

**Man Tracht un Got Lacht.... Man plans and God laughs
by Rabbi Steve Booth, B'nai Havurah, Denver, CO**

Man Tracht un Got Lacht.... Man plans and God laughs. Essential Yiddish wisdom for life, for making plans, for organizational change, for these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe. We make plans.... stuff happens. Don't forget that you are not in control, and that there is a One that is greater than the sum of all the parts. Invisible forces are at work.

Life teaches us this. Kids are perhaps our most intense teachers. Plans? Control? Even systems you can count on for more than a few months? You must be kidding. In his book "Fatherhood," Bill Cosby teaches that the first thing that goes when you become a parent is the concept of "I'll be there in 20 minutes." Forget it. You'll never be anywhere in 20 minutes again!

Every summer growing up in Chicago, I raced large sailboats on Lake Michigan, and sailing offers a fitting metaphor. The wind and waves are not in your control. Using all your sensitivity and skill you can trim the sails and influence direction by maneuvering the tiller. You can direct the energy to stay on course, and it often works, but you can't control the external forces. You can only control **your** response in as skillful as way as possible. You must pay constant attention and adjust.

We say L'Shannah Tovah, "towards a year of good." Part of what is so interesting about Hebrew however is the wide range of meanings in most words. Yes, Shannah means "year." But the root *shin, nun, heh* manifests several other meanings in my dictionary.

The first definition is "to repeat, do again, reiterate, or revise." So we are also wishing each other "happy revisions," or "happy do overs."

The second definition I find is to study, learn, teach, to inculcate. So, "happy learning!" And may we learn from our revisions.

The third definition, the one that really grabs me this year, is: **to change, to be different... *l'shanot***. When we say "Shana Tovah" we are not just saying "happy new year," but we are also, fundamentally saying, may you have a good changing.... may you be different in good ways, may this year bring changes that are good, that are life giving and sustaining. ...Or, **may the changes and surprises on the path of the year ahead, the unexpected shifts of wind and waves, either be for the good, or may your adjustments to them, your moving of the tiller or trimming of the sails, work well and serve you.**

Enshrined in our greeting to each other is the idea that change, planned and unexpected, is part of life. We seem to almost be saying: "just in case you were

thinking it would be best to keep things the same, HAPPY CHANGES!' Shanah Tovah! These days are a ritual for change.

Thousands of times I was sailing along, moving on course smoothly, sails and tiller in control, singing a tune, when suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, the wind did a major directional shift, picked up so hard and fast it almost blew us over,.... I cursed, and had hard work to do to adjust my efforts, my boat, to the new situation.

But I don't have to go back that far. A couple summers ago, I was sailing a large rented sailboat on Lake Dillon with Rabbi Soloway from Boulder. I was thrilled to discover he was as experienced and skilled a sailor as I, as he grew up ocean racing in England. It was just the two of us, a somewhat blustery late spring day, but we were doing fine. As the wind slowly built up however, I was steering, and I said: "Marc, I know its a pain, but if we reefed the main down a bit, it would be easier to steer and we'd have more control." He agreed, and we did it. As he finished with the sail and looked back to me from the deck, as we both started to nod that yes, this was better,BOOM! --we heard something pop.... and with a sick feeling, looked up, and watched in slow motion as the mast broke, and the sails and all the rigging simply blew off the boat! We were dead in the water, dragging our sails and rigging. (*Sound at all like anyone's life this year?*)

Good thing we were two rabbis... better yet... good thing we were two experienced sailors. Marc quickly started to haul in the sails and rigging, while I tried to start the outboard motor. Interestingly, neither of us was getting anywhere. So silently, as a team, we switched positions. As I was hauling in the rigging, I noticed that the wind was slowly blowing us towards a rocky shore. Not good. I thought, "you know... this stuff makes a good anchor," and I dropped everything back in the water.

The short version of the story is that Marc got the engine started and I hauled in the cold, wet rigging. We kept our heads, worked as a team, and to the shock of the folks at the Dillion Marina, on our own we brought the boat, sails, and all the rigging back safely to dock. We did this by not fighting the changes, but by adjusting to them. We worked together and stayed on course.

Our goal was to have a fun sail and get back to dock safely. We didn't expect it quite the way it happened, but adjusting to conditions, we still succeeded at our goal. In fact, wrestling with these surprises, we had a far more exhilarating experience than we would have if our plans had gone smoothly. And we are now bonded for life. He is one of the few I can trust in a storm.

I don't know about you, but I don't always respond to life's unexpected changes so well. But it is a blessing, and a learning, when I do, or when I witness someone else doing so.

We have a number of members of our community this year, who have metaphorically and literally had their masts broken and all their rigging blown overboard. Getting going again has usually not been so easy, but somehow, they are all doing well. ...My prayer is that we can help provide the connected support they need to bring their boats safely back to dock.

As Rabbi Irwin Kula says in his book “Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life,” life is messy! Stuff happens. It is often not pretty. We are certainly not in control. It can be frustrating and challenging in many ways... but if we can somehow shift our positions a bit, adjust our sails, our perspectives, perhaps we can find something redemptive in the unanticipated moment.

This is where Judaism and spiritual community comes in. You can't pray successfully for bad stuff not to happen. Judaism is not magic. What Judaism offers are teachings and rituals for dealing with what happens, whether good or bad. And in these teachings and rituals, we often find the perspective we need.

We have good guides and rituals for when a baby is born, someone becomes a teenager or gets married, or someone dies. And all of them have to do with finding God in relationships, in community, in the moment. Whatever happens, simcha and tzuras, we are there for each other. We listen, adjust, seek helpful and skillful ways.

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Challenges and bumps on the road are not a bad thing. Our scientists have shown us that challenges to (open) systems are actually healthy. They help a system grow, adapt, become more sophisticated and evolve -- as all systems must do. This is as true for us as individuals as it is for organizations. The key is staying clear about who we are and where we are going, even as stuff happens. The result is increased vitality, strength and flexibility.

This should also sound like the history of a community like ours. 40+ yrs. ago we set out on an adventure. We've had many bumps and surprises along the way, many adjustments. (Remember?) And we are stronger for them.

Bnai Havurah is entering an exciting **time** of transformation and change, and we cannot possibly imagine all the surprises and shifts ahead. With our work on our by-laws, Governance and Staffing structures, we seek to update them to better match and serve who we are today.

We were once a few self-run but collaborating havurot. We are now over twenty havurot, full and part-time staff totaling seven, and almost 300 households. We are a spiritual community in the larger sense, a connected community. As such, you are (and are further invited to be) part of these conversations.

In such complexity, we will need each other, and reminders of our **core values**, to help navigate the path ahead. No person or organization can be an effective co-creator with its environment without clarity about who it is intending to become.

Our Vision Statement says we are an “*evolving, participatory, Havurah-based, Reconstructionist community, seeking to provide a fulfilling pathway for living a meaningful, involved Jewish life.*” We are:

- **Evolving**, open to change as needed.
 - **Participatory** and a truly connected community, based in our foundational havurah system.
 - **Reconstructionist**, based on the principles first articulated by Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, as well as his disciples.
 - Offering tools and assistance for living **meaningful, involved Jewish lives**.
- I think we've got that down.

I believe our core values are also well articulated in the prologue to Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach: “*One does not become a Reconstructionist simply by joining a Reconstructionist synagogue or paying dues to a national organization. Our name itself implies active participation in a shared process. No mere passive adjective describing a “type” of Judaism, our name says that each of us engages in just that -- the reconstruction of Jewish life and tradition to integrate it with the particular lifestyle each of us chooses. The Reconstructionist community is not a body of synagogues and rabbis that others merely support. It is rather a **community** in the full sense of the term, in which no one's duty may be done vicariously by others. It is a community of Jews who commit themselves to ongoing study, to discussion of issues, and to a life of intelligent decision making.*”

That is who we are. And we can't help but notice that it is not a static definition. It involves and requires change. Implied here is also that we are “relational.” At the core of our processes as a community are the relationships we build and nurture and wrestle with. Just ask anyone on a committee, or our High Holy Day Service Leader Team, or the crew that labored together over the last couple years to create the Yom Kippur Service you will experience in ten days.

These are the values that will guide us through the coming changes, and we will need your help and involvement for it to be successful. Our co-chairs will speak more about this later, as will I.

As we move towards our Torah service this morning, and read the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, please note that it is a story filled with unexpected changes! From Sarah and Abraham having a child when they

are quite old, ...God telling Abraham to cast out his first born son, to God hearing Ishmael and Hagar and saving their lives. Notice the role of relationships here, and that God is close to everyone in the story (and even the instigator of most of the unexpected events). This whole parsha is full of unexpected turns and surprises to deal with. Everyone has to struggle in their own way with how to respond... and from this we can learn. Lastly, see perhaps if this year, you personally identify with one of the characters... and if you do, see if how they respond to life's surprises offers you some guidance, or if it shows you the path not to travel, or if you need to fill in the blanks to know.

Man tracht un Got lacht.... man plans and God laughs.... doesn't just mean we're not in control and God (who is) laughs, but rather, we plan, as we should, according to our values and goals,.... and God smiles, as we, in our wrestlings with the unexpected, achieve so much more....

.....A traveler had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw someone approaching him. His heart was filled with anticipation: "Now I will learn which is the right way," he thought. When they neared one another, he asked, "Please, tell me which is the right way out of this forest. I have been wandering about for several days."

Said the other to him, "I do not know the way out either, for I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been going, for that will lead you astray..... **Now** let us look for a new way together."

The rituals of this sacred season come to help us recycle and adapt to current realities on every level of our lives, and to spiral up our evolutionary ladders to our next stages. They remind us that we need each other, and that there is no predictable "right path," only kavanot, kivunim, directions we can learn by being in relation, by working with and recognizing each others varied perspectives.

And so we come together in community, this Rosh Hashanah/Head of the Year, 5768. None of us knows the way, but we have all learned on our journeys, and perhaps together, we can discover a new path.

L'Shana Tovah Tikatevu..... May we have a growthful year of changes, and be inscribed in the Book of The Evolving Religious Civilization of the Jewish People.