

When I was young I thought I was nothing at all like my parents – and would certainly not end up anything like them. It's not that I was rebellious. I just thought, "I'm not at all like them." The older I've become, however, the more I see that (despite all my good intentions!) a lot of my mother and father are in me – and I am glad and grateful for it! My mom volunteered to join the Army during World War II and then re-upped for the Korean War, working in a MASH (a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) unit. Years later, everyone at work called her "the sergeant" and at home she kept things ship-shape. I'm not nearly as tough as my mom, but I do like things neat – and our children constantly complain about my being compulsive about having everything tidy. In fact, they say, a neat house is the sign of a life not spent doing better things! My dad died about nine months before I became a Bar Mitzvah, and he was not around during my formative High School years, so I figured his influence on my life was not great. Recently, however, as I was cleaning bookshelves I came across a number of my dad's books from the '40s and '50s – and I realized that I like to read a lot of the same things he did. When I get emotional, I know it comes from him.

Seeking a different path than that of our parents, only to find our selves coming back to them, is at the core of the story of Abraham and Isaac. After Abraham so earnestly tried to slaughter his son, one might naturally assume that Isaac would have nothing to do with him. The Torah certainly hints that this could be the case. Before Abraham and Isaac get to the top of the mountain we read, וילכו שניהם יחדיו "And the two of them walked on together" – not once, but twice. Coming from the mountain, however, in a striking contrast the Torah says only "Abraham returned to his servants ... (and) Abraham lived in Beersheba."¹ Whatever Isaac felt about what took place, there is no record of a single word ever again spoken between father and son.

Even when Abraham finds a wife for Isaac, there is no communication, and Isaac brings his bride into his deceased mother's tent. Given that Abraham

¹ Genesis 22:19

bound his son and brought the knife to his throat, one can understand why Isaac might want to have nothing to do with his father. The breakdown in the personal connection for father and son, however, is not paralleled by Isaac's rejection of his father's ways. In fact, shortly after Isaac has his own sons the Torah says that he began to dig wells. Where? In the very places his father once dug. At first he named the wells the same names his father gave them. In time, however, he gave them new names. In this way Isaac returned to the ways of his father, yet found a means to bring something uniquely his own. Thus our rabbis teach, we do not say, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", but the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob", for each generation has to find its own way.

Modern psychology, which often seeks to help us understand ourselves in relation to our family of origin, reinforces the notion that all of us – consciously or not - dig in the wells our ancestors dug. And we spend our lives renaming those wells, hoping to draw fresh water that will be ours. We may reject some of the choices our parents made, Torah and psychology teach, but we would do well to understand what our parents gave us that is worth mining for meaning.

We live in an age of tremendous change. You certainly don't need me to tell you about the changing economic order in the world. The markets remain unsteady, with most of us uneasy about our financial future. All this is affecting families – yours and mine – in profound ways. A generation ago it was common for someone in their late 20's to be married and beginning a career. Today, take a guess how many Jewish young adults under 40 are not married? More than half!² Some 16% of young Americans in their 20's are unemployed and many are living back home with their parents. There is even a new term for this age cohort – "emerging adults", indicative of the fact that full adulthood is being delayed.

Change is happening rapidly in the business world, too. In June the firm IBM printed a special insert in *The Wall Street Journal* celebrating its 101st year in

² *Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today*, American Jewish Committee (2006), p.2

business. It noted that of the top 25 industrial corporations in the United States in 1900, only two remained on that list at the start of the 1960s. And of the top 25 companies on the Fortune 500 in 1961, only six remain there today.³ Old, stalwart bastions of industry are gone, and so much new has come into our lives.

Consider this - when Cantor Franco and I came here in the middle of 2003 these did not exist - Facebook, YouTube, Zynga, Groupon, Skype and Twitter. Only five years ago no one had an iPhone. Almost no one owned an e-book; iPad, Kindle and Nook were still a few years away. Just out of interest – how many of you have at least of one these in your household today? That's the pace of change! Early this year the number of eBooks sold surpassed that of all printed books. Do you remember the movie *You've Got Mail* with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan? Long ago when it was made – in 1998 (!) – the film played on the theme of huge bookstores destroying “mom and pop” booksellers. Last year Borders, which once had nearly 700 stores, went bankrupt – no longer able to compete with all of us now buying books for our e-Readers.

A year ago most of us would have scoffed if someone predicted that the government of Mubarek in Egypt and Qaddafi in Libya would fall. Last Rosh Hashanah the Obama Administration still hoped for some rapprochement with Syria. The world now sees Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for what he truly is – an oppressive dictator, not only dangerous to Israel and the West, but to his own people. The so-called “Arab Spring” is hardly a full-blown exercise in democracy, and it makes a difficult region even more dangerous, with the anti-Israel sentiment of the Arab street now threatening to undermine previously stabile relations.

Like it not, the world is changing – and fast. Let us not get too self-absorbed, however, thinking we are the first generation to deal with change – or that our age is more challenging than those past. A hundred years ago many of our great-grandparents were just settling into this land – cut off from loved ones and

³ www.ibm.com/ibm100/common/images/junespecial/ibm_centennial.pdf

all they knew, just trying to make a living. Just over 500 years ago the largest Jewish community in the world – with a percentage of Jews greater than any land since – was forced into exile and decimated by conversions to Roman Catholicism. We Jews have endured Crusades and pogroms, and the sweeping changes brought about by revolution and the dismantling of the ghetto's walls as modernity swept aside ancient customs and traditions.

How is it that our fathers and our mothers not just survived, but thrived? They did so by digging deep in the wells of their ancestors, the wellspring of Torah and Jewish tradition that served them – and can serve for us – as a source of strength, endurance and purpose.

The idea of inherent change is woven into the Hebrew word for the year - שנה. The word is connected to a verb that means “change.” Thus, the notion of time in Judaism, marked by the passage of years, is one that, by definition, involves change. When we greet one another, however, we say – לשנה טובה - may it be a good year. Change is inevitable – and sometimes it is dramatic – but what we pray is that it be good. We make sense of all that is new and different not by rejecting the past. Rather, we build a good life by doing things in new ways, but embracing the truths and values of the past. As the children of Isaac, we, too, would be wise to dig in old wells. Don't wait for another year to pass. Come to Torah study, read some Jewish books, take the time to make a grandmother's holiday recipe, go to Israel, be more engaged in Jewish life – and don't be afraid of doing it in new ways. Just keep digging.

I've been thinking a lot about continuity and change as we celebrate as a congregation our 60th anniversary. I never knew the founding president of our synagogue, Nat Hess, but I've heard a lot about him. One of the stories I like best is hearing how he planted the Atlas Cedar just outside the sanctuary window. Every time I am here I am drawn to this magnificent tree, as I know so are many of you – and looking at it I think of Nat. Arborists have told me he had a habit of planting trees too close to buildings – this tree being no exception. I think, however, Nat knew what he was doing. He understood that almost

touching this sacred space, anyone sitting here would naturally be drawn to the tree. It is old, yet with a pull on the young, who scamper along its limbs.

It is no surprise the tree became the symbol of The Community Synagogue. With roots deep and strong, and so many branches, it is an apt emblem for this our community at 60 – and it is a reminder of the Torah, which our sages of old called עץ חיים, our “tree of life.” The Torah, too, has roots in the past, yet its words endure to sustain new generations that branch out. At 60 our congregation is young enough to still have a few founding members with us. But with the loss of three of our earliest members this past couple of years – George Lotker, Vera Tietz and Leonard Weintraub – I have become acutely aware that we are reaching the end of an era. The legacy of our founders, however, lives.

The mothers and fathers of our people – like the founders of The Community Synagogue – dug wells. Our task, even with all the changes time brings, is to remember that fresh water still flows in the wells of the past. We may live stream services and use Facebook, our music may be different, the amount of Hebrew used in worship can wax or wane, clergy come and go, and lay leaders may be new, but the wellspring which sustains us – this synagogue – endures.

Our 60th anniversary is aptly named the *Etz Chaim* year – for it celebrates the tree of life – the one outside and the one in the Ark, both of which remind us that our task today is to find new sustenance in the old wells of our tradition. In the coming year we will honor those who have been leaders, but also the generations of members who have truly built this congregation. And we will be raising money to restore and renew our sanctuary, as well as write a new Torah allowing every one of us to fulfill this rare and special *mitzvah*.

In Jewish tradition 120 represents the fullness of life. Why? It is 1x2x3x4x5 ... a “full hand” of years. We are half way there – and it is an fitting moment to look backward, honoring all that came before, and to pledge ourselves to move forward, not afraid of change, but embracing whatever we need to do to stay relevant, meaningful and good.

If you look out the sanctuary windows you will – if you look closely – already

see the changes afoot. Those windows are new. They look much like the old ones, but they are stronger, more energy efficient and will endure better than those put in when this place was built in the '70s. They are a good metaphor, these windows, letting us see what they always did, but through a new and modern lens. We need your help to do more – to help us finish the desperately needed restoration of this beautiful sanctuary, to be a part of the writing of our communal Torah and to secure our financial future. We would have liked to do more already, but the leaders of our congregation are committed to financial soundness – and will only engage in projects when we have the cash in hand. We know times are tough, but the needs cannot wait – and if we join together we can show our faith in the future as did the founders of our synagogue, who started this community with a handful of people, no building and nothing but their dreams.

I know I'm not the first clergy person to ask for money. I heard about a preacher who was rousing in his sermons. Once, he really got his congregation riled up. Near the end of his sermon he exclaimed: "This congregation has really got to *walk* in the ways of the Lord" to which someone in the back yelled, "Let her walk, preacher!"

Encouraged, the preacher then said, "If this church is going to go, it's got to get up and *run*!" This time more shouted out: "Let her run preacher."

Feeling the surge of the community and its passion, the preacher then said with even greater gusto, "If this congregation is going to go it's got to really *fly*!" Now, with even greater excitement, the community joined in one voice, "Let her fly, preacher, let her fly!"

The preacher then seized the moment and stated with a rousing voice "If this community is really going to fly, it's going to need money!" After a few moments of no one saying anything, someone in the back finally yelled, "Let her walk, preacher, let her walk!"

I hope you will let us do more than "walk" forward. We expect 100% participation of our Board and all our professional staff. At least a third of our

congregation has never been asked to give, for in the seven years since our last campaign we have grown with over 230 new member households. For those of you who have given - sometimes multiple times – I hope you will be inspired to do so again. If not to the sanctuary or to fulfill the religious obligation, the *mitzvah*, of helping write a Torah, then to the endowment of the synagogue. In the coming days you will receive a mailing that describes what you can do. There is something for everyone – from the donation of a letter in the Torah to the dedication of this sanctuary.

The Torah, according to our rabbis, contains 600,000 letters – one for all who stood at Sinai. If one of those letters is missing or broken, however, the Torah is incomplete – and may not even be *kosher* (or “proper” for reading). If it is true for the Torah as a “tree of life”, it is certainly so for the “tree of life” which is our congregation. Without your participation – in study, volunteering, participation in events and giving to our capital campaign – we are incomplete.

In ancient days the first place of worship of our people – the *mishkan* – was built through voluntary offerings. Each was to give *אשר ידבנו לבו* “as their heart moved them.” Let your heart be moved. We can embrace the change that is inevitable with the passing of the years and make it “good” by going back to the old truths. And here, in our synagogue, we can establish foundations for that by being part of this *Etz Chaim* – this “tree of life” with roots in the past, and with a reach to the heavens.

May it be a *shana tova* – filled with changes, as every year inevitably is, but changes that are made “good” and worthy as we look to God, Torah and the blessings of a *קהילה קדושה* a “sacred community” - thereby finding sustenance, as we ever have as Jews, digging in our parents wells.