



Patterns in Flux
Rosh Hashanah 5779
Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles

I remember the last full day of sleepaway camp at Camp Interlocken in New Hampshire. The counselors had the campers all carve memory sticks. We each whittled a stick with images that captured what was special about the summer. That night, the head counselor invited us to throw our memory sticks into the campfire. I threw mine in. Even then, I loved ritual. It was symbolic, summer was ending, and we were offering our memories on the altar of s'mores and kumbaya. When I looked around, however, I noticed that no one else had done it. Everyone was clutching their memory stick. I was the only one who had thrown it into the fire.

I wonder where those memory sticks are now. If any of those campers still have them today, displayed on their mantel, or in a shoebox under the bed with lanyards and a macramé dream catcher. I suspect mine is the only one that made it into a high holy day sermon.

This day of Rosh Hashana, we reflect on our past deeds and experiences, our memories. We consider what to do with them. Shall we build with them a nest, settle in and live in them, or offer them up on the altar of change, as we step into a new year, ready to collect new ones.

There is a Polynesian myth that tells of a time when humans didn't die. Rather, when they grew old and their skin began to wrinkle, they would shed their skin by the river, like snakes, and renew their youth. One day, an old woman went to the river to change her skin. She tossed her old skin into the water where, as it floated away, it caught upon a stick. When the woman returned home, her child did not recognize her. The child cried and cried. To pacify the child, the woman returned to the river, retrieved her old skin, and put it on again. From that day, people stopped living forever.

It's a strange, fascinating story. This idea that the secret to immortality is shedding one's skin and renewing oneself. And death comes into the world, when we try to put our old skin back on.

We also have our myths about moving forward. Our creation story includes cherubs with fiery swords guarding the Garden to prevent us from going back and eating from the Tree of Eternal Life. We have the story of Lot's wife who is told not to look back but does and is turned into a pillar of salt. We have our tashlich ceremony (today at 4:30 p.m. at Santa Monica Beach, Lifeguard station 22). We don't shed our skins but we shed our sins, casting bread on the water. We have mikveh, when we immerse in a ritual bath and emerge reborn. The mezuzah sanctifies our moving through passageways, in fact the word *mezuzah* shares a root with the Hebrew verb *lazuz*, to move. Even breaking the glass at a wedding is a kind of shedding, casting off the chrysalis in order to evolve into a new life together.

At this season, we talk about return. But when we say return, we do not mean "go backwards." What we mean by return is return to the path. This is the time of year when we measure how far we've gone astray and recalibrate how to get back on track. Not back onto a stalled train, but back on a working track, so that we can venture on.

The word for year in Hebrew, *shana*, shares a root with the Hebrew verb *leshanot*, which means "to change." When we wish others a *shana tova*, we are wishing them a good year and a change for the good.

We are designed to move forward. Astrophysicist Karel Schrijver teaches: "We are quite literally not who we were years, weeks or even days ago. Our cells die and are replaced by new ones at an astonishing pace. What persists over time is not fixed, but merely a pattern in flux."

What persists is a pattern in flux. We think we are something solid and stable when we are more accurately patterns in flux. In the same way a wave is not recognized by the water that is constantly changing inside of it, but by its pattern.

God is in motion too. When Moses asked God, what shall I call You, God answered: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*. I will be what I will be. We are made in God's image, which does not mean we look like God and God looks like us, rather, we are patterned after the pattern of God. A complex kaleidoscopic fractal tetrahedron hyper prismatic moving pattern.

The whole Torah is about motion, a journey, from the exile from Eden to the exile from Egypt, and we never really arrive. Torah ends at the edge of the homeland, and then we roll back to the beginning and start again.

The Greek Philosopher Heraclitus said, "The only constant in life is change." He said, "No person ever steps in the same river twice."

So, when we roll Torah back to the beginning, it is not the same Torah, nor are we the same people, Our skin has changed. So we experience new wisdom in the ancient stories, find new treasures along the same path.

This idea of being in motion is familiar in Eastern religions. Non-attachment, which is not the same as being unmoored and lost. Rather, it's a release from desire and consequently from suffering. Freedom from lust, from craving for things. It is serenity. Equanimity. Like the lotus which hovers, untouched by the water.

But it is hard to do. Especially for us Jews. We get attached. We prefer building monuments, rather than mandalas. We are more interested in infinity rather than ephemerality. But that also burdens us, and when we lose things, it causes us to grieve. Hard. Perhaps that is why so many Jews turn to Eastern spirituality. And do yoga.

Maurice Sendak was once asked what his favorite comment from a reader was. He said, "A little boy sent me a charming card with a little drawing. I loved it. I sent him a postcard and I drew a picture of a Wild Thing on it. Then I got a letter back from his mother and she said, 'Jim loved your card so much he ate it.' That to me was one of the highest compliments. He didn't care that it was an original drawing or anything. He saw it, he loved it, he ate it."

The mother, understandably, had wanted to frame the postcard. To eternalize it. The child, however, wanted to imbibe it. Ingest, digest and internalize it.

I moved out of the senior office this summer. I gave away a great many of my books and winnowed down my file cabinets to two small boxes. And people ask me how it feels.

It feels the way a tree must feel when it is pruned, humbler, but also stronger, stimulated to form new flowers and fruit buds. It feels healthy, and right, and good, to branch in new directions. A new day brings new light. And it is not negation of the past, rather it is anticipation of the future.

The office I moved out of did not belong to me. It was once Rabbi Bob Gan's office, but it didn't belong to him either. It was once Rabbi Albert Lewis' office, and while he was the founding rabbi of our temple, it didn't belong to him either. Just as the land we own, doesn't belong to us. It wasn't quaked out of the molten sea just for us. We are all grateful tenants in this world.

When I was moving my office, I paused holding a large Bible. A Christian Bible I had discovered in an antique store over twenty years ago. It was over two hundred years old, filled with beautiful engravings. I had bought it, because it felt sacred. I kept it in my dorm at Brandeis University. To my New York apartment during Rabbinical School. And to the golden coast. I thought about what to do with it. Let it now be someone else's blessing. I thought about giving it to St. Timothy's. And as I walked out of the temple to my car with it in my arms, I saw one of our guards, Wilbur. We talked about faith. I said I have had this Bible for many years, and I want it to be treasured, to be an heirloom for a family of faith, passed down through the generations. And I gave it to him.

When he brought it home his family received it with much joy. His mother told him that if the Bible didn't get passed down to her grandchildren, she was going to come back from the grave and deal with him. And for me, there is such blessing in being able to give. It had lived with me, and now it had been delivered, channeled to its destined home. I am a part of that sacred book's story, part of its river, even more so that it is now out of my possession.

I am reminded of the moment in the 1971 movie Harold and Maude when, sitting by a lake, Harold gives Maude a ring. She clutches it to herself and says, "This is the nicest gift I've received in years." Then, she throws it into water. She says to Harold, "So I'll always know where it is."

There is a reason the most meaningful part of the bar mitzvah ceremony is the passing of the Torah. There is a reason the prayer that brings the most people to tears is *L'Dor va-Dor*. Because it touches on the essence of what we are. We are the river. We are fluid, and our spirit flows, like water in the pattern of a wave. And we long to be included in a movement of giving, rather than be clogged and stuck.

A body in motion stays in motion and so we are. Whether we like it or not, and we will shed parts of ourselves. We may let go of our hair or hair color. We may one day let go of our perfect hearing. Our memories fuzz around the edges and fade. We change. And the key to living well, to living artfully, is how we move with change.

Writer Pearl Buck once said, "You can tell your age by the amount you pain your feel when you come into contact with a new idea."

So here I am, in motion. Shedding one title, for the title, Interim Religious School Director, the very title says "in motion." My daytime address is still Temple Isaiah, 10345 W. Pico Boulevard, as it has been for nearly twenty years. But the river and I are not the same. None of us are the same. We are different from who we were years, weeks or even days ago. Patterns in flux.

And I'd like to share with you an insight from this new vantage point, at the same address. Come with me into the Religious School.

Four hundred children attend our Religious School each week. Religious School is a unique endeavor. It is only a couple of precious hours a week, and yet, we want so much of it. We want our children to know Jewish history, to know Torah, to explore theology. We want them to read Hebrew, to be able to hold a conversation in Hebrew. to translate the Dead Sea Scrolls and memorize the Talmud. We want them to have relationships with Holocaust survivors, to understand the history of Zionism and travel to Israel but also be citizens of the world. We want them to build houses for the homeless, make blintzes from scratch and be erudite about the holidays. We want them to be able to conduct a Jewish wedding, and lead seder, and study mysticism and Hasidism and know the biographies of every Jew who has ever won a Nobel Prize, and we want all of this to happen by the end of first grade, but we also want religious school to be fun.

We have a rich wonderful curriculum, and we fill their open minds, but there simply isn't time for everything, and we know that, so I think, what is it that we really want?

The difference between academic teaching and religious teaching is the difference between expanding what you know and becoming more aware of what you don't know. It is not how many answers you have learned, but what questions have you learned how to ask. And the tension comes in when we only focus on measuring what we know, the answers, when what we should be measuring is curiosity, and wonder. But how do you measure that?

In academic teaching, there is a subject, Math, Linguistics, and the goal is to increase your knowledge of that subject. In religious education, the subject is you. And the goal is to increase your self-awareness,

and self-reflection, to strengthen your identity, to find and refine your voice, to practice being a mensch. It is about you and your relationship with others. You and your relationship with God. And everything you learn – Hebrew, history, holidays – are all tools for excavating the endlessly mysterious you. And you are ever-changing. You are a pattern in flux. You are a dynamic labyrinth of shadow and light, one you will be exploring all your life.

Randy Pausch, who was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, gave his last lecture on September 18, 2007, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and many of you probably heard or read it. He was dying, and it was his last lecture.

In his last lecture, he said, “We send our kids out to play football or soccer or swimming or whatever it is, and it’s the first example of what I’m going to call a head fake, or indirect learning. We actually don’t want our kids to learn football... we send our kids out to learn much more important things. Teamwork, sportsmanship, perseverance.”

Part of the beauty of Randy Pausch’s lecture is that in the end he reveals that the whole talk itself was a head fake. In the end he said, “So today’s talk was about achieving childhood dreams. But did you figure out the head fake? It’s not about how to achieve your dreams. It’s about how to lead your life. If you lead your life the right way...the dreams will come to you.”

So what is the head fake in Jewish education. Most people don’t send their children to religious school to become rabbis, although that would be great. What they want is for them to know who they are. Yes. They want them to be Jewish with other Jews doing Judaism. Yes. They want them to feel such heights of joy in their heritage, and such depths of meaning in their tradition that they go to Hillel in college and have their friends over for Shabbat dinner, and create Jewish homes for themselves, and be confident enough to walk into any synagogue and find their place, and to put their hand over their heart when they hear HaTikvah. Yes, yes and yes. All of that is well within reach. That is what we do at Temple Isaiah. Our curriculum is chock full of significant content, the hearty protein of real learning, and we are happy to talk about our curriculum with anyone, go through it in detail...*and*, we are courageous enough to talk about the head fake. There are deeper goals.

Jewish Education is not about becoming Professors of Ancient Near-Eastern Studies. It is about how to lead your life. It is about leading your life the righteous way. It is about knowing who you are. It is about making mistakes and learning resilience. It’s about being successful human beings, and also peaceful people

Jewish Education is not about becoming rabbis and cantors. It is about learning to be generous, for the more we share and give, the more we see the world through the lens of superabundance and are blessed.¹ It is about learning truly that you are not alone. It is about knowing that your worth is not a quick summation of your failures and successes. Rather, your worth is immeasurable. It is about knowing that life is more than grades, money, sex, or fame. It is about knowing that you are loved.

¹ Rabbi Sam Feinsmith on the Ba’al Shem Tov

I learned the story of Gillian Lynne from a TED talk by Sir Kenneth Robinson on Education. Gillian Lynne had a tough time in school. It was in the '30s, she was eight years old. She couldn't concentrate, she was fidgeting and disturbing others. The school wanted her to see a doctor. At the doctor's, she sat on her hands for 20 minutes while her mother told him about all the problems. The doctor said, "Gillian, I need to speak to your mother privately. Wait here." As they left the room, he turned on the radio. When they were out the room, the doctor took her mother to a little window into the room and said, "Watch her." Gillian was on her feet, already moving to the music. The doctor said, "Mrs. Lynne, Gillian isn't sick; she's a dancer. Take her to a dance school."

Gillian said, "I can't tell you how wonderful it was. We walked in this room and it was full of people who couldn't sit still. People who had to move to think." She had an incredible career at the Royal Ballet. She founded her own company. She choreographed "Cats" and "Phantom of the Opera." She's given pleasure to millions.

At Isaiah, we pay attention to the souls as well as the body and mind. We look for the dancers who have not yet been released.

The body has its own language that is different than the language of the mind. And the soul also has its own language. And its own dance. Its own music. And what we're doing here, all of us today, is learning to listen to the rhythm of the soul and comprehend how it is in concert with the rhythm of time and space. We are here to move, and to be moved to think, to grow and to change, to shed old habits and re-spark our wonder and curiosity.

The word for Jewish Law, *halacha*, actually means "The Way." It shares a root with *lalechet*, the verb "to walk." Judaism is about how we walk through the world. How we move.

And we cherish this beautiful thing that alights in our hands, this ballerina of a soul, this breath, this delicate, transient life, and we dance with her while we can, and the song keeps changing, so we learn new steps, together, stepping in and out of the river, patterns in flux, patterned after our living God, we move into the new year, into new wisdom, into leading lives of righteousness and the dreams that are sure to come.

This year, may you be a wonder to you, and may we step forward into the light of this beautiful new day together.