

PACKING OUR BAGS

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779 – Monday, September 10, 2018

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

[Begin making a box and start putting things from the bimah in it. Jeanne comes up on the bimah...whispers in my ear...and walks off]

Oh...I thought you said we had to begin packing up BEFORE the High Holidays were over. But you said, AFTER the High Holidays? Oops...my bad.

[Put things back...put box on ground next to podium.]

As many of you know, Leslie and I moved in May. We sold our home just a few minutes from this building and are living full-time in Gardner, about 30 minutes southwest of here.

When we bought our house on Gardner Lake a few years ago, we figured a little paint and new carpet...and we were good. Quickly, we realized that new windows and a new roof were essential, as well. When we made the decision to move there full-time, we recognized that the house couldn't really do what we needed it to do, for it to be our primary residence. The kitchen needed upgrading. We didn't have a dining room. We were missing a second bedroom and an office for Leslie. We had no storage. Well...you get the picture.

On the journey that Leslie and I took...from buying the house and using it as a little getaway to moving there permanently and making it suitable for year-round living...I learned some valuable lessons.

And I hope that those lessons might be ones that help us – individually and collectively – as we move **into** this new year of 5779...and, as we move **out** of this building

in January for our much-anticipated renovations. As you probably know, we are in the midst of a capital campaign to raise 12 million dollars, in order to transform this facility from a school building – which was its original intent – into a wonderful place for us to grow and live Jewishly for the next several decades.

Whether it is renovating a home or renovating a synagogue or renovating our lives – which is what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about, it is beneficial to have some guidance as we embark on that process. With a tip of the kipa to this morning's Torah portion, any journey – like Abraham's – is filled with tests. Those tests help us become better than we were. Isn't that what renovations are, after all? Making what exists better?

With that in mind, I offer three simple lessons about the nature of renovations.

Lesson #1 – What we need today is not – necessarily – what we need tomorrow.

When we bought our house just down the street from here 15 years ago, our kids were entering middle school. We wanted a place where ours could be the house where their friends would hang out, and a place where we could do our work with the congregation that we have loved over the years. It wasn't unusual for us to have 30 or 50 people over for dinner...or even host the occasional wedding. And – as many of you know – we opened our home to you for Rosh Hashanah for 14 years. Hundreds would come by...and there was room for all. That's why we had our home.

But then, after 15 years, life had become different. Our kids had grown, were living on their own, and not returning to Kansas City. We wanted a smaller place to maintain. We didn't need all the "stuff" we accumulated over 30 years of marriage. Leslie wanted more vegetable and flower gardens. We realized that the space we needed was significantly different than it had been. In other words, our needs and our wants had changed.

The same is true with our congregation's home. When this building was built, it was to be a state-of-the-art educational facility, with an open-pod concept. A chapel was added for families...a place for our children to be inspired as they pray. It was never imagined to be what we have used it for, during these last 15 years. The number of people coming to services has increased. We don't have enough room all the time. Weddings and major celebratory events in this space were not anticipated and we have those needs today. In addition, the world has changed dramatically since September 11, 2001, two years after this building was built. We need improved security, even as we want a greater welcoming presence. And technology...well what we do today was barely imagined 20 years ago. So...our needs and wants have changed.

And the same is true with you and me.

On this first day of a new year, we celebrate. Our tefillah is joyful. And yet, there is an underbelly to that joy...a serious introspection, for each of us is a flawed work in progress. That is the message of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We intone Unetaneh Tokef, reminding ourselves that we are all judged. Perhaps by God. Perhaps by others. Always by ourselves. And depending on that judgment...our fates are influenced. Thus, we take these Yamim Noraim, these 10 days and we do some self-examining. Where was I great? Where did I fail? How can I be better? Simple questions. Hard answers.

Each year, we go through this process anew. Why? Are we simply laboratory rats

on an endless wheel, going through the motions because that is what we do? No, we return to this space and this time because what we needed to change last year is not what we need to change this year.

Are last year's fashions the same clothes you want or can wear this year? Have you gained weight? Lost weight? What about foods? Are you eating the same way as last year? Has your exercise routine changed? Has your economic situation shifted? Do you have less disposable income? More? Each of these factors affects who you are today and what you need and want. And they are different than a year – or two – or twenty years ago. A few days ago, a woman came in to tell me that her husband was filing for divorce. She was shocked and didn't know what to do. Another person called to share that he was scheduled for an ostomy surgery. In the blink of an eye, what these two individuals and their families needed a few weeks earlier is not what they necessarily need today.

Whether it is with our bodies, our work, or our relationships, life is in flux. We must constantly re-evaluate where we are along life's path and make adjustments. That is the message of these holidays. What we need today is not – necessarily – what we need tomorrow. Our first lesson.

Lesson #2 – Making changes are a) always hard; b) always exciting; and c) always expensive.

If you want to test a relationship, take two A-type personalities and have them renovate their home together. As Leslie says over and over again, if only I – Art – didn't have an opinion on everything!

It isn't easy to renovate. There are so many decisions to make. In truth, the big ones tend to be pretty easy. Do we need a new roof? Check. Our old furniture is too large, so we have to get a new couch. Check. It's the smaller decisions that are tough. What shape should the kitchen drawer pulls be? Should they be vertical or horizontal? It's a

lot of decisions and everyone involved has opinions.

At the same time, it is so exciting to have something new, the product of your dreams. Finally, it can be just the way you would want it to be.

And – of course – it is expensive. Anyone who has done any renovations or building knows...it takes longer than promised and costs more than anticipated. OY!

Our building renovations here at B'nai Jehudah fall into the same pattern. It is hard to do. Volunteers have been working on this project for over three years. Lots of people have had lots of different ideas. We all recognize that change is needed. Where we make those changes...how we make those changes...that's where it gets difficult.

It's all worthwhile, though, because we will have a renovated home for our community that will be just what we want it to be. We will radically transform our front entrance. We will add a small prayer space for minyan and other intimate spiritual moments. We will redo this social hall, making it both more elegant and more friendly for large-scale programs and services. And we hope to renovate our chapel, expanding it and improving both the audio but also the technological capabilities. In addition, we will focus on security, congregant comfort, a library filled with technological resources, and a way to display the incredible Judaica collection that Michael Klein has donated to the congregation. It will be amazing!

And...yes, it will be expensive. We anticipate the costs will be a bit more than the \$12 million we estimated originally. The great news is that – as of today – we have raised almost \$10.5 million dollars...and that is just from 150 families. We will be asking you to help, as well. We know that you will. Thus, we are confident we will reach our goal.

And how does this apply to ourselves? It's pretty much the same. When we renovate our lives...which is what we are asked to do at this time of the year...it is a three-part process: it's hard, it's exciting, and it's expensive.

First, we are asked to renovate our minds. If we want our lives, our jobs, our relationships to change, we have to start thinking differently. The same old thought patterns and limiting beliefs will just get us the same results. Instead, each of us can and should dig deep inside to figure out what to do in order for changes in our lives to take hold. That is hard.

Second, we have the opportunity to renovate our actions. And this can be exciting, for we have the possibility of becoming a new person, the one we have always hoped we can be. It is just a matter of starting to act differently. Need to heal a relationship? Spend more quality time with the individual. Want to be more spiritual? Take 20 minutes a day – just 20 minutes – and develop a personal spiritual practice. Want to be more physically fit? Take another 20 minutes and do something that gets you moving. In cultivating new habits, each of us can be rewarded with lasting changes to our lives.

Finally, it is an expensive proposition, so we also need to practice the art of subtraction. Whenever we renovate anything, whether it's a house or ourselves, we have to remove things from time to time to make it workable. What – in our lives – do we need to take out in order for us to move on? Fear? Mistrust? Anger? Selfishness? Toxic Relationships? These get in the way...they consume too much of our emotional reserves...and leave us without enough energy to make the changes in our lives that we need to. So, today we ask ourselves: what do we get rid of in our lives in order to have the most that we want?!

Like I said, making changes are a) always hard; b) always exciting; and c) always expensive. Lesson #2.

And finally...Lesson #3 – If you have the vision, it is worth it in the end.

Leslie and I hope that many of you will have a chance to visit us at our renovated home in Gardner. But not all at once. It's a small, modest place. Each time we walk inside, we smile. For it reflects who we are, what we believe, and how we live. It was a lot of work over a number of years. It was definitely worth it.

The same will be true with our building. We are about to go through some significant disruptions. With the exception of our Pre-School, we will vacate this building for a good portion of 2019. Our congregation will remain strong and vibrant, even as we transform our physical home into what we have dreamt it could become. And I have no doubts that – whenever it is next year that we do move back in – we will all smile. For it will reflect who we are, what we believe, and how we live. It will be a lot of work. It will definitely be worth it.

And it is the same with you and me. We are works in progress. If we take this moment to begin some thoughtful renovations in our lives, we will struggle. We will experience discomfort. And we will grow. If we are serious in our work, we will be able to look back and smile at what we have accomplished. For it will reflect who we are, what we believe, and how we individually live. It will be a lot of work to renovate our selves. It will definitely be worth it.

[Pick up box and put shtender in it and other papers]

I don't know about you but I have a lot of "stuff" I need to get rid of if I am going to renovate my home. No, not Leslie's and my place in Gardner. We've already done that. Rather, this, our congregational home. And more importantly, this home [point to my heart]. I need to go through a process of deciding what's good inside and can stay. What's worn out, not working for me, and toss it. And I need to figure out what I want to be in this coming year.

How about you?

[Walk back to seat with box in my arms]

¹ Rewording of material found at <https://www.cfinancialfreedom.com/renovate-life-3-steps-make-change-happen/>