



**Rabbi Rachel Timoner**

**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5773    September 17, 2012**

**Urgent, Patient Change**

Before I begin my sermon this morning, I want to acknowledge that I'm a very fast talker. I know it, and if you've heard me give a sermon before, you know it too. I might start out speaking slowly and clearly, but as soon as I get excited, I speak more and more quickly until my words speed by so fast they're a blur.

This is not a new problem. When I was a little girl, I remember sitting at the dinner table telling stories about my day until my parents would eventually say, "Rachel, SLOW DOWN. Take your time. What's the rush?" But try as I might to heed their advice, I continued to race through my stories. Who knew that a big part of my life as an adult would be standing in front of you, trying to communicate?

For as long as I can remember, I have been rewarded for speed. In school, the first child to raise her hand with the correct answer was called on and praised. Every test was a race against the clock. The faster I could think, the faster I could react, the greater my success.

But if I'm really going to look at the truth of why I've always talked so fast, I think it's that from an early age I was aware of the impatience of the people around me. I learned to speak so quickly because I feared losing people's attention. I saw this happen to others, and I didn't want it to happen to me. So I learned to outrace any signs of impatience. I worked to get my point across without taking up too much time – at the small cost of intelligibility. (Today, I invite you to raise your hand at any point in this sermon if I'm speaking too quickly. Okay, and now raise your hand if you're already feeling impatient. Those of you feeling impatient better sit back – it's going to be a while longer.)

We find a tension in Judaism between urgency and patience, fast and slow, hurry and wait. The message this morning has been that time is running out. The High Holy Days insist that we must act with great urgency, for we are going to die, and none of us knows precisely when. Therefore, we must identify what we've done wrong, speak our shortcomings aloud, go to the people we've harmed, repair the damage, and seek atonement before God in the next ten days.

We began our services last night when Cantor Kates chanted “Hin’ni,” saying on our behalf: Here I am, right here, right now, with all of my failings and imperfections, ready to stand before you, God, and be accountable, ready to change. I will not hide from this moment, I will not wait for some future time to face myself or to face you. And then, in the words that Rabbi Beerman read this morning, the *Un’taneh Tokef*, we heard, “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.... Who will live and who will die; Who at their end and who not at their end...”

What these prayers say is that between now and the day of our deaths the moral quality of our lives is in our hands. Therefore, act now. On this day, look clearly at the choices you have made. Name the mistakes. Take responsibility.

This approach is wise — change requires urgency. It is not a future event; it is a present activity. “I’ll take care of that tomorrow. Next week. Next year. When I’m not so busy. When I’m a little older.” There are always good reasons to wait. But no change will happen until the day we say: today. I will do it now.

Here’s the problem: even with the best intention and greatest effort, even when we commit ourselves right now, our capacity for rapid change is limited. How many years in a row do we come here with the same confessions on our lips, wishing for and promising the same changes? How many times has that made you give up hope? People say to me, “This is a pointless exercise. I come here every year, and every year I say the same exact things: I want to be less angry; I want to be kinder to my family. But I can’t see any difference year after year. It doesn’t seem to change anything at all.” We commit ourselves to create a new pattern, and then a bump comes along, something unexpected, or we have a bad day, and we slide back to our old ways. We recommit ourselves and again we slide back. And then sometimes we give up. The changes we want to make take repeated effort and attention over a long time. This work is invisible, difficult to measure, easy to doubt. Eventually, if we stick with it, we are surprised to find ourselves changed. We are surprised to find that the pattern really has been created anew.

Sometimes the changes we seek take years, sometimes decades to accomplish. Patterns of abuse or addiction in a family may take three or four or more generations to heal. Human change is slow, patient work. No matter how urgently we need to transform ourselves, deep human change does not happen in ten days. It happens over the course of lifetimes.

We live in a time characterized by immediate gratification. I want what I want when I want it. Desire anything — fresh fruit, a toy, a new hat — and you can order it with a few clicks and receive it the next day. What contrast! Some things come in seconds with the tap of a finger on a screen. Some things come with decades of great, persistent effort, day after day, year after year. The things I can get on my iPad are animated and colorful and

entertaining. The things I am working for in my soul are slow, subtle, and challenging. The kind of work we are asked to undertake on these Holy Days may be more difficult now than ever before. When so much of what we want comes to us so quickly, do we have the mettle, the persistence, the patience to pursue what we need?

A time of immediate gratification is also a time of impatience. How many of us have complained about a five second wait on an Internet search? How many of us have been impatient with ourselves when trying to do this very work the Days of Awe call us to do?

Our impatience is related to disappointment and discomfort. We have dreams for our lives. We have a vision for what kind of people we ought to be. When those dreams aren't yet fulfilled, we feel disappointed. It is uncomfortable to confront things as they are. We don't like to be uncomfortable for very long. We want resolution. We want to fix it fast or, if we can't fix it fast, we want to make it go away. The Hebrew word for patience is *savlanut*. The root, *sevel*, means burden or suffering. Being patient is akin to holding the burden of our lives, even in its untidiness. Not sweeping away our mess, but keeping it out and uncovered long enough to heal it.

Patience with the work of change, whether in our souls or in the world, requires trust in the invisible. Buckminster Fuller was once asked who was the most important thinker of the 20th century. Without missing a beat, he said Sigmund Freud. Why? Because Freud convinced the world that the invisible is more important than the visible. Much of the process of change is invisible to our eyes. We see a river running across a granite floor, but we do not see it carving the rock. We know that it is carving the rock because we are walking through the canyon it carved millennia ago.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family has been through every kind of disappointment – they've lost their land, lost their house, traveled in a jalopy cross country to California only to find no work. They're hungry and out of money, and a mob of torch-bearing local men threaten them, calling them "Okies." Tom is the eldest grown son in the family, the steady, persevering protagonist, but he finally breaks down and sobs. "Easy," Ma says. "You got to have patience. Why, Tom – us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people!... don't you fret none Tom. A different time's comin'."

"How do you know?" Tom asks his mother.

She answers: "I don't know how."

Patience requires a profound faith – in ourselves, in other people, perhaps in God. It requires the dogged belief that we can change, even in the face of repeated evidence to the contrary. It requires the ability to return to hope, even after repeated disappointment.

But what about the feeling that there's not enough time? Given how much we want to accomplish in a day or in a life, there doesn't seem to be enough time. If you live in LA, you are plagued by the feeling that time is running out. Given that every day it takes an unpredictable amount of time to go from point A to point B, you can never feel secure about how much time you have. When something takes longer than expected, or when something happens that wasn't on the agenda, how do we respond?

Patience is not something that comes easily to me. I like resolution. I like getting to the goal. I often feel that there is not enough time – in a day, in my lifetime. If something unexpected happens and I feel that I am running out of time, it shows. That's part of what led me to speak on this topic today. I struggle with this every day. I don't like to be unfinished, I don't like the idea that I will die unfinished. But I'm always unfinished. We all are.

In a recent poll, 22% of Americans said that they believe that the world is ending in this generation. There are many who believe in the rapture, the second coming. For crying out loud, there was a film called 2012 that portrayed the destruction of the earth *this year* as predicted by the Mayan calendar! What does all of this do to our ability to be patient?

What's ironic is that our frenetic human activity is *what is* destroying the earth, and our panicked responses to predictions of doom are not effectively reversing our course. Just when it seems that we should move faster, we need to slow down. We need careful, thoughtful, strategic action. This requires so much faith. Faith that we will make it. Faith that we can change in the time we have, even by slowing down.

There is truth in our fears that time is running out. But there's a paradox. The faster we move, the faster it goes by. Rushing does not buy us more time. The opposite is true. This is what we find on Shabbat – when we slow our own pace to a stop, the day stretches before us indefinitely. Time is elastic. It is not linear and it is not predictable. It expands and contracts and surprises us, depending on how we live it.

Gratefully, the urgency of Rosh Hashanah is balanced by another message in our tradition. This is the messianic vision, which asks us to have the humility to acknowledge that we don't have control over everything we want to change. We can't control the pace of change, and we don't have the power to change everything that needs to change. The messianic vision is simply this: There is a world coming that we can't yet see. It's the world of our collective dreams. We will sing today in the Aleinu, "On that day, on that day, You will be one and Your name will be one." Someday there will be unity among humankind, fairness, freedom. On that day, all of the sufferings

of the world, all of the injustices, all of the wanton destructiveness and tyranny will have been transformed. And a peace will settle in among us, and we will be happy with one another and with ourselves. And there will be a leader who helps to bring that day, perhaps many leaders over the centuries, each of whom gives us the example of his or her life and the vision of what's possible.

On Yom Kippur afternoon we will sing, "Ani Ma'amin, ani ma'amin, ani ma'amin..." I believe with a perfect faith that the world of our dreams will come – and even though it takes longer than I would ever wish – I believe. We don't know when it will arrive – it may be a long time from now and it may be sooner than we think. No matter how bad it seems right now, I believe that it all will amount to something extraordinary. All of the effort we take up on this day, to make ourselves better, to fix what's wrong, to make our world better. It all adds up. Even though we can't see how, we trust that it all adds up.

The need IS urgent. The conditions in our world are unbearable. And our dreams are on the line. So we proceed with all deliberate speed, whether in the work of soul change or social change. But we don't skip steps, we don't rush, and we don't give up just because it takes a long time.

Before Mohandas Gandhi led the nonviolent anti-colonial uprising in India, he spent twenty-one years in South Africa learning, developing his ideas, building his capacity to lead. Before Nelson Mandela led the transition to democracy in South Africa, he spent twenty-seven years in prison, engaged in the invisible, steady work of transforming his soul. Thirty years before the Civil Rights movement grew in the American South, activists formed relationships, built their skills, and developed their vision at a quiet retreat center in the Appalachian Mountains called the Highlander Center. Before Rosa Parks sat down on that Montgomery bus, she was there. Her moment of action was backed by years of planning and training, and was part of an organized movement that had been developing for decades.

Our community organizing work at Leo Baeck Temple has been an education in the paradox of urgency and patience. Since last Rosh Hashanah, when Community Organizing was launched here, almost 400 members have been involved in one to one conversations and house meetings and research. For the past eighteen months, a group of leaders has been working to steer this effort. They've been thinking and strategizing with great focus and commitment to find the way forward. Our course is not charted, as we are trying to accomplish something we've never done before. We're trying to move our entire congregation effectively on large-scale social change.

All along the way, there has been a gnawing fear that we're not moving fast enough. We have all felt this at one point or another. Why is it taking so long? Why haven't we changed any laws yet or marched on Sacramento? These questions have come from those of us involved in organizing, and they've come from other members of the congregation. I have been one of these voices. Perhaps you have been one of these voices. We are an impatient bunch.

We look out at the world and we feel a great urgency. We read the headlines in the newspaper and we want to scream: How can it be that such obscene inequality persists in our own city? Why isn't more being done to create jobs? We've heard so many people in this congregation talk about how the economy, the broken health care system and the broken education system are hurting them and their families. How can we take all of this time discussing our alternatives for action when people are suffering right now?!?

All year, the community organizing effort has been haunted by the impulse to jump to action. To go out and protest on the steps of City Hall. We've known that action would make us feel good. But we've also known that to win significant change we need to plan action as part of a much larger strategy. And every time we tried to rush this process, to skip steps, to hurry, it has been a mistake. We are learning, I am learning, to be patient.

And now, after a year of this careful work, Leo Baeck Temple is ready for action. Based on the hundreds of stories of members, research in the field, and strategic thinking, we have several opportunities to make change this year, as you heard from Rabbi Chasen last night. Already, on September 6th, we participated with our coalition partners through our broad-based organization called One LA, in a big action with California's Secretary of Health to shape health care reform in California. That work will be ongoing.

Last night Rabbi Chasen talked about how building local rapid transit can provide a much-needed boost to our economy. We've heard stories from so many people who are struggling or have family members struggling in this economy. We've heard stories from members who've lost jobs and can't get to jobs because the traffic's so bad. Our research included consultation with many local economic experts and overwhelmingly they agree that one of the most effective ways to turn the local economy around is to build local rail lines. This is why we're talking about building rapid transit right outside our doors on the Sepulveda Pass, not in twenty years, but now. We'd create thousands of new jobs in our city, green jobs. We'd get cars off of these unbearably congested roads. We'd be able to get to our jobs. We'd free up our time spent stuck in traffic for more important things like time with our families and time in our community. We'd be able to get here.

As you heard last night, the first step is to talk to our next mayor about it. On October 14th, the three leading candidates for mayor of Los Angeles will be here for a forum sponsored by the Community of Elders, who are now collaborating with Congregation Based Community Organizing. As part of the forum, the candidates have agreed to participate in a public action, where we will ask them on the spot to partner with us this year and throughout their term to build rapid transit in the Sepulveda Pass now. We need to fill that room on October 14th. We need to show them how much we care. And here's where urgency and patience come together. It took 18 months of patient work to get to this point, and this action, as exciting and urgent and important as it will be, is just the beginning. It's like the presidential election. We're electing a president in seven weeks, and it really matters who wins; but the values conversation that we're having through this election – about government and greed and social responsibility – will take decades, perhaps centuries, to complete. Urgency and patience.

While the High Holy Day liturgy insists that we have the power to make change now, the messianic idea teaches us to be patient with the long arc of changing the world. We work to be the people we should be now. We work steadily to bring about the world we want to see now, and we hold out hope that the future is one worth fighting for. This is the urgency and patience of change. Learning, listening, believing, trying again. Hoping, strategizing, building up power, trying again, until change happens.

The waves of history are bigger than us. What we can do is work little by little, to build momentum for the next wave. When it comes we'll have been part of generating its power. We may even be alive to ride it.

This is the nature of our interior lives as well. Soul change is not linear or measurable, and not entirely in our control. We try and we try and we try, and one day, we don't know when or why, we are more of who we're meant to be.

This is the challenge of Rosh Hashanah: to commit to change with the urgency that the brevity of our lives demands, and the patience that success requires. I challenge each of us this Rosh Hashanah to identify one behavior, one pattern, that we know we must change. And then to commit ourselves to the steady, focused, unremitting work it requires. Start with the next ten days – and give yourself a doable goal -- something very small. Break it down into incremental, winnable pieces. And then, when we're here on Yom Kippur, let's see how we've done. Even if you fail, pick yourself up and commit again. Commit to some little piece of that change for the next week, and then the next, and the next. This is the work of our lives. Let's trust ourselves, be kind to ourselves, and stay focused.

When we come back together next year, our efforts at change will likely be unfinished. But let us come back here having worked on it with awareness, humility, persistence, and love. Let us come back here having seen in our own lives the impact of this steady work, and the results it has engendered in us. Let us come back here with a little more patience, and a little more hope.

The time for change is now, and every day until we die. So let's not wait, and let's not rush. We will always be unfinished, so let's do this life right. Thank you, God, for urgency and thank you, God, for patience. This year, give us both.

Amen.