

**Rosh Hashanah 5772: Change Takes Time**  
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Rosh Hashanah is a day  
for telling stories:  
The story of Abraham and Isaac.  
The story of Hannah and her prayer.

As we celebrate the Birthday of the World  
there's the story we hope to tell  
about the year to come.

On this particular day of the year  
Which demands introspection  
examination  
teshuvah –  
a process of turning and returning...  
I'd like to invite us to look  
at how we tell our stories -  
With a new lens.  
For the New Year.

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On the first day of December in 1955,  
a black woman  
refused to give up her seat on a bus  
and started a revolution  
that changed history forever.

Who am I talking about?  
(*Rosa Parks*)

I love this story.  
I was brought up to believe in this story –  
in this TYPE of story.  
It's compelling. It's inspiring.  
It seems possible that every ordinary American...  
even the most **marginalized** citizen,  
can trigger a movement for social change.

And, I have to tell you,  
it was an effective lesson.  
I saw myself as a future Rosa Parks.  
One day, I would stand up for justice,  
and, if I was determined and courageous,  
I would succeed.  
Just like Rosa Parks.

We continue to teach this story-  
And stories just like it:  
Stories about the individual's capacity  
to bring about change...  
Stories about the one moment  
of true courage and conviction  
in the face of injustice  
That can redefine a life, let alone a society.

But, that heroic story of social change is incomplete...

What many of you already know,  
but I confess,  
it took me a bit longer  
to recognize...  
is that long before Rosa Parks boarded a bus  
there was a movement of people seeking change.

Long before Rosa Parks  
there were volunteers working on voter registration,  
running Citizenship schools,  
preaching sermons about equality,  
singing songs about freedom.

Long before Rosa Parks  
there were disenfranchised  
men and women  
joining together  
to learn,  
to lead,  
to raise money,  
and to recruit new members  
to organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,  
and the NAACP.

*And 9 months before Rosa Parks,  
Claudette Colvin,  
A black teenager – 15 years old,  
was arrested in Montgomery, AL  
for refusing to give up her seat on the bus.*

So on the first day of December in 1955,  
As there had been on the day before,  
And the day before that...  
there was a movement of people  
seeking change.

**A movement that took time to develop.**

Relationships that **took time to build.**  
Years of work invested  
in anticipation of the day  
when those relationships and that movement  
would have the power to act.  
Forcefully. Deliberately.  
Strategically.

This story isn't just about a work-weary woman  
who started a revolution  
through one small, significant act.

There were **people**,  
Thousands of people,  
invisible in most retellings of this story,  
who worked tirelessly, for years  
in the name of civil rights.

*Some of you sitting here today  
Might have been part of that movement.  
Part of that picture.*

And if we could only  
adjust the frame –  
Expand the borders of this story  
Widen the scope  
we would see those people...

and we might be able to recognize  
and acknowledge  
**just how much time and energy it took**  
to build a movement of people.

**It took time**

to build a movement that would eventually  
Have the resources and the strategy  
to support Rosa Parks  
To frame her action  
To give it context  
To ultimately,  
Give that moment power.

Now, that's not the story we tell...  
But it's a story that we should consider telling.  
**Serious, lasting, social change**  
Requires a lot more people...

And those relationships --  
Which are based on trust  
And shared interests --  
take time to build.

Stories have the power to shape  
a child's understanding of the world.

Children grow up believing certain truths about who they are,  
And how change is made  
based on what they learn from their parents,  
Their grandparents,  
Their teachers,  
And rabbis.  
And then, those children grow up...

If we only tell them stories  
that highlight the hero  
They will never look around  
For the partners who might join them  
Along the way.

**If we only tell them stories**

**Of the moment**

**And not of the movement**

They will think that change is brought about

Through one swift act

Rather than through an investment of time

Resources, energy

And strategy.

Rosa Parks was tired,

Really tired,

And she was fed up and didn't want to stand idly by.

So she made a decision:

To join a movement.

To serve as secretary

for the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP –

To attend a desegregation workshop

At the Highlander Folk School –

To stand up for what she believed in...

Ironically, by sitting down.

And on that day in December,

Thanks to the years of work

Invested by leaders and volunteers,

And thanks to the strategy that was developed...

To test out the public reaction

When an older, more established woman

refused to give up her seat on the bus --

Her moment of civil disobedience

Had real, transformative power.

**That's** the story of change

We need to start telling...

if we hope to give our children the tools

That will help them build a more just

and fair world.

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Believe it or not...  
I have another story  
About a bus.

A year and a half ago,  
Our community organizing team  
Helped to change a bus route  
For children traveling  
From Saturn Elementary to Emerson Middle School.

We had learned that the middle school students  
From the neighborhood of Saturn  
Were picked up and dropped off  
At the corner of Hauser and Venice.  
A dangerous intersection.

*One time, the principal of Saturn almost hit  
One of her former students  
Who had darted across the street  
To reach the convenience store.*

We spoke with community leaders  
and with parents,  
We agreed a safer bus stop  
Would be at Saturn Elementary  
Their former home.  
We asked for the change,  
and we won.  
Practically overnight the bus route was changed.

Victory!

A few months later,  
I was at Saturn for a meeting,  
And I happened to ask one of the teachers:

“How’s it going with the students  
And the new bus stop  
Here at Saturn?”

“Not so great,” he said.

“The middle school  
has early dismissal on Tuesday.

So the students are dropped off  
While our classes are **still in session**

And they come  
onto the playground...  
Or back into the building...  
to find a snack in the lunchroom,  
or, to visit the classrooms of their teachers...  
Who are still trying to teach...

We’ve had to lock the gate.  
And, still, they try to climb over.”

“Uh-huh.” I said.  
“So, this wasn’t such a great idea, then?”

“Well,” he said,  
“It’d be a lot better if you could change the dates  
For early dismissal.”

I could have ignored the comment.  
As far as our friends and family knew,  
We had reported success.  
The papers had captured our quotes.  
No one demanded a review in 3 or 6 months.

Fortunately, the practice of community organizing,  
Teaches that we always need to be evaluating our work.  
And that it’s not enough  
To APPEAR effective  
We need to BE effective.

So a group of leaders  
Returned to examine this new problem  
that we had created  
with our suddenly  
less-than-stellar solution...

Now, this could be written off  
As yet another example of:  
“no good deed goes unpunished”  
but I think it’s actually  
a great example of real efforts to bring about change.

**Quite often,  
change is not so neat and clean.**

For every two steps forward,  
There may be one step back.  
Solve one problem...  
Discover a new one.  
Sound familiar?

*Now, as it turned out,  
the district made the decision for us –  
Early dismissal is now on Tuesdays  
For all schools...*

**But the lesson holds true:**

If we’re serious about change:  
Personal, communal, national,  
Even global -  
we need to be realistic  
About what change looks like  
And how it comes about...

Real, impactful change  
Requires us to be humble  
So that we can admit when we’re wrong  
So we can admit that perhaps  
There is more work to be done.

Real, impactful change  
Requires work beyond the victory.  
Time, effort, energy  
And investment **one day after the celebration.**  
And one more day after that.

**The question is:  
Do we have the strength  
To stay engaged?**



Because ...  
if it takes time to build a movement...  
It takes stamina to stay involved.

Stories can help us!  
Stories that remind us  
That the process of change  
rarely happens overnight...  
or follows a linear path...

Stories that remind us  
That the work of change  
Is hardly, if ever, done.  
Completed.  
Checked off the list.

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On Rosh Hashanah,  
when most of us are focused on **forgiveness**  
Which also requires a good deal  
of strength and stamina –  
It's important to say aloud –  
That this work of personal change  
is hardly, if ever, done.

In thinking about  
the ten year anniversary of 9/11,  
**Rabbi David Wolpe wrote,**

“...in this broken and unfinished world,  
there is no end to struggle.”

Freedom is not an accomplished reality  
but a perpetually renewed achievement.

Darkness is not banished  
but rather subdued  
by a continual attempt to bring light.

Love is not settled  
but forever to be recreated.”

The expectation  
is that we are to be engaged in this “work”  
Of living, loving,  
Struggling and searching,  
**For the entirety of our lives.**

And yet...  
It appears that another rabbi  
actually assigns an endpoint  
to the process of atonement.

*(Two rabbis disagreeing...  
I know, you're shocked.)*

According to Maimonides,  
A medieval commentator and rabbi,  
“If you approach someone  
3 times for forgiveness  
and the person refuses to forgive you,  
the sin transfers to the one who refused.”

It's a good teaching.  
Sometimes, if we miss the mark,  
we have to return  
More than once  
To repair the relationship.

Often, I've taught this text  
As a way to show  
that there's an acceptable limit  
to our efforts to apologize.  
We can only do so much  
And then...  
We are freed from the responsibility.

And yet,  
Upon further reflection,  
It occurs to me that MANY OF US  
Have been apologizing for years,  
in various ways,  
to the same people  
for the same mistake...  
and we'll keep apologizing.  
Long past the number three.

As it turns out,  
we spend a lifetime working on relationships  
with our parents  
or our children.  
Our neighbors.  
Our friends.

Some of our teshuvah,  
Our repentance,  
might even be on a 5 or 10-year plan.  
Paid out in manageable installments each year.

Perhaps that's why the midrash says:  
While the gates of prayer are sometimes closed,  
The gates of repentance  
are always open.

For most of the relationships that really matter,  
We find the strength to stay engaged.  
We don't give up.  
We don't surrender to the fatigue.  
We hold onto the hope  
That each year,  
we draw a little bit closer.

We are engaged in this work  
For a lifetime.

**That's a story of change worth telling.**

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One final story.

Once upon a time,  
a rabbi was journeying towards a new city...  
on a bus.

(I'm kidding.)

He stopped a young boy along the way  
And asked him:  
"My son, which road leads to the city?"

The boy replied,  
"Both roads lead to the city,  
but one road is longer than the other."

"And which is the shorter?" asked the Rabbi.

"THIS road  
is the long-short road;  
**THAT** is the short-long road."

The Rabbi chose the short road  
(which, for the record,  
the boy had said was the short-long).

On approaching the city  
he found it encircled with gardens and parks  
so much so that he could not find his way in.  
And he was forced to return  
to the place from which he had started.

The boy was still sitting beside the road  
so the Rabbi said:  
"My son, didn't you say that THIS road  
was the short one?"

"Yes, Rabbi," he replied,  
"that **WAS** the short-long road,  
but, I think  
you only heard the word, short."

The other way is the long-short road.  
It takes longer,  
but, in the end,  
you actually get into the city.”

Here’s the thing,  
many of us,  
myself included,  
Would choose the shorter road  
If it seemed to promise  
A more efficient,  
Expeditious route.

We don’t have a lot of time:  
In the practical sense...  
There are a limited numbers of hours in the day.  
And in the spiritual sense ...  
We’re only here  
In this body  
On this earth  
for so long...

As a result,  
we are driven by an urgency  
To complete our tasks  
Achieve our goals.  
Make our impact.  
So much so  
That we may not even notice  
When our actions  
Lead us onto the short-long road.

We know that if we do our children’s homework  
They will not learn the material.  
But when it’s late,  
And we’re tired,  
It’s hard not to fill in the answers.

We KNOW that an in-person  
Face to face conversation  
Will be more effective,  
At work. At home.

In life.

Even if it takes longer to schedule,  
And yet we still hit “send” on an email  
Replacing the conversation  
With text...

And we watch  
as the responses fill up our inbox.  
Each one  
Delaying our arrival  
At our desired endpoint.

We may have experience  
Trying out the short-long road  
With **grief**.

Hoping that if we force ourselves  
back into our old routines...  
Or into new relationships...  
**That we can short-cut the suffering.**

Hoping if we can just reach the End  
The pain will stop.  
The loneliness will fade.

Yet we find ourselves  
Outside the walls of the city  
Unable to enter.

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We spend most of the year  
convincing ourselves  
that we are headed on the right path,  
even though there’s a tugging at our spiritual sleeve  
urging us to pull over and ask for directions.  
**But we refuse.**

We have to stay on track,  
We have to stay on message.

It's what we were taught...  
It's what we committed to...  
It seemed like the shorter road!

And yet, *we sense that there might be another way.*  
If only we were willing to **return**.

Rosh Hashanah is our time to honor that feeling.  
To stop.  
To look again at the stories  
that serve as our compass...  
To (re)consider.  
Re-evaluate.

If we hope to make  
Long-term, sustainable change  
For ourselves,  
our city  
our country,  
let alone for our world...  
We need to teach that **change takes time**.

**It takes time** to build a movement  
That will support our actions.

**It takes time** to sustain and to strengthen  
The work that we've already done.

We know this...but we forget.  
And so we end up on the short-long road –  
Turning around  
Again and again.

We know this,  
But we forget.  
And so we create lists  
With check-marks next to  
Each activity that we complete...  
Only to rewrite the list  
The next day  
The next week...  
Because the work has not yet been done.

We know...but we forget.  
And so we tell ourselves  
“if you want something done right,  
do it yourself.”  
It’s less complicated.  
More efficient, perhaps...  
But not so effective.

It’s time for a change.  
In how we live our lives.  
In how we tell our stories.

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Change takes time  
and it requires an investment  
over a lifetime.  
Sometimes over many lifetimes.

If nothing else proves this to be true...  
Where do we stand in 2011?  
56 years after Rosa Parks  
took her rightful seat in history...

Where are we now in the movement for civil rights?  
In spite of our achievements,  
our work is not yet done.

Michelle Alexander, a law professor at Ohio State,  
wrote a bestseller titled:  
The New Jim Crow:  
Mass **Incarceration** in the Age of Colorblindness.

“More African American men are in prison or jail,  
on probation or parole  
than were enslaved in 1850,  
before the Civil War began.”

If you look at the history of **public education**  
in our country,  
it's supposed to be the great equalizer....



Yet, in far too many places  
educational opportunity is tied to race,  
neighborhood and zip code.<sup>1</sup>

And lest we forget the connection  
Between graduation and incarceration --  
1 in 4 young, black, male **dropouts**  
are incarcerated  
or otherwise institutionalized  
on an average day.<sup>2</sup>

And while controversial for some,  
Many, myself included,  
believe that the fight for **marriage equality**  
Is an ongoing fight for civil rights.

Our work is not yet done.

So I want to return to Rosa Parks,  
Because this sermon is NOT  
about the insignificance of the individual.  
Or the insignificance of a moment.

Rosa Parks was heroic and powerful  
in her moment  
because she had a movement of people who supported her.

Men and women who stayed in the fight,  
Month after month,  
Year after year.  
In spite of their setbacks.  
In spite of their losses.

Men and women  
who listened  
and believed when Martin Luther King, Jr. said:  
How long?  
Not long.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.essence.com/2010/03/01/arne-duncan-education-reform/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/09/education/09dropout.html> (That compares with about 1 in 14 young, male, white, Asian or Hispanic dropouts.)

**Because we're walking this road together.**

So I'm asking you today,  
As we begin our New Year:  
**Are you on this road?**

Because if you are,  
I can promise you,  
You are not alone.

If you're on this road  
the work of personal change  
Will come easier.

We need a community  
to hold us accountable.  
To remind us that we are ALL working  
Every day  
On repairing ourselves and our relationships,

**Are you on this road?**  
Because if you are,  
the work of communal change  
Will come easier.

There are people in this community  
Who have walked this road for years...  
Their lives are a testament to the  
Ongoing efforts  
From one generation to the next  
To pursue justice through Temple Isaiah.

If you're on THIS road  
I can promise you  
that at this time next year,  
there won't just be three stories of change:  
Rosa Parks.  
Saturn Elementary.  
and that Long-Short Road...

There will be a fourth story to tell –

About you.

About this community.

About our commitment to one another –

And our efforts to walk this road together.

Ken Yehi Ratzon,  
May it be so.

Shanah Tovah!