

Temple Emanuel – Rabbi Laura Geller
Erev Rosh Hashanah -- 2006

When my son was eighteen months old, it was time for me to wean him. He was ready; I was ambivalent. I remember a conversation I had with a much older woman who said: “You have to wean your child many times in your life. You might as well learn to do it now.”

So how does a young Jewish mother learn how to wean her child? If the mother is a rabbi, she looks up the Hebrew word for weaning... and checks every reference. So that’s just what I did. And to my delight, I discovered a verse... a verse that appears in tomorrow morning’s Torah portion: “And on the day Isaac was weaned, Abraham made a great feast.” I had read this verse every Rosh Hashanah my whole life... but I never paid attention until the story was my story.

I was clearly not the first Jewish mother to need to learn how to begin to let a child grow up or to feel the need for some kind of ritual to mark this important passage. The text didn’t tell me the details of the ritual... who knows how Abraham and Sarah celebrated? All we know is that there was a great feast.

So I created a ritual. My ritual included friends embroidering small triangles of fabric that were later sewn together into a kippah. [Hold them up.] This was Joshua’s, his first kippah. This was Elana’s. They wore them proudly until they both outgrew them and realized that they are actually sort of funny looking!

Joshua is twenty-four now. And Elana just started her first year in college. My children are growing up. I am growing older. I am still learning how to wean them, how to let them go.

Everything changes. This is one of the great truths in life – and it is a truth that we have to learn over and over again. At this season we wish each other Shana Tova... a good year... But even as we say it we should keep in mind that the Hebrew word for “year” and the word for “change” share the same root. So we are actually wishing each other... and ourselves... a good change.

Here we are again, coming back to the same words, the same music, the same Biblical texts... maybe even the same seats in which we sat last year... but we have changed. Our experiences during this past year have changed us; and so we experience the words, the prayers, the Torah stories differently. This year, perhaps, someone we love is wrestling with a serious illness, so we’ll pray the words “Who shall live and who shall die” with a different poignancy. This year

because of the challenges to Israel, the prayer for the State of Israel has a greater urgency than ever before.

This year... every year... we are confronted with changes. We change, our world changes, Judaism changes. And our community, Temple Emanuel, changes as well. This change is reflected in our new logo: "Living Judaism."

"Living Judaism" suggests two different meanings because "living" is both an adjective and a verb, a gerund actually. As an adjective, living Judaism is a Judaism that embraces change. As a verb, living Judaism means allowing Judaism to penetrate our lives and to change the way we live.

Let me first explore with you some of the ways that a "Living Judaism" embraces change. And then, I'd like to reflect with you how "Living Judaism" can change the way we live.

Talk about change! This is the beginning of my bat mitzvah year as Senior Rabbi of our Temple. Remember what a big deal it was in 1994 that a woman was selected as a senior rabbi of a major congregation? Some of you may even still remember much further back what a revolution it was when girls first began to celebrate bat mitzvah! Look how our world has changed because of the increased involvement of women in Jewish religious life! New rituals... from weaning to mourning a miscarriage, new images in prayer, new ways of understanding God. And a more inclusive community... more sensitive to all the other people whose voices, like those of women, had also been left out of the Jewish conversation. Now there is real diversity, especially here at Emanuel, as we welcome different kinds of families and individuals, gay and lesbian, single parent, blended families, Jews from different countries, Jews-by-choice with many different backgrounds and ethnicities... and intermarried families.

A "Living Judaism" is rich because it learns from everyone. And so it changes... and its rabbis change as well.

When I came to Temple Emanuel, I had decided not to officiate at intermarriages. Like so many of us in the Temple, a number of my close family members have married non-Jews... including my brother, and some of my cousins. I rejoiced at those weddings as a sister and as a cousin... but I didn't officiate as a rabbi. It seemed to me then, as it still does now, that I could only officiate at a wedding that would lead to the creation of a Jewish family, and I couldn't see that happening in a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew. But over the years at Emanuel, I learned from some of you that I was being near-sighted. I have watched as non-Jewish mothers and fathers in our congregation joined with their partners to raise Jewish families, committed not only to their children's Jewish education, but also to creating a Jewish home, with Shabbat and holiday celebrations, with

Jewish learning and Jewish living. I've talked to non-Jewish parents around their children's b'nai mitzvah, sharing the joy of helping their child reach this milestone that they never experienced. In retrospect, those were weddings that I should have celebrated, not just as a friend, but also as a rabbi, because they did lead to a Jewish family. And those non-Jews among us who have chosen to raise their kids as Jews deserve to be thanked. I've learned a great deal from these non-Jewish teachers. I am grateful to them all.

I have learned even more from those who have chosen Judaism. In fact, one of the most moving dimensions of my rabbinate is hearing Jews-by-choice describe the journey that brought them to embrace Judaism. While every story is different, what they share in common is profound gratitude for the gift of becoming Jewish. Because they don't take being Jewish for granted, they remind me and the rest of us what a privilege it is to be living Judaism, where our lives are enriched by community, by history, and by spirituality. They bring a breath of fresh air, a willingness to share the stories of their own journeys and to talk about their own experience of God. And in so doing, they help us better understand our own journeys. Because of them, Judaism is changing, more open to talking about God. Perhaps because of them, we are rediscovering ancient sources of spirituality like the mikvah, an experience that so many other Jews are now beginning to explore as they search for ways to mark the transformations along the spiritual journeys of their lives.

In truth, I am finding that more and more Jews do see themselves as on a spiritual journey. That journey sometimes unfolds in surprising ways.

Look at our connection with the Bryant Temple AME Church, a black church in South Los Angeles. They are our partners in social justice work and we're learning together as well. It was amazing for me to teach Torah at their church... at one point a voice boomed out from that back of the church: "Sister, that was soooo deep!" And then others responded: "AMEN!" They are teaching us about joy in worship, about the exuberance of really feeling grateful, about lifting our hands up over our heads and singing at the top of our lungs: "Halleluya." Do you want to try that now? (Just kidding! Some changes we might not be quite ready for... yet!)

A "Living Judaism" learns from Eastern religions as well... as do rabbis and cantors. Both Cantor Kliger and I have participated in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality where we have studied mindfulness meditation. Perhaps you have noticed more contemplation in some of our services, as well as more time for silence.

Living Judaism... is changing, vibrant, inclusive, open to learn from other spiritual traditions, and to rediscover depths within Judaism that we might have overlooked.

And this is only part of what Living Judaism means, when living is the adjective. Living is also a verb... so living Judaism means bringing the wisdom of Jewish tradition into the way we live our life and the way we see the world. Actually living Judaism gives us the tools to change our lives as we deal with change.

I had a powerful experience of this second kind of living Judaism in an unlikely setting this summer when my husband and I spent a week at Spirit Rock Meditation Center for a retreat. It was a silent retreat. For one week, we didn't speak, we didn't read... we didn't listen to the radio or watch television. For one week there was no e-mail or phone calls. It was difficult. Silent meals, silent work in the kitchen, periods of sitting meditation and walking meditation... all in silence.

It was good we couldn't talk. If we could, after the second day what I would have said was: "Get me out of here!" But by the fourth day, the experience began to change. The "to do" list in my head began to grow shorter, and the chatter, the constant conversation I have with myself, began to quiet down. In the quiet, I noticed that I kept thinking about old dramas, stories of when I had been hurt. Surprisingly, the more I observed these familiar tropes, the more they seemed to lose their hold over me. As I thought about the people who had hurt me, I realized I no longer wanted to hold on to the hurts that I had been carrying. It wasn't that I condoned the hurtful actions... but rather that I accepted the truth of what had happened without the accompanying drama.

And then I began to think about times I had hurt people, and whether there was still some work I had to do to put that behind me and them.

I wasn't anticipating what came up for me through this quiet... I felt a rush of compassion, and then maybe even forgiveness... for myself first, and then for specific people... and then, in some inchoate way, for all people. I thought: everything changes... and I can change as well.

I looked around the meditation hall... seventy-five people, ranging in age from late twenties to middle seventies... people who were total strangers to me, people whose names and professions and stories I never learned... because we never talked. But I realized that each one of them has his or her own story, his or her suffering, and just like all of us, they were doing the best they could in the face of whatever challenges they were struggling with. I felt this overwhelming sense of connection with each one... and with all of

creation. The insight of quantum physics that at the most basic levels, everything is the same... made up of waves of potential, felt true to me. I heard the words of the Sh'ma reverberate in my body: Sh'ma Yisrael: listen, pay attention: Adonai , YHVH, the Divine name we pronounce with every breath [breathe], is God, there is only God. I felt a softening in my chest, my heart opening up.

It was an experience of teshuvah, of turning, of change. It was an experience of living Judaism.

Teshuvah happens when we understand that everything changes; and we can change as well. We can become more compassionate and more forgiving. Perhaps that is why our tradition offers us as part of the bedtime Sh'ma, a prayer that says: "I hereby forgive everyone who angered or antagonized me, whether against my body or my property, my honor or anything of mine, whether accidentally or willfully, carelessly or purposefully, whether by speech or deed, thought or fantasy." This is the prayer we are invited to say every night before we go to sleep. Imagine ending your day, every day, with forgiveness and an open heart. Imagine how living Judaism in this way could change you.

On the retreat I thought about that prayer and another as well, the interpretation of the second paragraph of the Sh'ma in the New Emanuel Minyan prayerbook: "Let your heart rest in the awareness of the present moment. See clearly, and let the work of your hands arise from clarity. Sit each day when you are settled and when your path is uncertain. Note the rising and passing of all things. Hold fast to your awareness through all of your transitions. For in every moment you are both giving birth and being born. For when you rest your attention in the truth of the present moment, your rest your heart in God."

The truth of the present moment is that everything changes.

Everything changes. Judaism changes... our rabbis change, our services change... more contemplation, more silence, hopefully more joy. Living Judaism celebrates change... and living Judaism offers us wisdom, insight, values, traditions, and practices that can change our lives... and maybe even our world.

Yes, everything changes. Our kids outgrow their first kippah. We lose people we love. This is what it means to be a human being. We can fight with that truth... or that truth can be the key to opening our hearts, and helping us become more compassionate... to ourselves, to other people and to our world. In opening our hearts we are truly living Judaism.

May this New Year be a year of good changes... for you, for our congregation, for Israel, and for our world.