

All Beginnings are Hard
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Temple Emanuel, South Hills, PA

I want to share with you again what an honor it is to serve as your Interim Rabbi this year. Fran and I appreciate so very much the warm welcome you have extended to us. You have made our beginnings here much easier than they might have been. As I am sure you know from your own experience, beginnings are difficult. Often very difficult. Somebody, some un-named ancient Rabbi pointed that out in the Midrash when he said, “*Kol hatchalot kashot*. All beginnings are hard.”ⁱ I can’t say that this was a revolutionary addition to human awareness as many rabbinic teachings were. After all, it’s obvious that beginnings are difficult because beginnings imply change. But the wisdom of this Rabbi was that he named what we all experience. By naming how tough it is to change and begin something new, he normalized it and enabled people to break through denial and take off the mask of feigned confidence. Change is not easy. But as the ancient philosophers taught, the only thing that is constant is change. We live our lives in the ballpark of time, and change is the game we play - using the calendar, the seasons, and the holidays to mark and measure what is different and what remains the same.

So here we are, another set of High Holy Days. Using these Days of Awe as a bookmark in time, we have begun the process of ending that which was, holding on to that which is to remain, and beginning that which is yet to be. Each of us reflects back on 5778, its gifts and challenges, its joy and sadness. There were lives which ceased to be and lives which came into being. There was love lost and love found, friendships formed and friendships dissolved, moments of pride and times of upset and disappointment, both personal and political.

There were beginnings which brought both joyous exhilaration and painful anxiety. There were endings which brought anger, sadness, pain, and relief all at the same time. Some of us found ourselves in situations we never dreamed we would be in – for better or for worse, situations which, in the blink of an eye, changed everything. We were pleasantly surprised by unexpected blessings just as we were motivated to act when things we had taken for granted were turned on their heads. For that which we did and that which we became, these holy days, can be a kind of reset button, enabling us to begin again - again.

Today, I want to talk about change, about endings and beginnings, and about transition, that unsettling and uneasy time between the no more and the not yet. I want to talk about them because they are important to name, especially here and especially now, as we begin this transitional year together.

Attention must be paid to our transition. William Bridges, in his seminal book on transitionsⁱⁱ explains the difference between change and transition. Change is simply what happens. Transition is the emotional effect that the change brings about. Transition begins with the ending of that which was, and ends with the beginning of that which is to be. In order for a transition to be successful, that which is ending must be recognized, celebrated, and mourned, and that which is beginning must be welcome, understood, and celebrated. Not doing this well is a disservice to the old and an impediment to the new.

Good transitions begin with acknowledging the reality of the ending. For many, my presence here in this pulpit as your Interim Rabbi concretizes the end of Rabbi Mahler’s 38 years of inspiring and devoted service at Temple Emanuel. (I want to take a moment to express my appreciation to Rabbi Mahler and Alice for their warm welcome and graciousness. They asked me to extend their greetings and let you know they will be celebrating a heart- and soul-warming new year in New York, at HUC-JIR, our alma mater.) You knew his retirement was coming – you have known it for two years plus, but now that it is a reality it is difficult for some to believe that he is not here, but you are and so is the Temple. I imagine for some, this is a bit surreal. The journey through loss does that to people.

For many of you, this homecoming of sorts is particularly difficult and engulfed in deep sadness. For some of you, these are the first services you have attended here which a Rabbi other than Rabbi Mahler or Rabbi Locketz has conducted and that, if not difficult, is different. For others, you have been here or at other synagogues long enough to know that this is what happens in synagogues. But knowing that does not make it any easier.

Regardless of the degree to which you connected with Rabbi Mahler, his departure was a tremendous loss on many levels, both personally and institutionally. So many of you were touched by his personal and spiritual presence in your lives and remain forever touched and forever grateful. Many of you were intellectually, emotionally, and Jewishly inspired by the example of his life, the depth of his words and teachings, and the beauty of his music. That touch, by the way, that enduring touch and that inspiration are what I believe are among the greatest legacies any Rabbi can create.

So, so many of you were touched and inspired and will ever remain so. Others, not so much, as is true for any of us who would stand in a pulpit and be simply who we are, as we can only be. Some hearts were hurt by his retirement; some hearts still mourn. Often when there is loss, there is anger and fear which often abide and pop up in other unexpected places. As with all loss, healing takes time. I pray that these moments together will be a part of the journey to the healing we need. Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, is not only for out there, it's for in here [for our community together] and in here [our hearts].

So yes, my being here marks the beginning of our transitional time together. Our time together began in July as you welcomed Fran and me to this wonderful community and will end next June after which you will do something which you have not done for over a generation, namely to begin a new journey with a new Rabbi. I am sure that your new journeys will be wonderful – just as I am sure that they will not be easy. *Kol hatchalot kashot*. All beginnings are difficult.

Let me tell you a bit about the beginning of my 25 years at Temple B'nai Or in Morristown, NJ. Their rabbi for 28 years retired on June 30, 1990, and I was brought in as settled Rabbi starting July 1. It would be a couple of decades before Reform Temples understood the wisdom of bringing in an interim following the retirement of a long-serving Rabbi. Consequently, those first few years at B'nai Or were really tough. I had been an associate Rabbi in a 2000 household Temple in urban Chicago where, modesty aside, I was known to be a pretty darn good speaker. But when I got to Morristown, it was like I could not give a good sermon if my life depended on it, which it kind of did, not my life but my livelihood. The old timers were particularly critical. They were used to one model of what a Rabbi is and does, and my model was very different. For many, what had worked quite well in Chicago bombed in Morristown. But I stuck with it and they stuck with me.

There was one moment when I realized that the Temple and I indeed would have a future. One of our most respected congregants, a grand dame of sorts and a dear and loyal friend of my predecessor was a vocal critic of this new Rabbi. No names, but her initials were Judy Steinberg. Well, I knew I had made it two, maybe three years in, when Judy was overheard saying, "I don't know if he is getting better or if I am just getting used to him."

The reality of course, was both. I became better attuned to congregational style and expectations while at the same time, more people got to know me, recognize the gifts I brought and, as Judy said, got used to me. You see, it takes time – a few years even - for a Rabbi to get to know, understand, and grow into a new congregation and make it his or her own. It takes patience and time for a congregation to get to know, appreciate, and grow into a new Rabbi and make her or him its own. I hope you will remember this when there is a new Senior Rabbi here in this pulpit a year from now. Trust, confidence, connection, and affection take time to take root, but I am confident that they will.

Rabbi Mahler's retirement would have been all the more difficult for us all were it not for your outstanding and dedicated staff: Rabbi Jessica Locketz, a gifted Rabbi and Educator and a true partner, Leslie Hoffman, who has been a great blessing to me as she has been to you and to Temple Emanuel, Iris Harlan who does such an amazing job in the Early Childhood Development Center, your devoted staff in

the office, the Torah Center, ECDC, and Library: Linda, Lori, Barb, Paula S, Paula A, Ellen, your wonderful caterer, Melinda, as well as the quiet folks behind the scene without whom none of this would happen, Steve, Chuck, and Linda. And we are grateful to Dr. Chuck Cohen and Jim Barnes for their inspiring music on the holidays and Shabbat mornings.

And we can't leave out all the volunteers who give of themselves so generously in the office and in the garden. Each of them brings her or his own special gifts to this sacred community. You, we, are truly blessed. The strength and continuity of the congregation is also maintained through the steady guidance of your dedicated lay leadership, your devoted Board of Trustees with your amazing president, David Weisberg. Your choosing of him is an indication of how wise and forward thinking this congregation is.

Over the last few months, I have had candid, one on one discussions with Board members, finding out what, in their eyes, is special about Temple Emanuel and their ideas on how to make it better. I have to tell you, I have been so very impressed by the depth of their caring about this Temple, about its future, and about you, the members, without whom there would be no Temple. One thing that was clear in speaking to each one was how much they need your help and want your help, your voice, your hands, your engagement, and your affirmation that you prize this community too. Another thing I heard was their commitment to the inclusivity I spoke about last night.

As I mentioned, transitions begin with an end and end with a beginning. And in between endings and beginnings, there is this middle phase which Bridges calls "the neutral zone." The neutral zone is that liminal, uncertain time between the no more and the not yet. As a model for what happens in the neutral zone, Bridges uses Moses leading the Israelites through the wilderness. No, the past was certainly not Egypt, and have no illusions about the future being a perfect promised land. But wilderness is an apt model to describe what happens in the moments between when the end really ends and the beginning really begins.

Moses discovered that time in the wilderness is fraught with unease, uncertainty, a seeming lack of direction, and LOTS of complaints. "I'm thirsty! You are moving too fast! You are not moving fast enough! It's too hard! We can't do it! Let's go back to where we were before! Where are we anyway?" But at the same time, Moses saw that wilderness can also be a place of great openness and creativity, a place where new voices can be heard and new ideas put forth. "What about this? Let's try that! You tried it and it did not work? Let's find a different way to approach it." Even his father-in-law piped in, "Mo, you can't do it all yourself. There are others who can rise to responsibility."

In the wilderness phase there can arise from within the congregation those "Joshuas" and "Joshuettes" who have not closely engaged with Temple yet, but who understand that this year in the wilderness might be their moment to raise their voices and present themselves to the community with "*Hineyni* – Here I am!"

There are, in fact, many voices within the Temple Community, many and varied, for Temple Emanuel is different things to different people. For some, Emanuel is a central part of your lives, an extension of your own homes, many of you having been here *l'dor vador* – from generation to generation. For some, Temple is a place of personal transformation, interpersonal connection, and transpersonal transcendence. Temple Emanuel is the first place that comes to mind when you ask the questions: Where can I find my people? Where can I go to experience Jewish community and culture and comrades who comfort and care? Where can I bring my children for an innovative joyful Jewish educational experience; where can I go for my own Jewish learning and growth? Where can I go by myself and find family, where can my interfaith family feel Jewishly normal? Where can I go where I will be accepted, even loved, just as I am?

For others, Temple is the place of conscience where the prophetic vision of letting justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream, is a core value. For others, this synagogue is one institution among many which you use as a means to fulfil particular needs: coming for the holidays,

saying Kaddish, educating your children so that at your child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah you can look at your own parents and say with your eyes, "Look Mom, look Pop, I did it. I carried on."

For many of you, the synagogue has always been and ever remains the anchor of Judaism and Jewish life, so important that it is vital to support it regardless of how much or little you agree or disagree with this or that or personally take advantages of what it has to offer. Temple Emanuel is all this and much more. Temple is the relationships and the community and the learning and the praying and the caring. And most important, Temple is the mission, the mission that gives the community a reason to be. It is the mission which not only justifies but inspires the faith, the work, and the sacrifice it takes to sustain the community.

As I see it, the original mission of the Israelites during their time in the wilderness was the building of a sacred community which knew that a higher power had bid them to become a holy people, a caring and inclusive community, exemplars of the righteousness to which they were called. That was our People's mission then and I believe it to be our People's mission still. Beyond that, each congregation has its own particular mission. What is the particular mission of Temple Emanuel? Right now, the stated mission of the Temple is "to preserve, strengthen, and realize the sacred principles and practices of Judaism." It's a great and important mission! Does it still express who and what you are as a sacred community? Does it give you the means to come closer to the vision of what you would like to be? Those are important questions to begin thinking about this year, so that next year you can begin to answer them with your new settled Rabbi and, together as partners, chart the course of the Temple's future.

Yes, dear friends, Temple Emanuel has a great future. Jeremiah told us so in the Haftarah we just read - "*Yesh tikvah l'acharitech* – there is hope for your future!" Jeremiah told you and I'm telling you, too! Unlike other congregations around the country which are merging or struggling for their existence, I have no doubt that Temple Emanuel has a rich and exciting future ahead. *That* it will be is not a question. *What* it will be is now in your hands.

Because Temple Emanuel Temple is more than any one rabbi or staff member or president or board. As beautiful and amazing as it is, The Temple is not the building which houses it. Temple Emanuel of South Hills is YOU. You are Temple Emanuel! This is your congregation, your community, your family. You are what makes Temple Emanuel so very special and so very unique! How you will honor your past, cherish your present, and envision your future is now in your capable, caring, and committed hands.

And so, friends, as we bring an end to the year now past and begin the year yet to be, I pray that the New Year ahead will bring us health, happiness and fulfillment, the blessings of forgiveness and healing. I pray that this New Year brings to this sacred congregation renewed hope and a new clarity of vision. May this new beginning serve as a bridge between the proud past you share and the joyous future that surely lies ahead for Temple Emanuel and for us all!

SHANAH TOVA!

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ⁱ Mekhilta Yitro BaChadoesh 2, on *vat aim shamoah tishma b'koli*.

ⁱⁱ Bridges, W. (2004). *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Lifelong Books.