

## Yes, You Can Change, Mrs. Goldstein! We All Can!

### D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

5784



*Y así como todo cambia  
Que yo cambie no es extraño*

*Cambia, todo cambia  
Cambia, todo cambia  
Cambia, todo cambia  
Cambia, todo cambia”*

Cambia, todo cambia ... Everything changes...This is the title of a song by Julio Numhauser, a Chilean activist,<sup>1</sup> that reminds us of something we already know: everything in this world changes.

*...The weather changes as the years go by, the shepherd changes his flock, the finest diamond changes its brightness as it travels from hand to hand... the hair of an old person changes. What changed yesterday will have to change tomorrow, just as I change in this foreign land. – writes and sings Julio Numhauser.*

And who better to tell us that everything changes than Julio Numhaser, who was forced to leave Chile in 1973 and moved to Sweden where he still lives.

And yet, Mrs. Goldstein has a different opinion:

Rabbi, I can't change, I am not going to change. This is the way I am, and this is the way I always was. Yes, I am stubborn, yes, I am impatient, yes, I am quick to anger, but this is who I am, and there is nothing you can do about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Julio Numhauser is also Jewish.

And yes, Mrs. Goldstein is right. There is nothing I can do about it. The truth is: I cannot change Mrs. Goldstein.

As you might know, I do meet with prospective brides and grooms in my office before I officiate at their weddings. We talk about their upcoming wedding ceremony, but we also talk about relationships. Although I am not an expert in the subject, I share with the couple something my thirty years of marriage plus thirty years in the rabbinate taught me: it is impossible to change others. People need to change themselves. And yes, this even applies to Mrs. Goldstein.

Now, what can I tell Mrs. Goldstein and each of you to convince you that change is possible? What can I say to make you realize that you don't have to be today the same way you were yesterday, that you don't have to be tomorrow the same way you are today?

I guess I could share with you some personal stories about change.

I can tell you about my parents making Aliyah while in their 70s, and my in-laws uprooting themselves from Argentina and moving to Israel while in their late 80s.

About a month ago, my mother-in-law, at the age of 90, while living by herself independently in her own apartment, made the difficult decision that it would be better for her and for those who love her, to move to an assisted living facility. Before Rosh Hashanah Silvia traveled to Israel to help her with the move. A few days ago, we spoke to her, and she told us that she was OK, that she is slowly making friends, and that the nurses and attendants are kind to her. Making the decision wasn't easy for her. A lot of back and forth. And yet change was possible.

Yes, I could tell you many good stories about change, but perhaps none as impressive as the one I am about to tell you, a story I learned about last month at a New York Board of Rabbis gathering.

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, executive Director of the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University (NYU), directed us to the 2-hour documentary, "Accidental Courtesy," directed by Matt Ornstein, that portraits a man – Daryl Davis, a blues musician - and his lifetime pursuit of an answer to the question: *How can you hate me when you don't even know me?*

The story is fascinating. In the words of Daryl Davis himself:

*I was playing music — it was my first time playing in this particular bar called the Silver Dollar Lounge and this white gentleman approached me and he says, "I really enjoy your music." ... and then, as we sat down to have a drink, he says, "You know, this is the first time I ever sat down and had a drink with a black man."*

*Well, now I'm getting curious. I'm trying to figure out, now how is it that in my 25 years on the face of this earth that I have sat down, literally, with thousands of white people, had a beverage, a meal, a conversation or anybody else, and this guy is 15 to 20 years older than me and he's never sat down with a black guy before and had a drink. I said, "How is that? Why?" At first, he didn't answer me and he had a friend sitting next to him and he elbowed him and said, "Tell him, tell him, tell him," and he finally said, "I'm a member of the Ku Klux Klan."*

*I just burst out laughing because I really did not believe him. I thought he was pulling my leg. As I was laughing, he pulled out his wallet, flipped through his credit cards and pictures and produced his Klan card and handed it to me. Immediately, I stopped laughing. I recognized the logo on there, the Klan symbol and I realized this was for real, this guy wasn't joking. And now I'm wondering, why am I sitting by a Klansman?*

*But he was very friendly, it was the music that brought us together. The fact that a Klansman and black person could sit down at the same table and enjoy the same music, that was a seed planted. So what do you do when you plant a seed? You nourish it. That was the impetus for me to write a book. I decided to go around the country and sit down with Klan leaders and Klan members to find out: How can you hate me when you don't even know me?<sup>2</sup>*

For the past 30 years, Davis, a black man, has spent time befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan.

The story sounds like science fiction, with the exception that it is not.

*He (Davis) says once the friendship blossoms, the Klansmen realize that their hate may be misguided. .... that began to chip away at their ideology because when two*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convincing-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-ropes>

*enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy — it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship and as you build about that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves.*

*Since Davis started talking with these members, he says 200 Klansmen have given up their robes. When that happens, Davis collects the robes and keeps them in his home as a reminder of the dent he has made in racism by simply sitting down and having dinner with people.<sup>3</sup>*

When I learned about Daryl Davis and watched the documentary my first thought was: there is a sermon here. My second thought, however, was that while the documentary is about Daryl Davis and his incredible story, the true heroes of the story are the 200 Klansmen who gave up their robes and changed. You can make a point that Daryl Davis is not your average person: Fiery personality, incredible sense of humor, high self-esteem, an inclination for risk-taking...

However, there is nothing intrinsically special about the 200 Klansmen who gave up their robes and changed, with the exception that they gave up their robes and changed.

So, here is my message to the leaders of our divided country, and the leaders of the divided State of Israel: If 200 Klansmen can sit down with a black person to talk about what separates them while highlighting what they have in common, so can you, for the sake of our country, for the sake of Israel.

And here is my message to Mrs. Goldstein, to all of you, and of course also to myself: If 200 Klansmen can give up their robes and change, so we too, can give up our old ways and change.

Being a rabbi, I am privy to countless inspiring stories of people who swore they couldn't change and did change, people who were successful in softening their harsh ideologies, and in rounding their harsh edges. I am inspired by people who

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem

used to see the world in black and white, and now they see grays in between, by people who became kinder, more compassionate, more forgiving, more generous, more loving.

People who find it difficult and challenging to change, and yet they do change, are my new heroes.

Yes, you can change, Mrs. Goldstein! We all can, and we should.

And so, we pray:

Avinu Malkeinu, in this sacred hour we ask you to help us see that change is possible. As Julio Numhauser reminds us, *everything in this world changes*, and we cannot be the exception. Teach us Your ways, oh God, help us to be more forgiving, more loving, more generous, more compassionate.

And in your kindness, bless all of us with a year of health, and joy, contentment, and change, with a good and sweet year.