

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yizkor

5775

One of our many blessings, a result of our move to New York, is the friendship we developed with my rabbinic colleagues and their families. Not only do we share programs together with Hollis Hills and ICCJ, but Rabbi Wise, Rabbi Fryer Bodzin, and I get together to celebrate birthdays and other happy occasions, and to comfort and support each other in times of sorrow and pain.

Rabbi Fryer Bodzin's and my family have an established tradition to share holiday meals. Aaron and the rabbi come to us on the first night of Rosh Hashanah and we go to their home for the second one.



Inevitably the subject of our respective divrei Torah becomes the subject of our dinner conversation. What did you talk about? How did it go? How was it received?

It is not uncommon for rabbis to borrow material from each other. Good ideas, and good stories are still good even though you didn't come up with them yourself. As long as you find your own twist (I love the word twist) to the idea or the story and mention the name of the person who shared it with you, then the borrowed idea or story becomes part of your own dvar Torah.

This is what I told Rabbi Fryer Bodzin on the second night of Rosh Hashanah at her dinner table, before asking her, "Do you have a good story you can share with me about change?"

So Rabbi Fryer Bodzin shared with me the following story.

The story is told of two veteran fishermen who every year would make a trip out into the wilderness of northern Maine. Their favorite place was off in the back country, far away from any roads, and the only way to get there was by sea plane, a little piper cub equipped to land on water. So they hired a pilot to take them up. He landed on the lake, taxied over to the place where they would be camping, and before he left, he said to them,

"I'll be back to pick you up in three days, but remember this is a small plane. There's room only for the two of you, your gear, and one bag of fish. That's all we can carry."

With that he flew off. When he came back three days later he was dismayed to see that the fishermen were waiting for him, all ready to go, and that there with them were two huge bags of fish. "I can't take two bags of fish," he shouted. "We'll never be able to take off."

Well, they argued for a while. Finally the pilot gave in and they loaded the plane with the fishing gear, and the two big bags of fish. It was so tight in the cabin that the two men had to lie down with the fish on top of them.

And it was so heavy that when they started their takeoff run across the water, the plane just barely made it into the air. As they struggled to gain altitude, the left wing of the plane clipped the top of an old tree and the plane slowly went down, finally settling in the middle of the forest.

When the dust settled and they climbed out of the wreckage, one of the fishermen turned to his buddy and said, "Where are we?"

And the other man answered, "About 100 yards further than last year."

"So where is the change part?" I asked. "They ended in the middle of the forest?!"
"Yes," Rabbi Fryer Bodzin replied, "but *100 yards further than the year before.*"

So maybe this is the big secret about change. It is not about soaring to new heights, or becoming a new person overnight. It is not about giving up all your old habits or becoming *frum*; it is not even about not repeating the same mistakes you made last year. All you may need is to land 100 yards further than last year.

Expecting from others and from ourselves an overnight transformation is not only unrealistic but also very frustrating. Since I cannot become a whole new person overnight, why even try? If big changes may not be possible, why should I even bother to work on small ones?

The truth, however, is that it took us many years to become who we are. It took me over 48 years to develop all my bad habits. How can I change them overnight? Can you guess how many times Silvia told me that it might be a good idea for me to unload the dishwasher once in a while? The other day I did it on my own, without being told to. Silvia came into the kitchen and beheld the great vision. "I am about to faint," she said. "Now," Silvia continued, "let's work on remembering to take out the trash on Sundays and Wednesdays, to sort the laundry, and to come home on time for dinner."

And this is just the tip of the iceberg! There are so many things I need to change: my eating habits, my lack of discipline when it comes to working out, my anxiety over small fixable problems...

However, the only way towards big changes, I am afraid, is through small changes.

One hundred yards a year might be all we can do, all we can manage. For some it might be one step here, one step there; for others, two steps forward, one step

backward. The key is to set goals, to believe that change is not only necessary but also possible, and to move forward, always forward.ⁱ

Silvia's brother, Rabbi Gustavo Surazski, who lives in Israel, shared with me the following personal experience:

Last year, my brother-in-law visited Buenos Aires and attended Shabbat services at the Conservative synagogue in his parents' neighborhood.

He arrived for morning services and discovered that the officiating rabbi had been a student in the class of bar mitzvah boys that he had prepared twenty-five years earlier. Congregants and guests began to arrive in throngs to the service. That same Shabbat, two boys celebrated their *Bar Mitzvah*, sons of families that my brother-in-law had known for years.

To his surprise, he recognized one out of every two people sitting in the sanctuary. He met representatives of every period of his life, beginning with nursery school and elementary school, through high school and his first jobs as a counselor and as a student rabbi, and from the first congregation he had served as a rabbi before making *aliyah* to Israel 12 years ago.

My brother-in-law hadn't seen most of them for more than two decades, but quite a few looked at him and commented, "Hey Gustavo, you haven't changed!"

At first, he took this as a compliment (as most of us would). However, on second thought he was less enthusiastic. For truth be told, to see a person after twenty, thirty or forty years and to say "you haven't changed" isn't much of a compliment.

I know for sure that if I were to meet a childhood friend who hasn't seen me in twenty, or thirty years, this is what he would tell me: "Look at your white beard! And since when do you have short hair? Are you planning to sue the barber? And you finally married Silvia? Mazal Tov! You have a nineteen year old daughter? Wow!"

I actually don't need a childhood friend to tell me I have changed physically. Just by looking at old pictures I see the difference and that doesn't necessarily make me happy.



However, I would be happy if any of my childhood friends who hadn't seen me in thirty years, would say, after spending some time with me, "Manes, I see you have really changed! You are wiser than the Manes I remember, and more sensitive."

I wish one day my former congregants from the Dominican Republic and Virginia, and my Argentinean colleagues, upon seeing me after twenty years, would tell me, "We see you have become more learned, Manes, and more observant, and more compassionate."

I really want to change! I can change, I have to change!

I want to become a better husband, a better son, a better father. I want to become a kinder friend and a more compassionate rabbi. I want to learn more Torah and do more mitzvot, even if I change just one step at a time, even if I advance only 100 yards a year. I know it is difficult to change, but it is possible.

I should change. And so do each of you here today!

Today, as we remember "those who enriched our lives with love and beauty, kindness and compassion, thoughtfulness and understanding,"ⁱⁱⁱ we should pray for the ability to break old habits and routines, for the same gifts of love and beauty,

kindness and compassion, thoughtfulness and understanding, to pass on to future generations.

In this sacred hour, all of us should reflect upon our shortcomings and affirm that we believe that change is possible not only for others, but mostly for ourselves.

"We don't have to stay in the same place. We can go out on new journeys, embarking upon paths which can open us to new ideas, unique experiences and broader perspectives."ⁱⁱⁱ

I know, it is not going to happen overnight. It is okay. Don't worry.

Small steps are all we need to bring change into our lives. Maybe next year we will remember to bring only one bag of fish. Who knows, maybe we will be able to make it all the way home, maybe we won't end up in the middle of the forest. But even if we don't make it all the way home, I hope next year will find us 100 yards further than this year. That's all I ask for.

Master of the Universe: In Your kindness, You renew every single day the work of Your creation. Grant us the gift of renewal. Instill in us the conviction that we don't have to be today the same as we were yesterday, that tomorrow we can be better than we are today. Save us from frustration by helping us to remember that small steps are okay, as long as we move forward, as long as we set goals, as long as we believe that change is possible.

As we recall how we were blessed by our relatives and friends who have gone the way of all earth, we ask You God, to bless us as well. May we feel Your love, may we experience Your compassion, and may all of us and our loved ones be granted a year of health, and physical vitality, a year of sustenance and peace, a year of joy and meaning, a sweet and good year.

Amen

ⁱ My friend Baruch Zeilicovich likes to put it in Italian: "Avanti, Sempre Avanti!"

ⁱⁱ Jules Harlow (Editor): Siddur Sim Shalom. Memorial Service. Page 516. The Rabbinical Assembly – The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. 1989.

ⁱⁱⁱ I couldn't have said it any better, Rabbi Fryer Bodzin.