



THE CITY CONGREGATION for HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

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“LETTING GO”

by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Now if I were a betting person, which I'm not, I think it is safe to predict that I, along with most rabbis this High Holiday season, will use at least one of our sermons to talk about the state of the nation. In fact, I started writing a talk last July on this subject. It was going to serve as my Tashlikh reading this year, when we talk about casting away our sins. My talk was tentatively titled, “Cast out the Bum.” But it took only days before I realized that the ground kept shifting under my feet, with new revelations and allegations, firings and resignations, compounded by the tragedy in Charlottesville, and then it just got worse with the destructive force of hurricanes that are another reminder that we better address climate change. I realized that I would have had to be revising my talk until probably last night. So instead, several weeks ago I said, Dayenu, it is enough already, and I reworked my thoughts into the article I contributed a week ago to Huffington Post, “A Time to Preach, A Time to Impeach.” I have been heartened by the positive reviews and I also have been encouraged to rap it aloud, but trust me, you're better off reading it to yourself.

Now, without diminishing those matters, there is another topic on my mind that I do want to talk about. This past May, after I made my decision to retire in a year's time, I assigned myself a book to read by Philip Roth, his first novel after “Goodbye Columbus”, that launched his career. I chose the book because of its title alone, “Letting Go”, with the hope that it might help me navigate what I was about to go through, what we are about to go through together.

Now sometimes when we read a book that we like, we get so engrossed in it that we can't put it down and may gladly give up precious sleep to get to the end. Alternatively, I sometimes start slowing down on purpose so that I can savor the experience and not give up a relationship I have developed with an array of characters, some admirable and endearing, others cantankerous and irksome, that I have come to care for or been irritated by, whose future I wish I could see, or who I just enjoy being with and with whom I am reluctant to part company.

Well, I can't say that I sped through the book nor did I delay its ending, and while the book did not help me figure out how to handle this task of retirement, I was reminded how good a writer Roth is and I savored each and every one of its 641 pages.

In case you're interested, Roth explores difficult topics like divorce, remarriage and family estrangements, birth and adoption, religion, assimilation and the class divide, all set amidst the social constraints of the 1950s. Roth is especially ascerbic when it comes to airing the dirty laundry of Jewish narrow-mindedness and prejudice.

As is my habit, I made numerous notes in the margins and the inside flap so that I could reference citations later for a talk or discussion. Only then it occurred to me: I'm supposed to be letting go and that talk or discussion or analysis may not be one I'll actually ever lead or present. Or maybe I will, in some yet-to-be-written chapter in my next life, but the point remains: there will be inevitably some other idea or plan we won't complete, let alone even start, or book to read or trip to take or bucket list goal to check off that just won't happen.

A few summers ago I realized that my days of arduous mountain climbing are essentially over. Going up wasn't the problem, it was coming down. Because my vision is not what it used to be and I can't gauge the ground ahead so well, and because gravity was not an asset. I was tense the whole descent. I had to be extra careful not to topple over. It's a sad decision – climbing is something I've loved, and some of you know I've even been to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro – but better to be wise and quit before I hurt myself. And still I'm not giving up entirely. I harbor a long-held dream to get to Nepal one day, no longer to take on a difficult ascent, but to find a more gentle trek that I can manage.

Letting go is about acceptance. It means coming to terms with the decline of our physical strength and energy, our hearing and vision, our mobility, our independence, our memories short-term and long. It is about accepting an increase in aches and pains, visits to the doctor, and an array of mail-order medicines. Now I know I've lost everyone who is under 50, but trust me, your time will come.

Letting go and moving on means taking stock and hopefully focusing on our accomplishments and successes, not beating ourselves up about missed opportunities and poor decisions that we can't have do-overs on. It is too easy to play the woulda-coulda-shoulda game, and to live mired in our regrets and disappointments.

As I have looked back on my thirty-eight years since ordination, and especially the last 11 years as rabbi of this congregation, and the previous 14 years as your volunteer rabbi, there are so many experiences and encounters that I will cherish. If I started to list them we'd be here too long and I'd risk leaving important ones out. But I do want to make a few general comments.

First, I have strived to create a community that endorses the idea of inclusivity. We are stronger because of our diversity, not because we walk in lock-step together. We are a movement that encourages individual beliefs.

And so I have made it a point to protect that value and the voices of all us especially in open meetings when it is too easy for someone to feel silenced. That is why we invite members to speak at High Holidays and at Shabbats, to share their personal take on all sorts of themes. That is why we encourage the kids in KidSchool to ask questions and pick apart our literature with critical thinking. And that is why we built a bar and bat mitzvah program that pushes the students to explore their own values, beliefs and identity, and, when it applies, embrace Jewish and non-Jewish roots equally.

Second, while I have had the pleasure to enter the lives of so many people in times of joy and celebration, more importantly, I have had the privilege to be with you in times of sadness and loss, of challenge and difficulty. Yes, this is part of the job description of any rabbi, but to describe these moments as obligations greatly diminishes them. I know for me they have been immensely meaningful and often inspiring. You have allowed me to see you at your most vulnerable moments. I thank you for your trust.

I have also valued over the years the countless numbers of questions that people have brought me that have sometimes developed into lengthy email exchanges. There is nothing more satisfying to a teacher than to be engaged in this kind of dialogue and exploration that often forced me to clarify my own thinking.

Back in January 2006, we had a meeting to discuss the imminent hiring of a rabbi and I made the point that this decision was bigger than me. I said that we were about to embark on an exciting challenge together and this was going to be a collaborative project. I stand by those remarks today, as I did five months later, when I was installed as your rabbi. On that occasion I said that “a rabbi without a community makes just as much noise as a tree in a forest when nobody is there to hear it fall.” Well, that may not actually be true about the tree, but I know for a fact that rabbis need not just members and visitors to attend services, take classes, and go on marches, but to be on the board, get tricked into being president, serve on committees, be mentors for our students, bring us beautiful music, and do all the countless tasks that fall on dedicated volunteers and committed lay leaders which sustain the life of a congregation.

Now while I’m on the subject of giving thanks, let me acknowledge where credit is really do and to repeat what I have often said, which is that had it not been for my wife, Myrna Baron, who founded this congregation, none of us would be here today. And she didn’t just found it but she served for many productive years as president, newsletter and ad writer, KidSchool teacher, and bar/bat mitzvah coordinator.

On a very personal note, Myrna has been my trusted and reliable sounding board all these years, even before I was officially the rabbi. Because of her wisdom and good sense and deep commitment to our Humanistic values, I was better able to stay accountable, handle the stresses of the job, sharpen my thinking further, and, on a very practical level, re-write presentations like this one because my first draft missed the mark.

And so now it is time to let go, which means handing off and handing over. It means letting others carry on our work. It means letting others do what we did and maybe even do it better than we did it. Or at least differently. Ironically, it is sometimes the trailblazers and founders of new institutions that have the hardest time letting go of them. Sadly, we know about family businesses where the over-possessive and protective founder can’t release authority and responsibility to the next generation and this very act of holding onto power can end up being the undoing of the company. But in our case, Myrna and I want nothing more than a secure future for this institution that has meant so much to us and our family personally.

The Talmud (Kiddushin 29a) instructs a father to teach his son how to swim. For us, this same mandate, to prepare our children with survival skills, of course falls equally upon mothers and on girls learning these skills too. Whenever the time comes for our children to be on their own, we need to know that they will make it. With self-confidence, resilience and inner strength.

That, in fact, is our greatest legacy. To secure a future for those who come after us. By endowing them with knowledge, skills, values and ideals, and, hopefully, a little money in the bank.

But please don't write any eulogies yet. While I may be stepping down from the pulpit, I prefer to say that I am now stepping up to rabbi emeritus, details to be worked out. Either way, I am not planning on disappearing and I highly doubt that you will find me leading High Holidays on a cruiseship next year.

And so, finally, I state the obvious when I say that letting go is not just an exercise to go through during the valedictory year of one's career. Nor is it a task just to be relegated to the High Holidays when we purposively engage in self-reflection and ponder how to enter a new year unencumbered by the weight of the past. But what better days than these to get off on the right track, to put our house in order, to recommit ourselves to a life of meaning and purpose, joy and love, and ultimately, acceptance.