

Renew Our Days as of Old
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As March 2020 rolled around, I had planned a busy few months: I was getting ready for Purim celebration at Leyv Ha-Ir, where I was serving as interim rabbi; David and I were looking forward to a cousin's wedding in Tucson in April. In June, I was slated to speak at a conference in Ontario, and to attend a retreat in Indiana.

As you very well may have guessed....*none* of that happened. Instead, David and I and our two returned college kids were sequestered at home. As each of these planned events approached, I went through the same process: resisting, grieving, and ultimately *very* reluctantly accepting that my plans were not going to be realized. COVID made all of it impossible, and then, to top it off, David ended up in the hospital for 11 days and I was not allowed anywhere near him. We were living the Yiddish saying: *Men tracht un Gott lacht*-We plan and God laughs! Over and over again, we found ourselves having no choice but to let go and pivot, let go and pivot, let go and pivot all over again!!!! Needless to say, all of this was bewildering, frustrating, and sad.

It seems to me that we humans have a primal wish: just let things stay the way they are. We embody the words of the *hashiveynu*: *hashkiveynu Adonai elecha v'nashuva*. Let us return, God, and *then* we will turn to You...just let us go back to the way it was and we will be right there with You, God!

We resist change but change and disruption are natural and constant. On a collective level, we face pandemic, environmental crisis, AI, and war. On an individual level: change is constant – our lives are filled with transitions, happy and sad (not just the life cycle events we typically think about, but also moves, illness, gaining a new friend, starting a new job).

In his fascinating book, *Master of Change*, writer Brad Stulberg calls these individual and communal changes "disorder" events...he says that, on average, a person experiences 36 disorder events over the course of adult life, or one every 18 months. Of course, sometimes they are not neatly spaced at all, but rather come in clusters.

Avoiding or resisting our changed reality can be costly: I have a friend who is a marvelous conversationalist- he has a great sense of humor and asks really good questions. I noticed a couple of years ago that he was hanging back, not really joining in—he was having difficulty hearing and parts of the conversation were going right by him. He even did this to try to hear [gesture]! Never subtle, I asked: do you notice that you are missing lots of conversations because of your hearing loss? He said, yes, I do. So, I continued...what's keeping you from getting hearing aids? Without hesitating, he replied: Vanity! When my friend finally got hearing aids a year or two later, he was amazed at how great it was, not just to be fully present in social settings, but to hear the people he worked with! Not wanting to accept that he needed help kept my friend from the connections he treasured.

Writer Byron Katie famously says: whenever I fight reality, I lose, but only 100% of the time.

Change is inevitable, but often jarring, annoying, discomfiting,even *good* change, like successfully sending a child off to college. The new empty nester wonders: who am I, now that I am not parenting a kid at home? What am I supposed to do at 3:30 on weekday afternoons when I would have

been attending soccer or basketball games? How in the world am I supposed to help my kid when they are distressed without angering them by giving unsolicited advice? It's a positive change that a child is becoming an adult, that a child has launched...*and* it involves loss and confusion for the parent.

Contemporary psychologists and scientists are discovering that accommodating change is essential to our well-being. Brad Stulberg says it was once thought that change brings us out of our status quo, and then we adapt in such a way that we *return* to homeostasis...essentially *the way things were*. Homeostasis posits movement from order to disorder back to order. Now, researchers Peter Sterling and Joseph Eyer offer a different conception - change *interrupts* the status quo, and we need to *adapt* to the new reality—this model is called *allostasis*. Allostasis suggests we move from order to disorder to *re-order*—a new reality. Brad Stulberg says, "...you achieve stability not through fighting change or getting back to where you were, but rather by skillfully working with change and arriving someplace new."

So how can we move to create new order out of change and unwelcome experiences? How can we grow toward *embracing* life's fluidity? Brad Stulberg suggests that we need to develop *rugged flexibility*, which he defines as "a gritty endurance, an anti-fragility that not only withstands change, but thrives in its midst."¹

I'd like to share a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov as a guide to help us cultivate rugged flexibility. The Baal Shem Tov initially offered this formula as a way of dealing with distraction during prayer, but eventually posited that it could be helpful in facing any experience of brokenness. Rabbi Burt Jacobson translated the teaching in this way:

An individual should cultivate three ways of dealing with adversity: *Hachna'ah*/Yielding, *Havdalah*/Discernment, and *Hamதாக*/Sweetening.... If you are able to purify your thinking regarding what is good and pleasant about each of the occurrences that happen to you through Yielding, Discernment and Sweetening...you will then be able to hold your footing and you won't be toppled by the husks of evil. You will remain bound in oneness to the Blessed One.²

Let's unpack this: we will look at each of these three ways of responding to unwelcome experience—*hachna'ah*, *Havdalah*, and *hamதாக* – yielding, discerning and sweetening.

Hachna'ah

Hachna'ah could literally be translated as submitting, like "surrender, Dorothy!" I like to think of it as yielding or *softening* to reality. Another way of understanding it is through psychologist and mindfulness teacher Tara Brach's term, "radical acceptance."

Brach writes, "Radical Acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our lives as it is."³ To experience ourselves and our lives *as they are*. Piece of cake, right?

Hachna'ah calls us to drop what I call the "classic toddler stance," which I personally embodied through all of Spring, 2020—stamping our feet and yelling, no, no, no: this is not supposed to be happening! The toddler stance is satisfying in its way, but ultimately not productive. Clinging to the

¹ Stulberg, Brad. Master of Change (p. 14). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

² Baal Shem Tov, as translated in Burt Jacobson, *This Precious Moment: The Wisdom of the Ba'al Shem Tov*," Kehilla Community Synagogue, 2016, 52-3.

³ Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha*

demand that things be other than they are leaves us mired in misery. Instead, we need to expect and accept that life includes hardship, disappointment, and pain.

This business of bringing radical acceptance to unwelcome reality is counterintuitive. What is natural, and reflexive, is to deny, to stiffen. When you pull a muscle in your back, your body responds with alarm, attempting to protect the hurt, raw place by hardening around it. You want to make sure that nothing can get to that vulnerable place and injure it further. But a strange thing happens. Instead of feeling better, now you are not only sore but also stiff. You find you have trouble bending, turning, and eventually moving at all. You want to take to your bed; you pray that this will all just pass. Surprisingly, you should do anything *but* this. Stretch, move gently, your doctor tells you, and you will heal. This is yielding, softening. The Ba'al Shem Tov teaches that *hachna'ah*, *allowing* what is, brings redemption from imprisonment.

Havdalah: discernment

If we yield to reality, we discover that what we are facing is not just darkness. The Ba'al Shem Tov calls us to discern the sparks that are encased in *klipot*, or shards, as we face brokenness. I imagine this as a spiritual/emotional parallel to the phenomenon of entering a darkened room. Initially, all we perceive is blackness. As our eyes adjust, it turns out there is shadow, there are shades of darkness, there's mass and space, and, if we try hard, we can make out tiny fragments of light.

Once we know the terrain of our distress and we can let go of resisting it, we can begin to open ourselves to *all* of the complex experience. Another way of describing *havdalah* is bringing curiosity to the unwelcome reality. Having arrived in a place we hoped to avoid, we endeavor to take in and fully inhabit the landscape.

Jarem Sawatsky is a professor of peace and conflict studies who is living with, and reflecting on, Huntington's Disease. He watched his mother, uncle and grandmother live and die with Huntington's, and he himself was diagnosed in his 40s. In his moving memoir, *Dancing with Elephants*, Sawatsky writes, "Once you decide to embrace darkness, a different world comes into focus." He dedicates himself to living fully amid reduced capacities and with complete awareness that further decline awaits him. He insists that he is more than his disease. He works to befriend his forgetfulness and frequent falls, rather than to sink into constant anger. He aims, "To be thrilled, grateful, wonder-filled and curious about life and living."⁴

What Sawatsky is doing, in our language, is saying *hineni*- I'm here and I'm going to figure out what I can do in this tough place. *Havdalah* means taking back agency. As Tara Brach puts it, "There is something wonderfully bold and liberating about saying *yes* to our entire imperfect and messy life."⁵

Hamtakah: sweetening

⁴ Jarem Sawatsky. *Dancing With Elephants: Mindfulness Training for Those Living With Dementia, Chronic Illness or an Aging Brain (How to Die Smiling Book 1)*. Red Canoe Press, 20178.

⁵ Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*

When we've allowed ourselves to dwell in darkness and we've opened our eyes wide to sparks of light within it, we are ready to wrest some sweetness out of a bitter experience. Ultimately, the Baal Shem Tov teaches, what we can hope for is to harvest something redemptive out of our most anguishing life experiences.

I want to make something clear: the Baal Shem Tov is not whitewashing the agony of suffering. He himself was orphaned as a young child, his first wife died, and he grew up in an atmosphere of deprivation and violence against Jews. This is not a Pollyannish denial of suffering's sting. Rather the sage boldly reminds us that even the most wrenching agony may also contain goodness if we are able to be open to it.

So how are we to experience sweetening, *hamtakah*? Allow me a what might seem to be a digression. The year we enter is called *shannah*. The root of this word, comprised of the letters shin, nun and heh, has at least two meanings. The first meaning of this root is to *change*. This might make sense, as each year brings change to our lives. The second meaning is to *learn*, as in the word Mishnah. I think the confluence of these two meanings of the word comes to teach us something: out of each experience of change, there is the possibility of learning something new. Encountering unwelcome experiences just might transform us.

I experienced transformation through unwelcome change when I was 17 and an exchange student living with a family and attending high school in Haifa. My host sister and I were walking home from shul, when we noticed that the streets were buzzing with cars. It wasn't until we got home that we learned that Israel had been attacked by Egypt and Syria—the traffic we'd seen was our neighbors heading to the front.

What had started for me as a fun opportunity to get away from my parents and my boring high school became a life-altering experience. In an instant, I became *part* of what was going on around me—I was in the bomb shelter with the rest of the women and children of our building; I was with the mothers and wives to whom I delivered letters from soldiers as a Postal Service volunteer; my adopted *abba* was at the front; and, though I had no idea at the time, I was in real danger, along with the rest of Israel.

War was not the far-away Vietnam conflict I experienced only through the nightly news, but right where I was. The losses from the Yom Kippur War were staggering: 2,569 dead and 7,500 injured—nearly everyone around me had lost someone by the time the war ended. I lost some illusions – when my *abba* returned from the Golan front, he came with pottery and grapes—that he had taken from a home the army had occupied. So much for “*tohar ha-neshek*--purity of arms.”

Israel was no longer an idealized abstraction, but a part of me, warts and all. I vowed at that time never to abandon Israel. I have not, even as now, that bond requires protest and support of those on the ground who are fighting with all their might to preserve Israel as a democracy. And...though I couldn't have imagined it at the time, part of me is literally *in* Israel—our daughter, Anya, made Aliyah 6 years ago and who works through education to repair Israel's brokenness. All of this came from a singularly unwelcome experience.

Sometimes, *hamtakah* can literally be finding sweetness in a bitter experience.

When I was a Jewish Family and Children's service chaplain in a Center City condominium, I met a woman I'll call Barbara. She was caring for her 88-year-old mom, Elaine, who had been living with dementia for many years. Elaine was unable to talk or in any obvious way engage...*and* their relationship had been fraught with conflict. Not an easy task for Barbara to be there. But Barbara drove 100 miles from her home every other weekend to care hands-on for Elaine. "Everything has changed, she says...I don't know how, but the bitterness has just evaporated, and all I experience is tenderness." Facing the supremely difficult task of caring for her mother allowed Barbara to experience healing and ease.

Hamதாக can also happen if we open to the experience of Presence, or holiness, or godliness in the midst of unwelcome change. Here, I think about our beloved member, Howard Spodek, of blessed memory. As most of us know, Howard had a stroke while in Ahmedabad, India, which was the center of his life's work as a historian, and his second home. Howard's Indian friends tenderly cared for him along with his daughter, Susie, until he was strong enough to travel back to Philadelphia. When Howard came back, he received almost daily visits from members of his Dorshei Derekh and GJC communities. It is heartbreaking that Howard didn't regain the ability to walk or talk, and never returned to his home before his death last month. But/*and*...I believe that Howard experienced *hamதாக*-sweetening, as he had a unique chance to see how loved and cherished he was, something many of us either don't have or don't know.

The *Hashiveynu* prayer which we say repeatedly during these days, ends with these words: *Hadesh yameinu k'kedem*. Renew our days as of old. With the insight of the Baal Shem Tov, we can see that this prayer does not mean: Return us to the way things were, but rather, give us the capacity to be new--fresh and fluid--as we face whatever change comes. We pray: give us the capacity to be new--fresh and fluid--as we face whatever change comes.

At this turning of the year, as we are praying for a chance to turn toward the good, may we find renewal in *what is*; may we embrace even unwelcome change, be open to the paths that are available to us, and find sweetness all along the way.

Gmar hatimah tova.