

“God is Change”¹

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In the past few weeks, students of all ages have returned to school. This milestone is often captured with a photo. Sometimes they hold those neat little signs, with their new grade and their new teachers' names, the things they like, what they want to be when they grow up. This ritual is often repeated on the last day of school. Taller, wiser, strengthened and stretched, there is another photo, of a child at the end of the year. And you can see, between these photos, what happens over the course of 10 months. Growth and Change.

Of course, the change happens incrementally, almost imperceptibly. Each day, the child moves a tiny bit from the first day photo, to the last. And suddenly, the shoes that just fit are too tight, or the pants are too short, the bangs too floppy and in need of a trim.

This is the nature of change, it is slow and also fast. Incremental and incredible.

Without rituals: holidays and birthdays, anniversaries and milestones, the change occurs so slowly, we can almost miss that it is happening. We can almost forget that it is possible. Rosh Hashanah is a change holiday- it is a day on which we mark, observe and celebrate change.

Rosh Hashanah teaches us that change is ongoing, and unceasing, and that we have the power to shape it. Surely, there are humbling liturgical reminders that we are not the sole creators of our own destiny. *Untaneh tokef*, reminds us of all that exists beyond our control. But the notion of *teshuva*, of turning, of the belief that we have the capacity to impact our own actions and our own fate, represents a remarkable faith in our power to impact the world around us.

¹ While it didn't make it into the final draft, I started thinking about this sermon topic after reading *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler. “God is change,” is a central idea in that powerful book.

Former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught that, “*teshuvah* is one of the most remarkable ideas ever to have entered the human mind. *Teshuvah* tells us that history can change because we can change.” He continued, “history can change because we can change and we are the makers of history.”²

In order for us to take this seriously, we need to believe that the world is, in fact, changing. It is easy, in Washington, in the year 2026, the dawn of 5787, to observe a great deal of change. But, I would imagine that for many of us, these are painful changes.

Change does not always mean change for the better. As we mark the 250th anniversary of the founding of this nation, there is much to mourn as we’ve watched the rise of climate change denial, a pervasive skepticism about science, a rejection of diversity and inclusion, the rights of women, queer people, trans-people, immigrants and minorities. Change is happening quickly, loudly and unavoidably. The work of so many of you, of your loved ones, being challenged, tested and unraveled.

But Rebecca Slonit, in her book “*The Beginning Comes After the End: Notes on a World of Change*,” suggests that there is more positive change happening than we can see. More change *has* happened, than we can measure by watching the daily news or reading the morning paper.

Many of us live in what she calls a “perpetual present...believing that the future will be like the present.”³ This makes sense, we live in a deluge of news and information, creating a reality in which we are overwhelmed by what is happening....RIGHT NOW. But we know that this is not really how the world works. It’s like taking that first day of school photo and believing that your child will remain perpetually the same as they were on the first day of kindergarten.

² “Thoughts for Ellul,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/thoughts-for-ellul/>.

³ *The Beginning Comes After the End: Notes on a World of Change*. Rebecca Slonit. P 25.

Sometimes, we are reminded to step back. To assess change from photo to photo, to consider all of the unseen tiny moments that contributed to the growth in between.

This year, Temple Sinai is marking its 75th birthday. Temple Sinai began in 1950, according to our website, “when 7 families decided it was time for a *change*.” They wanted to create a Reform community that was “a congregation of equals.”

Now, Sinai has always been a special place, the founders of this congregation were change makers. They wanted a different kind of Judaism than what they were experiencing at other congregations. They bravely tried to build something totally new, and, I’m biased, but I think they built something pretty amazing.

A few weeks ago, I was speaking to Ed Cohen, who has been a member of Temple Sinai for 70 years. Ed shared that his family had initially been members of a more traditional congregation in Maryland. His parents asked the rabbi about his sister having a Bat Mitzvah there. The rabbi responded that at their congregation, she would only be able to do a very modified service. But, the rabbi said, “you should check out this new congregation called Temple Sinai.” In fact, the first Bat Mitzvah in Washington, D.C. was held by Temple Sinai in the Bethlehem Chapel at the National Cathedral.⁴

Equality has always been a value at Temple Sinai, celebrating Bat Mitzvah from the start, creating an environment in which your standing in the congregation wasn’t tied to your wealth, and advocating for equity in the world around us. Our founding rabbis were freedom riders, they were change makers: using our congregation as a laboratory for a Judaism that pushed us beyond the walls of the synagogue, and informed our actions and advocacy.

And, Temple Sinai was also a product of its time. The leaders in the first few years, the board and its chair, were all men. The rabbis were men. There was no outreach or

⁴ “Our Pioneer Hebrew School at Temple Sinai,” Lenell Ammermann, May 25, 1995. Temple Sinai Archives.

acknowledgement of interfaith families, and there were no same sex couples that were openly members of the community. Our early history was written by men and their wives, who were brave and bold and visionary, but they could not yet know how the world would continue to change.

Each of the changes, that have made Sinai more welcoming, more inclusive, each of the changes that made Judaism more welcoming, more inclusive, each of the changes that made the world more welcoming, more inclusive...each change was the result of action, not just the big legislative changes that we can mark with a date and an anniversary, but the tiny changes, made by people that changed culture, that changed who we are, and how we think about each other.

That change is happening right now, even when we can't see it. Even when it can feel futile to try. We are bravely planting the seeds of a better world that is taking root, slowly, imperceptibly.

At Temple Sinai, through the work of the Davis Center for Social Justice, we're not giving up...on reproductive freedom, or environmental justice, or our concern for immigrants and refugees or our work to protect democracy and voter access.

Our archives committee is documenting change. Collecting everything from bulletins and blueprints, landscaping contracts and first person testimonials. Their ongoing work to capture our history gives us the tools to look back and see how these changes came about. And they helped provide Rabbi Roos and me with wonderful resources to help write our Rosh Hashanah sermons. (Rabbi Roos is also talking about our congregation's history this morning- I got a sneak preview- you should definitely read his sermon too.)

In our new nursery school garden, tiny hands are literally planting seeds. They are learning what it means for change and growth to happen slowly, imperceptibly and miraculously. They are practicing by planting, watering, weeding, and literally tasting the fruits of their labor.

Tomorrow when you wake up, you won't see change. But, we have to keep working, bit by bit, remembering how much has changed as the result of all of the tiny actions that have allowed us to live in a world that's more welcoming, more inclusive, more free. As Gloria Steinem, may her memory be a blessing and an inspiration, wrote in her final essay, "When you're lucky enough to have lived a long life, as I have done, your role is to remind us how far we have come."⁵

I say this not to deny the harm that is being caused right now. It is not my intention to paint a naively rosy picture of what is happening right now in our city, in our country and in our world. Slow, incremental change feels wildly insufficient when people are being hurt every day. But we cannot allow despair to trap us in a perpetual present, we have to keep bravely working for change.

How do we do it? It's not easy. Our children are not just our reason why, they are also our models of how. They, YOU, are our greatest teachers of how to endure and direct change. We learn from kids: Who are brave, who keep growing and learning, in a world that is rapidly changing around them. Our neighbor, Bishop Mariann Budde, wrote about bravery during this back to school season. "I believe that children are the bravest among us. Time and again, they are thrust into new situations and must attempt to do things they've never done before, be taught by people they've just met, and take their place in a classroom, gym, or cafeteria where they don't know if the students sitting next to them will be kind."⁶ Each child in one of those back to school photos is bravely heading into a new experience, and bit by bit, over the course of the year, they change, and they make change. They, YOU, are some of our best teachers about how to bravely continue to change.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we can change, and if we can change, then the world can change. It changes all the time. 250 years ago, 56 people signed the declaration of independence, and this country hasn't stopped changing since. 75 years ago, 7 families created a new kind of congregation in Washington, and the changes continue to this day. In

⁵ "Gloria Steinem's Final Essay." Gloria Steinem, September 3, 2026. The New Yorker Magazine.

⁶ "A Time to Be Brave." Bishop Mariann Budde. September 2, 2026.

the past few weeks, you set out for your first day of school, a photo captured who you were in that moment, knowing that you were bravely headed for a year of change.

Change is constant. It happens in minute moments, and enormous explosions and it's all around us and inside of us. On this day that celebrates change, we reconnect with this remarkable idea that we are the makers of history. You are the makers of history. And even if it feels like history is happening without you right now, like you are trapped in a perpetual present, remember...you are planting seeds. For how you will grow, how we will grow, how our world will grow if we keep working at it...together.

With gratitude to Rebecca Slonit for writing her beautiful book about change, that helped me uncover a hopeful message at a painful time. And to my husband, Josh Friedman, and my sisters, Sarah and Emma Goldstein- who are all wise, patient and super smart editors.