

Rabbi Sarah Marion
Yom Kippur Morning 5787

“This Too Shall Change”

Throughout my childhood, the fireflies always seemed to mark the changing of the seasons and the inevitable passage of time. As springtime days stretched longer and we'd linger outside till nightfall, the first firefly spotted in the backyard always signaled the official start of summer. They'd then reach their peak around the dog days of August, their lights scattered across the yard like shooting stars. Then, as September and the first hints of fall crept in, they'd slowly start to disappear. We never seemed to notice or remember their last night with us; one evening they were there, and then, just like that, they were gone...until the following summer, when they emerged again, their tiny lights signaling the start of another summer, another turn of the cycle.

As I now watch my own children scamper around the backyard, their small hands holding tiny flickers of light, I am reminded of how much changes as time and life goes on...and how much, also, remains the same.

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My Aunt Shelley and Uncle Mark have lived in the same red-brick house on Marbury Avenue in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, for the past thirty-five years. They moved there when their son, Jonah, was six and their daughter, Raya, was three. Stately and distinctly Victorian, their home was always memorable for its high ceilings, generous rooms, and the kind of beautiful bones that drew them to it in the first place. I can still picture the long, winding staircase leading upstairs, and the regal, glass-paned doors to the living room.

Over the years, the cells of their family became embedded within the walls themselves, as the house slowly absorbed the rhythms and realities of their lives.

Like the child-sized nook under basement stairs where Jonah and Raya etched their names into the drywall, claiming the space as their own private “clubhouse.” And the built-in bookcase in the den, crafted by Shelley's father, which always seemed to contain a part of him, even after he died.

In Shelley's words: “We are a part of this house, just as much as this house is a part of us.” Indeed, the house bears traces of it all: the milestones and the

memories, the growing up, the ordinary days and the moments they never could have imagined.

And now, after thirty-five years, my Aunt Shelley and my Uncle Mark are saying goodbye to 144 Marbury Avenue, the home that has become an extension of the family itself.

Two years ago, Mark was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. As time progressed, his steps became shorter and more deliberate; his footing increasingly unsteady. Turning a corner, moving through a hallway, crossing a room...all the movements he once made without thinking suddenly required effort, planning, coordination.

But in the end, it was the stairs, that were the breaking point.

That majestic stairway that connects one floor to the next...the cobblestone steps to the front door...the charming features that drew them to the house in the first place ultimately became obstacles to overcome. A forgotten phone on another floor meant another negotiation with the stairs. Going in and out of the house meant thinking about all of the stairs that would be involved with getting there, and back.

Little by little, the house began to feel less like a refuge and more like a labyrinth they had to navigate every moment of every day. The rooms that had once held them had become daunting, demanding, unlivable. In their new apartment, with single-floor living and an elevator directly to their floor, they will have a home that is better suited to the changes they are facing...and the ones that are still to come.

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Jewish tradition has long recognized that we live in a reality in which nothing ever stays still.

Our ancient storytellers imagined that we are who we are, because of a series of moments in which our ancestors transitioned from the familiar, into the unknown.

Abraham and Sarah left home, answering God's call to move to a new land and embrace a new identity.

The Israelites journeyed into the Sinai desert, becoming a new nation with a new purpose and a new sense of who they were.

And Jacob fled to the wilderness, set his head down, and saw a winding set of stairs connecting heaven and earth...because some changes would carry him upwards, while others would cause him to slip, falter, and struggle to reach the next step.

Of course, we need not turn to Torah to know that change is constant, happening everywhere, at every turn. All we need to do is look around.

The kids are constantly outgrowing their clothes.

The home that sheltered us for decades now belongs to somebody else.

The grandmother who once spoke to everyone on the street now struggles with simple words.

The parent who taught us how to walk, how to ride a bike, now needs help steadying his steps.

The child who needed bedtime stories now closes the door on us, at night.

The house that was once filled with the sounds of stampeding children has grown quiet.

The daughter who used to cry at nursery school drop-off now has a partner who can wipe away her tears.

The job that was all consuming no longer takes up space.

The person I could always count on can no longer be the one I turn to for help.

The other side of the bed, is now empty.

We are drawing closer to certain people, and drifting away, from others.

The holiday table looks different: circumstances have changed, family members are elsewhere, some who always gathered with us are now no longer here.

And, elsewhere, tables that once fit everyone are no longer big enough, as weddings and births add new members to the fold.

And our bodies, of course, are a running commentary, on change.

That favorite sweater no longer fits.

Restaurant menus now require reading glasses.

Knees start complaining on stairs...back, shoulders, hips become less and less forgiving.

We carry running mental lists of the things we once could do, that our bodies no longer allow.

Our parents, our partners, our children are becoming different versions of themselves.

We are becoming different versions of ourselves.

Some change happens in an instant, like a clear flip of a switch, and we can pinpoint the exact moment when things shifted from what was, to what will be.

And, as well, some change happens in increments so small that they are barely perceptible to the naked eye.

Each moment looks so very much like the next, until one day, we look at our aging faces in the mirror...we ponder the thresholds we don't remember crossing...and we find ourselves asking, how did time go by so fast? How on Earth did I get to this place?

King Solomon is credited for the famous Hebrew maxim "gam zeh ya'avur:" this too shall pass."

But there is another, equally accurate way to describe the human experience:

"Gam zeh yishtanah:" this too, shall change.

Whether we reach for it or we resist it, change is an inevitability.

So much of what we know is here, only for a moment, before it changes and transforms and evolves.

The people we love have changed.

The places we call home have changed.

The bodies we live in have changed.

The families, the communities that we belong to have changed.

The things we desperately try to hold onto have changed.

This, too, has changed.

The question, then, is not whether our lives and our realities will change, because, surely, they will.

And so the question, rather, becomes: what will we make of that change...how will we cope with it...as it continues to come to be?

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Physician and mindfulness expert Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn remarks on our bodies' remarkable ability to adapt to the constant fluctuations in the world around us.

Our internal homeostasis keeps our body temperature near 98.6 degrees despite changes in outside temperature. Allostasis regulates our heart rate, blood pressure, hormones, so that we can function amidst changing or challenging conditions. "Our bodies," Zinn writes, "are biologically protected from outside variations... our built-in mechanisms, which stabilize our inner chemistry, help us to maintain stability and vitality in the face of constant change."

And yet, while our bodies may be highly capable of adjusting to the changing conditions of the physical world, our minds and hearts can be slower to adapt when the change is more personal...when the shift is not in the temperature around us, but in the circumstances of our lives.

Because this kind of change requires more than simple physiological adjustment; it asks us to process, absorb, and come to terms with what is no longer the same. When life as we once knew it evolves and changes form...when change unsettles the familiar patterns around which we have organized our lives...we are asked not only to adapt to what is new, but to let go of what we have always known.

In this sense, every new beginning always starts with an ending. Before we can embrace what lies ahead, we must say goodbye to something that once was. This is why all change, even the ones that are welcome, always involve some measure of loss.

My mother-in-law, Jean Marion, retired after 35 years as a health and physical education teacher in the Lynbrook public school system. Though she relished the newfound freedom, she hadn't anticipated the disorientation of suddenly having nowhere to be each morning - or the loneliness of losing the daily camaraderie with the colleagues she'd seen everyday for the past three decades. "It felt as if I cut an entire social sector from my life," she says. And "just as hard," she tells me, "was the loss of purpose and usefulness that came with being needed at school everyday." Retirement, she says, "is a great unknown. Liberating, yes, but when you get older, unknowns are harder, and definitely a little scary."

And upon reflecting on the recent experience of moving their youngest into college, the last of their three daughters to leave home, Debbie and Ted Portnay share this: "launching the girls to become independent adults was always our vision. This was always the end-goal...it's what we've been working towards ever since they were born. And there is heartache, knowing that all those childhood years are now over." For Debbie and Ted, the sadness is intertwined with the sweetness, in these years of change and growth and transformation.

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In Torah, Rebecca experiences a pivotal moment of change when she becomes pregnant with Jacob and Esau. In addition to the joy of becoming a mother, she experiences physical pain, fear, and uncertainty as the children struggle within her. The pregnancy becomes so distressing that Rebecca questions the meaning behind what she is experiencing, seeking God out and asking, "im kein, lamah zeh anochi? If this is so, why do I exist?" Her question reflects not only her physical suffering but also a deeper desire to understand the purpose of this profound change in her life. She does not simply ask how she will endure this new and uncomfortable ordeal; she asks why she is encountering it, at all. In response, God answers that two nations are in her womb; giving larger meaning to her experience.

Centuries later, Viktor Frankl presented his own version of "if this is so." Writing in the aftermath of his ordeal at Auschwitz, Frankl grappled with how to make meaning from the profound suffering he had endured. In his timeless treatise "Man's Search for Meaning," he concluded that meaning can always be found,

regardless of what we contend with, in our lives.

And so while change is an inevitable part of being human – whether it is thrust upon us or chosen by us – Frankl would remind us that we always retain some measure of agency in how we respond to it. Even as we undergo the kind of change that feels painful, challenging or excruciating to bear, he would ask us to consider the meaning that we might find, within it. What can I learn from this change? Who is this change inviting me to become?

If this is so, why do I exist?

Larry Levine's elderly mother, Gerry Levine, once tended Larry's bumps and bruises and tucked him in at bedtime. In the aftermath of Gerry's fall a few months ago, Larry became the one getting up several times each night, helping his mother to the bathroom and escorting her safely back to bed. Before Gerry's sudden loss of independence, Larry hadn't thought about being there for her, in this way. But as he and Alison continue to care for the mother who once cared for them, Larry has discovered that we are often capable of far more than we imagine...that sometimes, it takes living through a profound life change to discover how much strength we really have.

If this is so, why do I exist?

After burying both of her parents within a matter of months, Alison Bonds now has a deeper understanding of how quickly the older generation can leave us; how important it is to cherish them while we still can. Without her mom and dad, she's discovered newfound appreciation for her two aunts, who carry stories about her mother that no one else knows. Alongside her aching heart, Alison has taken her place as next in line to preserve and transmit family history, and memory.

If this is so, why do I exist?

For Debbie and Ted Portnay, letting their children go has taught them that being needed doesn't end when children leave home, it simply changes form. Their daughters may no longer need them to fix every little thing, but they still need them to be there, for them. And with more space in their lives, Ted and Debbie are discovering new dimensions of who they are: Ted through his new interest in street photography, Debbie through new ventures in her therapeutic work. This new life phase has reminded them that we are never finished becoming; with this latest

change, they have started another chapter in their ongoing work of growing more fully into themselves.

And so perhaps in the midst of all that changes, it is that which *doesn't* change – our ongoing capacity to learn and grow and find meaning – that helps us to cope with the constant motion that surrounds.

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After Rebecca cries out during her pregnancy...after Jacob sees the stairs... Jacob wrestles with a mysterious being, who wrenches Jacob's hip from its socket... leaving him with a perpetual limp.

But although Jacob's body was permanently changed, he still had more to do, he still had more to give. He reconciled with his brother. He blessed his children and his grandchildren. He grew into Israel: the new name, the new identity that he received after that life-changing encounter. His altered mobility didn't make him irrelevant...it simply changed the way he showed up in the world.

My Uncle Mark also knows a thing or two about living in a body that no longer moves the way it once did. For decades, his successful career as a cardiologist gave him purpose, rhythm, identity; now, his daily work entails navigating a body that poses new and unfamiliar limits.

But like Jacob, Mark is discovering that a limited body need not mean a diminished life. His diagnosis, he says, has brought into sharper focus the fragility of our bodies, and the extraordinary gift of each new day. And it has made him more intentional about what matters: time with Shelley and the kids, the connections that were once so easy to postpone.

He offers me this: "I may have trouble walking, my body may no longer be what it once was, but I can still give. I can still love. I can still bless. I can still leave something, for those who come next."

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After all the boxes were sealed and carted away, Shelley went back to 144 Marbury Avenue one last time with a group of dear friends, who call themselves the "Fireflies."

Years ago, the Fireflies gathered around Shelley's fireplace for conversation and togetherness, and, over time, Shelley's house became their monthly home base.

As moving day drew near, one of the women in the group ordered a handful of tiny, glow in the dark firefly stickers. Once the movers left, Shelley and the fireflies walked through every room, sticking the little lights into unexpected places. "So a piece of you always stays here," they said.

In a house stripped of nearly everything that had once consumed it, the fireflies left behind a small reminder that even as life changes and we travel down unfamiliar roads, something of us will always remain, behind.

And those little lights – tucked into places where a child might someday discover them and delight in their glow – leave a bit of magic, a bit of wonder, for the next generation to stumble upon and enjoy, in this ever-growing, ever-changing, everlasting, world.