

Rabbi David Chapman
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5786
“Do Not Cast Me Away in My Old Age...”

Shana Tova!

When I was in college, we had to take a distribution of liberal arts classes, and one of those had to be in the philosophy department. The only class that fit into my schedule was an introductory level course called Experience & Reality. Everyone said it was going to be an Easy A. The professor was an Israeli scholar who is still active named Dorit Bar-On. Her research topics include self-knowledge, language and communication, and epistemology – the study of understanding.

Professor Bar-On asked us to write a paper explaining how we knew we were the same person today as we were yesterday. Every one of my friends in the class wrote the paper in 45 minutes. For reasons that I still can't quite explain, the assignment sent me into a panicked tailspin. I was up all night, asking ... how DO I know I am the same person I was yesterday?

It was probably the lowest grade I got on any paper in college.

But one positive that came out of writing this paper was coming across a teaching of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Although this is not a Jewish teaching, per se, it has become one of my favorite High Holiday images.

Heraclitus used the metaphor of a river to describe the universe. A river is in a constant state of flux. New waters rush into replace the water that has now moved downstream. Even the shape, the course, the dimensions of the river change over time. A century ago, the Chicago river even changed direction!

This gave rise to his observation that a person cannot step into the same river two times.

But for us Jews, his metaphor works on an even deeper level. We cannot step into the same river two times not just because the river is changing, but so are we.

We are not the same one moment to the next. We are continually evolving. We are not the same as we were this morning, or last week, let alone last year.

We are not the same as individuals, nor are we the same as a collective, a people. We are not the same as a congregation. We have those who are part of our community this year who were not year last Rosh Hashanah – some have been born; some have emerged from the flowing waters of the mikvah to take their place among the people of Israel. And of course there are losses – those who sat among us last Rosh Hashanah and who are no longer here. We feel their absence.

But just because we are always changing doesn't mean that there is no continuity from one moment to the next. (This is what I had so much difficulty proving to Professor Bar-On in 1500 words or less.)

How do we navigate the reality that we are always changing, and yet, we are building on what has come before?

One of the most vital and important ways we do that – as a community – is by honoring our history and caring for and honoring our older adults.

In a recent D'var Torah delivered here at CBS, our member Tilly Shemer quoted the Jewish liturgist Marcia Falk. Teshuvat Hashanah, the turning of the year – reminds us that *all ends are beginnings and all beginnings can be turnings*.

This is helpful to keep in mind when things feel too new, which can sometimes cause us lose our bearings. It helps in those moments to remember that what feels new and perhaps jarring is actually built on the foundations of what has come before.

To me, that is one of the clearest and most palpable gifts of being part of a community like ours. We are always changing, always building something new, but we are always building upon the foundation of what has come before.

Let me speak personally for a moment. I am standing here today, nine months into my tenure as senior rabbi. It is the honor of my life to serve this community in this role. I don't mind saying, this is not a position I expected to be in, certainly not in this moment. Throughout the last year, whenever I have seen friends or colleagues, they've sort of asked me in loaded terms, "How's it going over there?"

But the one thing I could always say, even through the tumult, was, "I feel so supported by this community. I know that I am building on a strong foundation."

I am always aware that I am standing on hallowed ground. I am only the fourth rabbi to serve in this senior role in our almost 60-year history. Every day, I remember that I am stewarding the community that was lovingly guided and grown over the last decades by those who came before me – Rabbi Melman, Rabbi Wolkin z'l, and Rabbi Rosenberg z'l, not to mention the other rabbis who have served us – Rabbi Ferratier, Averbach, and Wohlberg, and now Rabbi Honig – our first female clergy member in our history – as well as Rabbi Mussman z'l. and a few cantors, too. I can't remember any of their names but ... and I serve alongside educators, administrators, communications professionals, etc.

This is an awesome responsibility – one I do not take lightly.

Earlier this year, when Cantor Stoehr and I hosted several community chats to reflect on the changes that were taking place, I shared some reflections and we had some honest and sometimes difficult exchanges. But what I came away from those dialogues with was an even deeper respect for the depth of your love for and care for CBS – our history, our traditions, our values, our people.

So how do we change and evolve while still honoring our past and present?

Many of you have noticed that our synagogue has placed a strong emphasis in the last few years on deepening the connections for families with children, particularly young children. We've done this in a number of creative and engaging ways from major programs to small touches.

Yes, it has been a lot of new and a lot of young. So much so that some of you might say, so much new – what about me? Will I still be cared for and listened to when there is so much change?

On this holy day of turnings and beginnings, I also want to affirm a commitment to you all. We at CBS have not and will not abandon those of you who don't fit into that new or young category – we will not forget our commitments to serve, care for, educate, engage, and love our seniors and our longstanding members.

My grandma z'l always said, make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other ... [gold.] You all knew my grandma!

One of the most beautiful psalms in the book of Tehillim is the 71st Psalm, that begins with the plea –

B'cha Adonai Chasiti, al evosha l'olam.

God, in you i seek refuge, protection, trust. I will never experience shame.

The psalm goes on to describe each of life's stages, as the psalmist asks God for continual refuge and care. The psalmist describes God's protection me'beten – in the womb, min'urai, in his youth, then we hear him describe himself k'mofet hayiti l'rabim – I have become like a miracle, a sign of God's power to the masses. One imagines this is the height of adulthood, the pinnacle of one's accomplishment. God's care is still present.

But then the psalm shifts course, about halfway through. The 9th verse reads;

אֶל-תְּשָׁלִיכֵנִי לְעֵת זְקֵנָה כְּכֹלֹת פְּהִי אֶל-תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי

Do not cast me away in my old age, when my strength fails. Do not abandon me.

These words speak to such fear, such vulnerability. We all fear losing our strength – losing our ability to do things with our bodies that we could even just last month or last year. We fear using our mental faculties – recalling places and names, keeping up with friend and family members, remembering medications and doctors appts, and ... perhaps most importantly, savoring the sweet memories that have given our lives so much meaning.

As someone who has cared for many seniors here and elsewhere in my life, I've heard – not these exact words, but words like them, expressed many times.

During my rabbinic training, I completed a unit of clinical pastoral education during Covid, where my responsibilities included cold calling seniors living in a Jewish eldercare facility in Manhattan. Many had been without any human contact for months.

They felt forgotten about, cast aside – even abandoned by God.

I couldn't do much for them, but I could talk to them, listen to them, and ensure them that they were not forgotten. And sometimes that's enough.

If those words sound familiar, it's because they inspire of the Shema Koleinu prayer – which we incorporate into our night of selichot preparatory prayers and will return to again next week on Yom Kippur.

But in Shema Koleinu, the singular voice of the psalmist is replaced by the plural first person voice that characterizes so much of our liturgy during these days.

Al Tashlicheinu l'et ziknah, kichlot koachenu al ta'azveinu. Do not cast US away as we grow old. Do not desert US as our energy wanes.

In Parshat Ha'azinu, which we always read this time of year, Moses says, Tzhor Ymot Olam – remember the days of old. Binu Shnot dor va dor. Consider the years from past generations.

As your parent and ask your elders and they will tell you.

And Rabbi Heschel once said:

“A test of a people is how it behaves toward the old. It is easy to love children. ... But the affection and care for the old ... are the true gold mines of a culture.”

In many areas of our society, we fail this test. We live in a society that prizes youth and often disregards the needs of seniors. I've heard it called a Juvenocracy – the opposite of a gerontocracy.

We know that older adults are often mistreated, even abused – God forbid [and let me say here if...]

Even in less dire circumstances, elders are certainly not honored the way they should be. And I will say that sometimes our Jewish communities fail this test. We invest so much time and resources and attention in attracting younger members, members with kids, members thinking about having kids, that we neglect the needs of our older community.

But we are not going to fail here. Between the strength of our CBS U adult education curriculum and our HAZAK programming, our partnerships over the last few years with The Jewish Grandparents Network and Peaceful Grandparent, our robust multigenerational Men's Club and Sisterhood communities, and an overnight retreat for older adults that is in the early planning stages – we are serving and honoring our older adult community.

We are also honoring our history here at CBS. One way we did this during this past year was by preserving all the bookplate dedications from our old siddurim and carefully and lovingly replicating them in our new siddurim, a project that was led by our Ritual VP Jill Olefsky with the help of many volunteers. When I asked around what my colleagues did about the old bookplate dedications when they changed *siddurim*, most of them said, we didn't do anything. We got rid of them. But we saw that those names represented important chapters of our CBS history. We know that many of our shabbat regulars and our older adult community dedicated those siddurim to honor births, wedding anniversaries, retirements, memories that have shaped their lives and our community. I am so proud that we kept them here. I think it speaks volumes – No Pun Intended - to our values and our priorities.

But it's much more than stickers.

We hear the words *Al Tashlicheinu* in the plural, and we understand that it speaks to us on two levels. First – it speaks to a universal experience of growing older – we all grow older every day, we all contend in some way or another with the realities of aging. We all deserve to feel what the psalmist yearned for – dignity, safety, and God's care throughout all the stages of our lives.

But we also say it in the plural to remind us that care for our seniors is a communal responsibility – a shared need. It is a testament to who we are. With the help of everyone here, we know that we at CBS are up to this task.

We are going to continue to honor our seniors, our elders, our builders, the ones that came before me and my family – the ones who built this community which we are all so lucky to call home. Not just because we want to “take care of them” but because we know how much they – you – have to offer us as storytellers, stewards of tradition,

builders, and innovators. We know that our table is not fully set until every generation is present.

We will listen to one another's voices, as we plea for God to listen to ours, Shema Koleinu, listen to our voice.

And together we will fulfill the instruction of Midrash Tanchuma:

כָּל הַמְקַבֵּל פְּנֵי זָקֵן כְּאֵלוֹ מְקַבֵּל פְּנֵי שְׁכִינָה

Anyone who greets an elder welcomes the face of the divine.

Shana tova.