

Change You Can Believe In
Yom Kippur 2008
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I am not going to tell you who to vote for. First, as I understand separation of church and state, I can talk about issues and even about propositions, but I can't use this bully pulpit of mine to endorse a candidate. I hope the group of pastors who recently challenged the law lose when their case comes to court. Separation of church and state is good for the Jews, and for every other minority religious group in our country. And second, you wouldn't listen anyway! Each of you knows as much as I about the candidates, and each of you is going to make your own decisions. So I won't tell you who to vote for. But I will tell you (in case you're interested) that I am going to vote for the candidate in favor of ... change!

So what does that tell you? Not a whole lot. McCain is in favor of change. He said: "We have sent a powerful message to Washington. Change is coming." Obama is in favor of change. He said: "We are the change that we seek." Change... it is a word we hear a lot these days – but it is often just a political slogan, without much meaning.

We're all in favor of change, and yet, we're all anxious about it as well. In our *Elul Reflections*, one of the most poignant thoughts was from Toni Corwin who said: "So the holidays are a busy time for me... a lot of hoping and praying for good things to come, or at least that things don't get worse."

That things don't get worse... Don't we all pray for that? The year just ending turned out to be a really tough year. More people than ever before are requesting financial aid to pay their membership dues. One of our congregants told me he is worried about keeping his home. Another told me she didn't know how she could finance her daughter's college education if student loans dry up. Some people have lost their jobs while others are deferring long-planned-for retirements. My mother, like many older people, is worried about whether she will outlive her savings.

The High Holidays are exactly the time that we confront the vulnerability of life, but this year it feels like we are even more vulnerable. Who can listen to the words of *U'netnaeh Tokef* this year and not really tremble. It's not the "who shall live and who shall die" part that is so terrifying; that consciousness is always a part of these High Holy Days. But this year what grabs our attention is something else: "who shall be poor and who rich, who shall be humbled and who exalted."

What does our tradition offer us at a time like this? How can it help us cope with the changes that might be in store for us? How does it help us remain hopeful?

Part of the answer is in the Torah portion we're about to read: "I have set before you today life and death, blessing and curse... Choose life, so that you and your descendants might live."

What a strange statement. It doesn't seem like a choice at all. Who wouldn't choose life over death, blessing over curse?

I think the challenge is more subtle than that. Today, in every moment of every day, there is both blessing and curse. How I respond is a choice. Every challenge that we face includes the possibility of blessing and curse; I get to choose. Yes, I am frightened. But fear is a choice I am making. I am angry; that too is a choice. I am envious of people who seem to have more than I do; another choice. But in each of these

cases, I am choosing the curse; I am choosing death. Not literal death, but death of my spirit, my trust, my hope.

What would it mean to choose life, to choose blessing? Maybe it means asking myself: what do I really need? How high an income? How much money for my retirement? How fancy a car? Maybe it means asking myself what is really important in my life and noticing how richly blessed I really am, even now.

In a few days, many of us will build a sukkah in our back yards. We'll cover it with palm fronds or bamboo, and decorate it with the few New Years cards that still come in the mail instead of on-line. For one week we'll eat our meals there, inviting friends to join our families in this very fragile booth that becomes our home. A sukkah can't protect us from rain or cold; one strong wind could topple it. And yet, we call this time we spend in our sukkah "the season of our joy"! Why?

Because we take into the sukkah only what is most important: we take our family, our friends, and the memory of those people whose lives are a blessing for us. We leave our computers, blackberries, big screen TV's, and video games behind. Sukkot is the holiday when what we have acquired in our life is totally irrelevant, when we realize that there is no security in a beautiful home or even a stock portfolio. The only security is the peace that comes from dwelling in God's presence, the cloud of glory that the sukkah represents.

Yes, there are challenges. Some of us will lose money; others may lose our jobs. Some of our kids will move from private schools to public schools or colleges. There is no question that will be hard. The question is: can we face this moment, and still choose life, still find the blessing instead of the curse, even in the challenges that might be in store for us?

When we read the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, we can get so caught up in the terror that we miss the point. The metaphor that on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is decided "Who shall live and who shall die, who shall be impoverished and who enriched" is a poet's way not of telling us something about God, but rather telling us something about our own experience, the truth of our lives: the world is a shaky place. We can't change that truth; but we can create meaning in the face of it. We need to read to the last line of the prayer: "But teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah avert the severity of the decree." The decree is the decree: everything we hold precious will eventually be taken away from us. But the severity of that decree, how we experience that loss, can be softened by teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah – turning, prayer, and acts of justice. Those are the keys that open the doors of hope and reduce the pain of our lives.

Teshuvah, turning, is the first key. No matter where you are, you are never completely stuck. You can change; not the easy change suggested by a political slogan, but real change, the kind of change that comes from struggling with your best vision of yourself, the person you most want to be, made wiser by your life experience, humbled by the mistakes you've made, more compassionate because you understand that everyone else is really just like you. You are a work in progress; each challenge is an opportunity to learn something more about who you might become.

I want to share a story of teshuvah, one that was e-mailed to me by a congregant just yesterday. He begins: "You might find the following... extraordinary... After shul on Tuesday morning, I went to visit my mom... She has been bed-and-chair-bound for

twenty months and has to be fed by a caregiver. She is present most of the time but is not always able to... communicate. ...

“I brought the booklet of *Emanuel Elul Reflections* and I read to her. We got to my story which begins ... I have so many vivid memories of the High Holidays over the years. At least one is too embarrassing to share... Another? Too embarrassing to share.’ Before I got to the third ‘too embarrassing to share,’ my mother, with all the physical and mental challenges that attend her now, said: ‘Oh Albert, you never have to be embarrassed about anything.’”

The e-mail continued: “I don't want to wax too psychological about this... but here we are in the Days of Awe, heading to atone, and these words from a mother, spoken through a gravelly whisper, stunned me... I realized in that instant that we can recover from episodes that caused us feelings of deep shame and embarrassment that may have led us into cycles of bad behavior... It made me wonder how I would feel if I atoned and made amends on a daily basis?” He concludes: “This experience as an adult of being seen by a parent who is fading away was very powerful. I see it as gift.”

That moment between an aging mother and an adult son was a moment of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of transformation, of change. It was an experience of *teshuvah*.

The second key is *tefillah*, prayer. You have heard friends in Twelve-Step programs talk about “letting go and letting God.” It is the recognition that sometimes you can't do it alone, that you have to let go and trust that there are bigger hands that hold you. Not that the hands can protect you from tough times, but that they can comfort you as you go through the narrow places. And along with those hands come other hands and the connection of hearts. So *tefillah* is not only all the words we have said today, outloud and in our own hearts, but also the community that comes together to say them.

Just last week, during Shabbat services, one of our older congregants had a heart episode. Someone called 911, and then two other congregants, each forty years younger than she, followed her to the hospital and stayed with her until, thankfully, she was able to go home. The friends she made through the New Emanuel Minyan were there for her, just as they are there when someone dies, or someone needs help moving, or someone has a simcha to celebrate. *Tefillah* is a key to opening doors and opening hearts. Those doors open onto community, and to friends who can help you through tough times.

Tzedakah, acts of justice, is the third key. You are not powerless in the world around you. You can make a difference with the choices you make. And that's why the *haftarah* we read this morning calls us to “let the oppressed go free; share your bread with the hungry; take the homeless into your home; do not turn away from people in need.” The blessing in the uncertainty of this season is the realization that we are all the same; all of us, God forbid, could imagine a scenario in which someone we know, someone we love, could become homeless. The blessing in that terrible thought is that maybe now we will actually try to do something about homelessness, about hunger, about foreclosures, about building affordable housing. The *haftarah* concludes “Then cleansing light shall break forth like the dawn; your wounds shall soon be healed.” Isaiah is telling us that *tzedakah* is a key: when we take care of those who need help, our wounds will be healed. And maybe, by working with other people to try to help those most affected by the economic uncertainty, we can to begin to change ourselves and we can begin to change the world.

Yes, these are tough times. Some doors might be closing, but we can open other doors because we have the keys: *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, keys that open the door to choosing life.

I conclude with a well-known, perhaps apocryphal story told about a performance of the violinist Itzhak Perlman. Because he had polio as a child, he walks with crutches slowly across a stage and it takes him a few minutes to remove the braces from his legs, settle himself, and pick up his violin. At this particular concert, “just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap - it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant and what he would have to do: put down his violin, replace his braces, pick up the crutches, heave himself to his feet, make his laborious way offstage, and either get another violin or restring his crippled instrument.

“He didn’t. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then signaled the conductor to begin again. Everyone knows it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. He played with such passion and power and purity... You could see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece in his head... When he finished, there was an awed silence, and then the audience rose, as one.

“He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, ‘You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music he can still make with what he has left.’”¹

This year our challenge is to find out how much music we can make with what we have left.

Let us become an orchestra and together, fill our world with music... as we open the door to choosing life.

Amen.

¹Reported in the Houston Chronicle, February 10, 2002, but later determined to be an urban myth. Still, some stories are so good that even if they are not actually true they are still important.