

Legacy and Innovation
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780
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Dear friends, I welcome you tonight on the eve of our New Year 5780. I am deeply grateful to be here with you as Congregation Shir Ami enters *its* new year of synagogue life--of community and prayer, of planning and sharing, of tradition and innovation. I am honored to celebrate these High Holy Days as your cantor and spiritual leader. Here we are, at Round Hill Community Church, our home for the High Holidays with all of you gathered in this serene space, our Torah in the ark, our beautiful choir, and the familiar prayerbook in our hands, as we begin this eve of Rosh Hashanah. The only thing not so familiar is....me. But that, I'm happy to say, is rapidly changing. Tonight we *begin* a New Year, while mindful of the one we have just concluded.

Our tradition has much to say about beginnings. Indeed the very first word of the Torah, "*Breishit*," means "In the beginning." The Talmud, the large compendium of Jewish law, picks up on the theme of beginnings and offers a succinct yet wise bit of advice: "*kol hatchalot kashot*," all beginnings are hard. Whether it be a new school, a new relationship, a new course of treatment, or a new job, the Talmud is correct. Beginnings are hard.

Yet, the Talmud doesn't say that beginnings *must remain* hard. While I am sure some do, in time, most beginnings shift into a predictable schedule or anticipated set of norms, and the elements which demanded so much energy and concentration eventually soften, as we establish our footing in a new environment, or gradually feel more grounded in a new phase of life. *You* have made my beginning here as smooth and gentle as it could be. You have cushioned my landing with your warm smiles, your invitations to meals, your willingness to show me a neighborhood restaurant, or share a useful contact number, and most of all, you have helped me understand who you are, and what you value.

And of course, what is Rosh Hashanah if not an opportunity to begin *again*. During the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah, we are called to turn inward, to ask ourselves how we can improve for the year to come; we are

commanded to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, literally an “accounting of the soul” in which we are meant to inspect our inner lives. Have I been empathic enough? Have I listened patiently before charging in with my own viewpoint? Have I indulged my own needs too impulsively, or, not enough? Yes, Rosh Hashanah is a yearly opportunity to take stock of how we have behaved and then, to begin anew.

But in no way does a new beginning mean that we minimize our past or neglect what has come before. We could do that, but we would be loathe to do so. Much can be learned, as we know, from examining aspects of our past. After all, what is *cheshbon hanefesh*, the process of “accounting of the soul,” if not a way to look back on elements of our own past year.

But in addition to the personal self-reflection our tradition proscribes, I would suggest it’s important we do this communally as well; that is, we are strengthened as a community when we take stock of where we have been as a congregation and think together where we wish to go.

As you and I begin this new chapter together, I have tried to make myself a student of your history. You’ve shared stories, scrap books, recordings and articles. I have learned about the unique and powerful story of our own Sefer Torah from Shidlovitz, Poland; I have gone through Rabbi Axe’s handwritten notes and read some of her books that she passed on to me from her personal library--all in efforts to know who you are. And, in the time since I began, I’ve come to understand the following:

You are a unique spiritual community; you help create ritual moments by participating actively in the leadership of services. You seek justice. Just only days into my work here, I can’t tell you how many of you have asked me about social action possibilities, eager to participate. Soon our social action team will be in touch with you with a survey to see what issues feel most pressing to members of our congregation, and tomorrow morning, I’ll address some critical issues of our time, through the lens of Jewish values.

Next, you embody what it means to serve the Shir Ami community--no task is too menial. From taking pictures for our promotional materials, to hosting a meeting or a rehearsal in your home, to preparing a space for worship or Seder, you do all of this NOT as employees or even as ‘volunteers’, but as members of a sacred community. You don’t just walk the walk, you know the rest of phrase....you are actively engaged in shaping

and creating religious life. (Do you know how unique you are? It's not like this everywhere!)

What else have I learned about you? You like to sing--together--*you know* that raising voices together in communal song is a vehicle for powerful spiritual expression.

One of my mentors, Rabbi Samuel Gordon, founding rabbi of Congregation Sukkat Shalom, in Wilmette, IL, upon learning I had been engaged as your spiritual leader, advised me "Jill, always keep mission and culture at the center." That is, in the day-to-day work of synagogue leadership, Rabbi Gordon reminds us that active re-articulation of our values and founding ideals is what keeps a community energized, prevents burnout of members and staff, and will guide us in our most challenging moments. I am confident that together, we can keep our mission central to all that we do.

In order to keep those values front and center, please join me for breakfast on Sunday, October 27th, when we will review and discuss our mission. That is OUR sacred work.

So here we are, embracing our history and contemplating our growth, meeting changing needs, staying true to our founding ideals while wondering how we might further develop, and dream(ing) together how we can straddle legacy and innovation. It's not for me to decide, it's for us to figure it out together.

The medieval commentator, Rambam, reminds us in his work entitled *Introduction to the Mishnah* (8:2), that "there was no time that there was not contemplation and innovation of the matters [of Jewish life]." While we have retained our sacred texts and traditions, we have always been innovators. Hundreds of years later, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, taught "The past has a vote, not a veto," recognizing the limiting grasp of the past. Finally, in Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, the famous artist, Jacob Kahn, says to 13-year-old Asher Lev, about a career in art, "Only one who has mastered a tradition has a right to attempt to add to it or rebel against it." (Adapted from Chaim Potok). Let's heed Potok's advice, as we simultaneously remain schooled in our own history AND attempt to move forward.

But the desire to balance legacy and innovation is not unique to Jewish life. Certainly we see it in other aspects of societal life. Kripalu, the yoga based retreat center in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, describes one of its courses on healing as: “ancient wisdom and cutting edge science.” Or how about the New York Baroque Incorporated, a period orchestra who describes its mission as “committed to presenting early music in dynamic and provocative ways.” Or how about Brooks Brothers clothing company; their tag line is “time tested classics elevated to your style.” All three examples seem to be telling us something similar: you can have something old and new at the same time.

Why does that sound so appealing? What does it grab our attention and pull us in? **Because it speaks to our anxiety about change.** In those short phrases, we are reminded that the ancient is still relevant, that the old favorite is not lost, but that new concerns are ALSO being addressed. Most of us have some concerns about change and it’s generally not a bad thing. Change requires risk and risk takes courage.

You know about courage. You started a new congregation. You have welcomed the stranger, you have opened your doors, and in the words of the Psalmist, you sang to God a “new song,” and now we will carry forward those founding principles. And you know what...I know about risk too: this year I made a major change in my own life, stepping down from a twelve year position at a large congregation, to realign myself around a different set of values--values which favored more time with family, a more measured pace of life, and time with you. We are in it together.

Yes, we shall cling tightly to core values, rearticulating them at each juncture, while recognizing the need to evolve and to grow--albeit in measured, thoughtful and deliberate ways. The attempt to balance legacy and innovation: that’s who we are together. “*Kol Hatchalot Kashot*” the Talmud says. “All beginnings are hard.” But not too hard, especially when we face those beginnings together. We enter this New Year together. We do so with hope and determination and enthusiasm. Blessed are you, Source of Blessing, who renews our days so we may begin again in wholeness and peace.