river. What enables Jacob to wrestle with his fear is the fact that he has already sent everything he owns and everyone he loves ahead of him into Esau's path! He has taken a step from which there is no turning back.

Just as there are changes that come into our path whether we like it or not, there are changes that will never find us unless we throw ourselves into their path. Like dialing the number of a person we are afraid to call, and letting it begin to ring, we must dive in and allow our fear to come along. We have all felt that moment on the phone, when the other person answers – hello? – and we tell ourselves, “OK, here we go. I guess I'm really doing this.” Or it might mean beginning that conversation with a loved one we need to have, even though we don't know how they will respond, or accepting that first client in the private practice we've been afraid to start. It is in moments like that, when we take a risk, that we can best hope to make real change.

Today I would encourage you to think about what this might be for you. What is the change that you've been thinking about and afraid to make? And I encourage you to consider taking that risk— throwing yourself into the path of change. Sign yourself up for that triathlon, or whatever it is you've been putting off. Make that phone call or start that conversation with your friend or family member. Take that first step from which there is no turning back.

As we near the end of the Ten Days of Repentance, we think through the changes in our lives, the ones that have happened and the ones that still have not. The changes that have happened to us we do not control, and so we adapt to them the best we can. For the positive changes we have made for ourselves, we are happy, proud, and thankful. For the ones we still have yet to achieve, we ask God for help in finding the courage to begin.

In one of the prayers we utter during this holiday, as we stand facing the ark, we say, “Avinu malkeinu, fill our hands with blessing.” Change does not – just – happen. The power is in our own hands. We ourselves face the difficult changes in our lives. We wrestle with our fears. We help each other to begin. Avinu Malkeinu, malei yadeinu b'virkotecha. Avinu Malkeinu, fill our hands with blessing. Help us to shape our own lives and to do the work that is so difficult for us, so that the changes we most need will happen. G'mar Chatimah Tovah, May we all be inscribed this year for such a blessing.